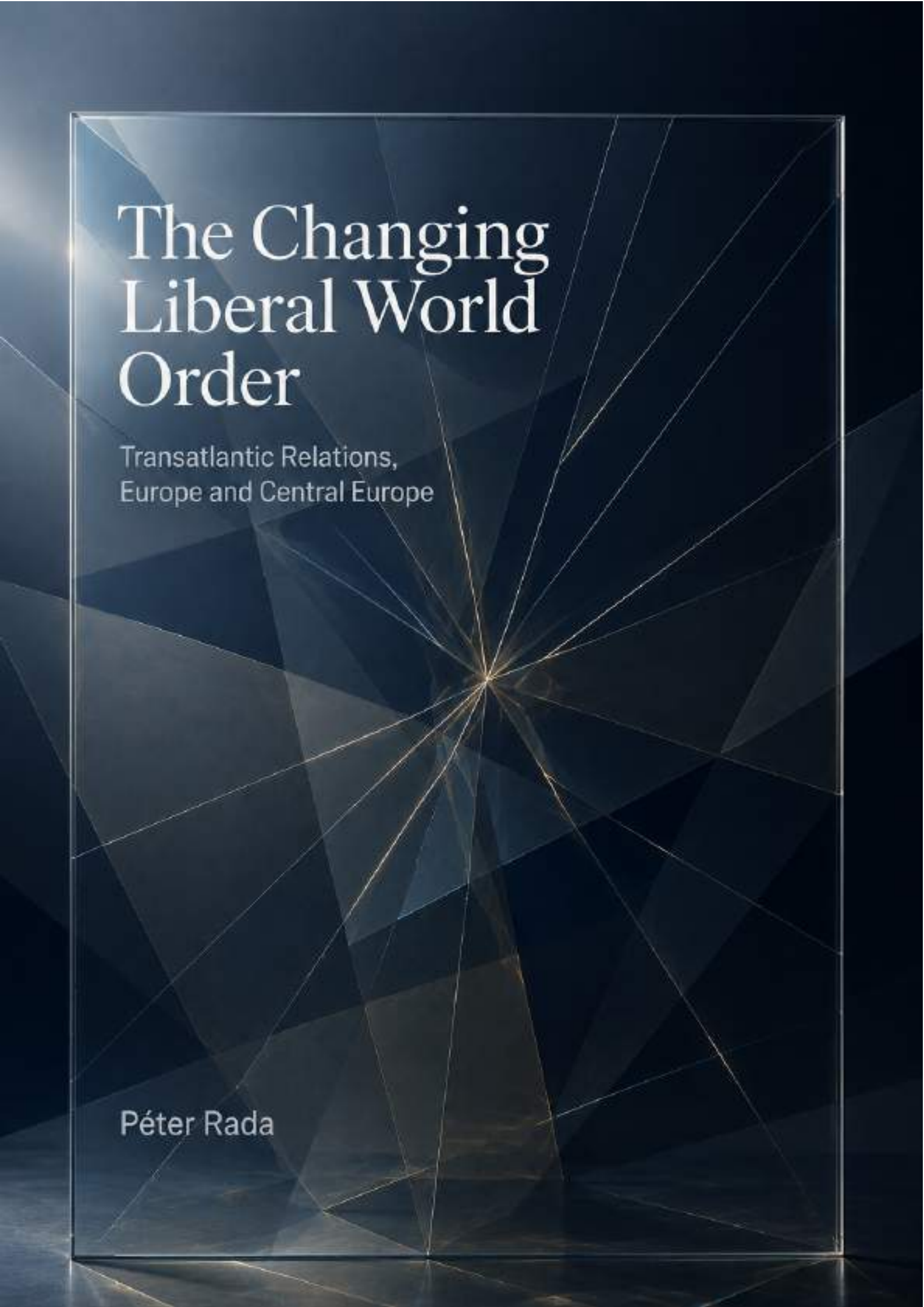




The Changing Liberal World Order

Transatlantic Relations,
Europe and Central Europe

Péter Rada

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2026

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1 Foreword

This book is the product of a longer intellectual journey rather than a single research project. Its ideas have evolved gradually through years of studying International Relations, world order, transatlantic relations, European integration, and the geopolitical position of Central Europe. They have also been shaped by countless discussions with colleagues, students, policymakers, and scholars from different parts of the world, each offering perspectives that challenged assumptions and refined arguments.

The research presented here has benefited enormously from international academic cooperation. Many of the ideas were tested, debated, and further developed at international conferences, workshops, and research projects organized over the past several years.

Although this book has benefited greatly from these collaborations, the interpretations and conclusions presented here remain entirely my own.

The immediate motivation for writing this volume was a growing sense that academic debates about the liberal world order today had become fragmented, public discourse often oscillates between two simplistic narratives: either that the liberal international order has collapsed beyond recovery or that its institutions remain fundamentally unchanged despite mounting geopolitical tensions. Neither interpretation appeared fully convincing. The international system seemed to be moving in a more complex direction than either optimism or pessimism alone could explain.

The liberal world order has neither disappeared nor remained unchanged. Rather, it is undergoing a profound transformation. The institutions, norms, and rules established after the Second World War—and significantly expanded after the end of the Cold War—continue to organize much of international political and economic life. At the same time, they increasingly coexist with renewed great-power rivalry, geopolitical competition, the weaponization of economic interdependence, technological competition, and the growing influence of political narratives and identity-based conflicts. The contemporary international system therefore cannot be described either as the triumph or as the failure of the liberal order.

It is an order in transition. This transformation presents both an empirical and a theoretical challenge. The classical theories of International Relations each

illuminate an important dimension of contemporary world politics. Realism explains the enduring centrality of power, security competition, and strategic rivalry. Liberalism accounts for the resilience of institutions, economic interdependence, and international cooperation. Constructivism demonstrates how identities, norms, and political narratives shape interests, legitimacy, and political behavior. Yet none of these perspectives, taken individually, fully captures a world in which these dynamics increasingly operate simultaneously rather than sequentially.

This observation made over the years became the intellectual starting point of the present book. Its objective is not to determine which theoretical tradition is ultimately correct, nor to replace the established schools of International Relations. Instead, the analysis seeks to understand how these perspectives complement one another in explaining the changing character of the liberal world order. The concept of SurRealism, which is not a central argument in the book but used as metaphor or illustrative label emerged gradually from this effort. It is not proposed as a new grand theory of International Relations but as an interpretive framework describing an international order in which liberal institutions, realist power politics, and socially constructed political narratives coexist within the same political reality.

The book therefore follows a deliberately cumulative path. It starts with revisiting the principal theories of International Relations before examining the concept and historical evolution of the liberal world order. It then explores the changing transatlantic relationship and the evolving roles of the United States and the European Union as the principal agenda setters of the contemporary international order. Finally, it turns to Central Europe, examining how a region firmly embedded within the institutional core of the liberal world order adapts to an increasingly complex geopolitical environment. Also in this sense, the concept of SurRealism is not the point of departure but the outcome of this analytical journey.

This is not a book written to defend the liberal world order, nor is it intended as an argument for its rejection. It is written from the conviction that understanding must precede judgment. Only by clarifying the concepts, theories, and historical processes that shape contemporary international politics can we meaningfully assess the challenges confronting Europe, Central Europe, and the wider international community.

If this book succeeds in encouraging readers to reconsider familiar concepts, question conventional assumptions, and view the changing international order through a more integrated theoretical lens, then it will have fulfilled its purpose.

2 Introduction

“The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”

— *Thucydides, The Melian Dialogue*

Few observations have proved as enduring in the study of international politics as Thucydides’ description of the Melian Dialogue. More than two thousand years later, his conclusion continues to resonate in a world again characterized by geopolitical rivalry, military competition, and the return of power politics. Yet international relations cannot be explained through realism alone, international institutions continue to shape political behavior, economic interdependence remains a defining feature of globalization, and political identities, values, and narratives increasingly influence both domestic politics and international legitimacy. The world today presents an apparent paradox: realism seems to have returned, while the liberal international order continues to structure much of global political and economic everyday life.

This paradox lies at the heart of the present book.

The transformation of the liberal world order has become one of the defining questions of International Relations. Although scholars have debated the evolution of international order since the end of the Cold War (Rada, 2007b), recent developments have accelerated this discussion to an unprecedented degree. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China, the weaponization of economic interdependence, technological rivalry, the fragmentation of global supply chains, and growing skepticism toward multilateral institutions have all contributed to the perception that the post-Cold War order is reaching a historical turning point. Whether this transformation represents the decline of the liberal world order, its adaptation, or the emergence of an entirely different international system has become one of the central questions of both academic scholarship and foreign policy.

Public debate, however, has often proved less precise than the complexity of the phenomenon itself. Terms such as world order, international order, liberal order, sovereignty, multipolarity, or even realism are frequently employed interchangeably despite referring to different concepts, different analytical levels, and different historical experiences. Political discourse has increasingly become saturated with competing interpretations that often reflect ideological preferences more than conceptual clarity. As a consequence, discussions about

the future of the international system frequently generate more confusion than understanding.

This book therefore begins from a simple premise: before asking whether the liberal world order is collapsing, transforming, or surviving, we must first understand what we actually mean by world order, what makes an order liberal, and how different theoretical traditions explain the operation of international politics. Without conceptual clarity, empirical observation risks becoming little more than the confirmation of pre-existing political preferences.

For this reason, the book begins not with current events but with theory. The first chapters revisit the principal traditions of International Relations—realism, liberalism, constructivism, and related approaches—not to determine which one is ultimately correct, but to examine how each explains the organization and evolution of international politics. Rather than treating these theories as mutually exclusive competitors, the analysis explores their respective strengths, limitations, and enduring relevance for understanding the contemporary international environment.

Only after establishing these theoretical foundations does the book turn to the liberal world order itself. The objective is neither to defend nor to reject the concept but to examine its historical emergence, philosophical foundations, institutional architecture, and principal criticisms. The liberal world order is treated not as an ideological aspiration but as a historically observable framework through which much of international political, economic, and institutional life has been organized since the Second World War. Understanding its origins and internal logic is essential before evaluating the nature of its contemporary transformation.

The book then examines how this order has evolved during the twenty-first century. Contrary to widespread narratives of either uninterrupted liberal progress or inevitable decline, the argument developed here is that the liberal world order has entered a period of structural adaptation. Military power has regained prominence without replacing institutions. Economic interdependence has become both a source of prosperity and an instrument of geopolitical coercion. Technological competition increasingly shapes national security, while political narratives have become strategic instruments alongside military and economic capabilities. These developments do not eliminate the liberal order; rather, they fundamentally alter the way it operates.

From our perspective – looking at the system from Budapest –, within this evolving system, two actors occupy a distinctive position. The United States remains the principal strategic architect of the order. Its military capabilities, alliance networks, technological leadership, and global political influence continue to shape the international agenda to an extent unmatched by any other actor. At the same time, the European Union has become the order's most developed institutional expression. Through its regulatory power, economic weight, legal framework, and normative influence, the European Union has evolved into a global agenda setter in its own right. Although transatlantic relations have become increasingly contested and occasionally divergent, the United States and the European Union together continue to define many of the institutional, political, and normative parameters within which the liberal world order operates.

The implications of these transformations become particularly visible when viewed from Central Europe. Situated firmly within the institutional framework of both the European Union and NATO, the region simultaneously experiences the opportunities and constraints generated by the changing international order. Central Europe neither determines the structure of world order nor remains a passive recipient of external developments. Rather, it illustrates how medium-sized states seek to preserve sovereignty, pursue national interests, and adapt strategically within an order whose principal rules and agendas are largely established elsewhere. The region therefore provides an especially revealing perspective from which to observe the interaction between global structures and regional political agency.

The analytical direction of the book follows this logic. Instead of beginning with Central Europe itself, the analysis proceeds from the broadest level of abstraction toward the regional level. It first examines how International Relations theory explains international politics, then explores the concept and evolution of the liberal world order, before analyzing the transatlantic relationship and the European Union as its institutional core. Only after establishing this broader framework does the discussion turn to Central Europe. This sequence reflects the conviction that regional politics can only be properly understood within the wider international structures that shape both opportunities and constraints.

The approach adopted throughout the book is deliberately interdisciplinary. It combines insights from International Relations theory, regional studies,

European studies, and foreign policy analysis. At the same time, it remains primarily a conceptual rather than an empirical study. The objective is not to test a single hypothesis statistically or to construct a predictive model of international politics. Instead, the book seeks to organize the principal concepts, relationships, and theoretical traditions that together provide a coherent framework for understanding the changing liberal world order. In doing so, it follows the long-established tradition of theoretical reasoning that has shaped the discipline of International Relations while remaining closely connected to contemporary geopolitical developments.

As the analysis progresses, a broader interpretive pattern gradually emerges. Realist power politics, liberal institutions, and constructivist narratives are often presented as competing explanations of international politics. Yet the contemporary liberal world order increasingly demonstrates that these dynamics coexist rather than replace one another. Military competition unfolds within institutional frameworks. Liberal cooperation persists alongside geopolitical rivalry. Political narratives shape the legitimacy of both power and institutions. The apparent contradictions of contemporary international politics therefore reflect not theoretical inconsistency but the multidimensional nature of the international order itself.

It is from this cumulative analysis—not as a point of departure but as a conclusion—that the concept of SurRealism emerges. SurRealism is not proposed as another grand theory of International Relations, nor as a replacement for realism, liberalism, or constructivism. Instead, it offers an interpretive framework for understanding how these perspectives simultaneously describe different dimensions of the same international reality. The contemporary liberal world order is SurRealist because liberal aspirations, realist power politics, and socially constructed narratives coexist within a single political order whose complexity cannot be adequately captured by any one theoretical tradition alone.

The chapters that follow therefore invite the reader on a conceptual journey: from the foundations of International Relations theory, through the historical evolution and contemporary transformation of the liberal world order, to the strategic role of the United States and the European Union, the position of Central Europe, and finally the interpretive synthesis offered by SurRealism. Only by following this sequence can the changing architecture of the contemporary international order be understood in its full complexity.

PART I

3 The great debates of International Relations theory

3.1 The great debates of International Relations theory

The development of International Relations theory was advanced by the fact that its major schools continuously engaged in debate with one another, responding to competing assumptions about the nature of international politics, the identity of its principal actors, the sources of conflict and cooperation, and the possibilities of order. These debates did not simply replace one theory with another. Instead, they progressively expanded the discipline's conceptual vocabulary and changed the questions scholars asked about international politics. In professional and theoretical circles, it is generally accepted to speak of three great debates (Baylis, 2020): first, the classical debate, marked by the distinctive emergence of realist criticism against idealism; second, the mainstream neo-ism debate, centered on the theoretical contest between neorealism and neoliberalism; and third, the rationalism debate, which brought rationalist theories into confrontation with critical approaches, particularly those employing constructivist ontology.

This book organizes the development of International Relations theory around these three major debates rather than the also several times published account of four "great debates" (Thies, 2002). This choice is deliberate. The three debates discussed here concern fundamental ontological and epistemological disagreements about the nature of international politics, the relevant actors and structures, and the conditions under which knowledge about them can be produced. The behaviorist-traditionalist debate, that is the fourth, conventionally identified as the second great debate, was different in character: it centered primarily on methodology and the scientific status of the discipline rather than on competing conceptions of international order itself. Its importance for the development of IR is therefore not disputed, but it is not treated as a separate theoretical debate here because the purpose of this

discussion is to trace those conceptual controversies that most directly shaped competing understandings of international order and provide the foundations for the theoretical framework developed in this book.

The distinction among these debates should not be understood as a rigid chronological sequence. The assumptions of classical realism and liberalism continued to shape later approaches, while the neo-ism debate did not disappear with the emergence of constructivism and critical theory. The debates are better understood as successive stages in the widening of theoretical inquiry. The first focused primarily on power and the possibility of peace. The second examined how international structure and institutions affected state behavior. The third questioned the materialist, rationalist, and positivist foundations shared by the principal mainstream theories. Together, these debates created the principal theoretical perspectives through which the international system, international order, and world order have subsequently been interpreted.

3.1.1 The classical debate

The classical debate developed around competing realist and idealist explanations of international politics. Realism emerged between the two world wars as a critique of idealist thought. The horrors of war made it clear to realists that the perspective represented by idealists was incapable of explaining political reality. Idealists believed that nation-states were capable of organizing the framework of peaceful coexistence around shared values, but according to realists they neglected the central role of power.

From the 1930s onward, the idealist conception faced increasing criticism as a new generation of political scientists placed greater emphasis on the conflictual nature of international politics (Carr, 1964; Kennan, 2020; Morgenthau, 1948; Niebhur, 2013). Although realism became the dominant theoretical approach only after the Second World War, realist thinking has a long history. Throughout history, rulers shaped their policies according to realist principles: by invoking *raison d'état* to justify particular decisions, or by treating the enhancement of their country's security as their primary objective (Dunne, 2005, p. 164).

It is essential to note that the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, in *The Peloponnesian War* (Thuküdidész, 2006), already explained that the Peloponnesian War broke out because Athens sought to increase its power, which Sparta perceived as a security threat. Fearing the excessive growth of

Athenian power, Sparta therefore attacked it. In other words, Thucydides described the basic logic later associated with the realist security dilemma.

The next indispensable and frequently cited precursor was Niccolò Machiavelli. Although he lived in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, he laid down the basic principles of modern realist thought and power politics in *The Prince* (Machiavelli, 2001). In addition, he made a lasting contribution to the history of realist strategic thought with *The Art of War* (Machiavelli, 2022). He established the idea shared by many classical realists that human beings are inherently self-interested and unreliable, which is also reflected in the behavior of states. Even in peacetime, states must strive to appear strong because otherwise others may ruthlessly crush them. The most important instrument available to the state and the ruler for increasing power is armed force. From Machiavelli's way of thinking, another basic realist proposition can also be derived: however important ethics or morality may be, they are always subordinated to the interests of political survival and power.

To complete the pantheon of obligatory precursors, Thomas Hobbes (Hobbes, 2011), writing in the seventeenth century, must also be mentioned. He continued the Machiavellian argument that human beings pursue their own interests, which places them in constant conflict with one another. The state of nature is therefore a condition of anarchy in which everyone wages war against everyone else because people constantly perceive their lives and security as threatened and may consequently initiate preventive action. This condition continues until individuals authorize an absolute sovereign to administer justice and guarantee internal order. Yet rulers themselves are not subsequently controlled by any superior common authority. Politics among states therefore necessarily remains anarchic. Hobbes's argument established an enduring distinction between the possibility of order within the state and the persistence of anarchy among states.

The works of the English historian Edward Carr, who initiated the classical debate in its modern form, can no longer be considered merely historical roots. With *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (Carr, 1964), he laid the foundations of modern political realism, and the intellectual struggle between idealism and realism during the interwar period is most clearly associated with his name. Carr sharply criticized excessive idealism because political practice based on those principles had failed disastrously, as the events of the 1930s clearly demonstrated. Carr enriched realist thought with three important propositions: history is a sequence of causal relationships; theory derives from practice; and ethics depends on politics rather

than the reverse. Carr regarded the principal task of realism as the destruction of utopian thought because such thinking prevents us from understanding the true nature of international politics. In his interpretation, international order could not be based simply on an assumed harmony of interests. It necessarily rested on power and on arrangements shaped by the dominant actors of the international system.

Hans J. Morgenthau is frequently described in the literature as a refunder of International Relations (Matus, 2005, pp. 60–63). It must certainly be acknowledged that Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* (Morgenthau, 1948), published in 1948, can be regarded as the most important work in the history of realism up to that point. Morgenthau's political philosophy makes it clear that the primary interest of the state is defined in terms of power. Politics is governed by objective laws rooted in human nature, and statesmen must therefore distinguish political necessity from abstract moral aspirations. Political realism does not deny the importance of morality, but it rejects the assumption that universal moral principles can be applied directly and without regard to political circumstances.

John Herz (Herz, 1951) agreed with Morgenthau's realism on its basic principles but refined it on several points. In his interpretation, the objective of states is not necessarily to increase power for its own sake but to achieve security. What threatens security is not simply the conflictual character of human nature but the structural condition of the security dilemma. The security dilemma has existed throughout human history since people began forming organized communities. These communities have always sought to increase their own security, which they could achieve by increasing their power. In doing so, however, they came into conflict with other communities that felt threatened by the growth of the former's power. A vicious circle therefore emerged, characterized by constant competition. Every state seeks to increase its security in order to neutralize the power of others, but in the process may increase its own power to such an extent that it begins to threaten the security of those around it. Even measures adopted for defensive purposes may consequently be interpreted as offensive preparations. Although Herz initially attempted to move the framework of analysis in a more liberal direction when he declared that the nation-state was no longer capable of responding adequately to global challenges, he later argued that the interests of the nation-state stood above

everything else and that nation-states would therefore remain the central units of analysis for a long time.

Arnold Wolfers analyzed the relationship between security and the national interest. Wolfers argued that security is closely connected to the national interest because every state instinctively regards its own survival as its most important task. Security has value in itself for the state, and increasing it is therefore treated as a fundamental objective (Wolfers, 1965). At the same time, Wolfers pointed out that security is an ambiguous concept. States differ in the value they attach to security and in the level of security they regard as sufficient.

Cooperation among states may therefore be possible in certain cases because it serves to increase their security. He also argued that the security of states is influenced not only by other states but by additional factors important for the internal functioning of the state. In this way, he criticized the realist “billiard-ball model,” which treated states as closed and internally unified units. The liberal and idealist tradition developed from different assumptions. According to some authors, liberalism had less impact on the practice of international politics than realism, despite the fact that the past century brought decisive changes in the domestic politics of states (Dunne, 2005). Following the First World War, politicians who sought to reconstruct international relations according to liberal principles came to power in several of the world’s leading countries. Owing in no small part to the excessively optimistic plans associated with U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, the literature frequently describes this period as idealist. Idealists blamed balance-of-power politics for the global conflagration. In their view, war was not the only means of resolving disputed issues. The arms race and secret diplomacy had to be banished from international relations, and interaction among states had to rest on harmony and institutions grounded in international law.

Since the precursors of realism have already been reviewed, it is also worth doing the same on the liberal-idealist side. Thomas Aquinas (Aquinas, 2004) formulated the idea of just war, which reappears in arguments concerning humanitarian intervention and the principle of the Responsibility to Protect in the twenty-first century (Rada, 2007b). Through the idea of just war and his account of the conflict-generating nature of the desire for power, Aquinas contributed to the development of the liberal theoretical tradition by asking how political authority and moral restraint could be reconciled.

Hugo Grotius (Kardos, 2007) developed this conception by arguing that wars could be avoided or regulated if relations among states were also governed by laws. It is in the mutual interest of states to submit themselves to law because doing so contributes to their own security. The development of international relations therefore requires the creation of international law modelled, at least partly, on the domestic law of states.

Emmerich de Vattel (Kardos, 2007) considered the significance of international law even greater than that of domestic law. In the history of theory, an early conception of collective security appeared in his work, with international law serving as the basis for its operation: states would act jointly to punish violators of the law. Every state must insist on its rights, from which the possibility of legitimate self-defense also follows.

Among these precursors, Immanuel Kant made the most frequently cited contribution to the development of liberal thought. In his influential proposal *Perpetual Peace* (Kant, 1998), he argued that peace is not a natural condition but that human beings are capable of creating it deliberately. In his view, only a republican form of government could lead to peace in relations among states. Kant's conception of the possibility of democratic—republican in his terminology—peace, and his ideas concerning the peace-promoting potential of commerce, continue to reappear in liberal theoretical models today.

Although economic theories do not primarily offer political explanations for processes occurring in the world, their influence, particularly on liberal political theory, is nevertheless important and demonstrable. The classical school of economics had the greatest influence on the development of liberal theoretical thinking. Adam Smith's economically motivated assumptions concerning the harmony of interests and the mechanism of the "invisible hand" in the economy inspired liberal-idealist thinkers. The same general idea of decentralized interaction generating an emergent order later influenced other approaches as well; Kenneth Waltz also relied on a structurally comparable mechanism when describing the operation of international structure (Rada, 2007a).

In opposition to realism, which proclaimed the all-encompassing importance of the anarchic international system, liberals emphasized the values of liberty, justice, and order, which they believed could also be secured within international politics. Liberalism is at once a theory of government within the state and of "good governance" beyond the state. The task of domestic and international institutions is to protect these values and to create predictable frameworks for

social and political interaction. It must nevertheless be noted that no unified and distinctive position comparable to realism existed within liberalism. Thinkers who described themselves as liberals engaged in sharp disputes with one another over what liberalism actually meant. Liberalism is therefore better understood as a broad theoretical tradition than as a single coherent theory. Certain general characteristics nevertheless make it possible to outline the approach. Even early liberal thinkers were concerned with the question of how peace could be secured and, through it, a better world created. One instrument for achieving this would be an international institution standing above, or at least among, states, of which every state would be a member and within which power-seeking behavior would be constrained by common rules and norms.

The institution envisioned by the idealists—particularly Wilson and British foreign secretary Edward Grey creating the League of Nations, which began operating on January 10, 1920 – eventually failed as a collective security institution because it was unable to prevent the events that ultimately led to the outbreak of the Second World War. The United Nations was a considerably more successful undertaking because it sought to learn from the mistakes of its predecessor, but Cold War confrontation repeatedly paralyzed its operation, providing further support for realist criticism.

Early liberal thinkers also shared the view that the sources of war were rooted not primarily in an unchanging human nature but in imperfect political institutions. Political institutions, however, could be changed, and through them human behavior could also be transformed. The negative characteristics of human nature could be moderated through the development of civilization.

From this perspective, a harmony of interests potentially existed, but poor political practice and defective institutions had damaged the mechanism through which it could operate. It could nevertheless be corrected through education, enlightenment, institutional reform, and the progressive development of international law (Matus, 2005). Liberalism does not emphasize the exclusive centrality of the state because it places greater emphasis on individual freedom, inalienable rights, and self-realization. Likewise, states are not the only actors present in the international system. International institutions and organizations, as well as nongovernmental organizations operating below the state level, may also act autonomously in international relations. Rather than emphasizing ever-present conflict, liberals seek the possibilities of cooperation. States do not necessarily possess a single unified national interest because they are internally

divided by political interest groups, institutions, parties, and social forces. Consequently, changes in domestic power relations may substantially alter a country's foreign policy.

The classical debate therefore established several of the basic questions that continued to shape International Relations theory. Realists placed power, conflict, survival, and the structural consequences of anarchy at the center of analysis. Liberals emphasized institutions, law, domestic political arrangements, economic interaction, and the possibility of cooperation and reform.

The debate also revealed two different conceptions of international order. For realists, order emerges primarily from power, balance, hierarchy, or hegemony. For liberals, it can be deliberately constructed through law, institutions, common interests, and political reform. This disagreement remained central to the later debate between neorealism and neoliberalism.

3.1.2 The mainstream neo-ism debate

From the late 1970s and early 1980s onward, the theoretical debate between neorealism and neoliberalism dominated mainstream international political theory. This debate did not simply repeat the earlier confrontation between realism and idealism. Neorealists and neoliberals shared several assumptions concerning the international system, its principal actors, and the rationality of political behavior. Their principal difference concerned the problems they examined and the conclusions they drew from their common premises.

Neorealists remained fundamentally focused on power, security, position, and survival, while neoliberals placed the possibilities and institutional conditions of cooperation at the center of their research.

The realist and neorealist approach remained dominant in the field of security policy, while neoliberal thinkers turned toward other dimensions that appeared increasingly important, such as the economy, interdependence, institutions, and environmental protection. Neorealist and neoliberal theories are therefore not unambiguously opposed to one another. Both are generally state-centered, rationalist, and positivist, and both accept the condition of international anarchy. Their disagreement concerns the consequences of that condition.

Kenneth Waltz's structural theory (Waltz, 1979) represents only one part of the broader neorealist school, yet the approach is primarily associated with his name. Neorealism is internally differentiated in several respects. First, some

approaches adhere more closely to traditional elements, the “hard-liners,” while others are more open to new ideas, the “soft-liners.” Second, differences also arise from the instruments scholars use in explanation. Approaches employing models of rational choice theory may also fall within the broader neorealist tradition.

Waltzian neorealism, or structural realism, differs from classical theory in at least three respects. First, classical realism is fundamentally an inductive theory and concentrates strongly on units, leaders, political judgment, and human nature. Neorealism argues that the international system must be studied as a structure because, although the analysis of units is also important, the primary source of constraint is the system itself. The structure is shaped by the general organizing principle of the international system: anarchy. States operate under conditions of self-help because no superior authority can guarantee their survival. Their behavior cannot therefore be understood exclusively from their domestic characteristics or from the intentions of their leaders. Second, while classical realists frequently regard power as an objective of the state in itself, neorealists treat it primarily as an instrument through which the state can preserve or improve its position within the international system. Power remains indispensable, but its importance derives from the protection it provides under uncertain conditions. Third, the two theories differ concerning how states behave under anarchic conditions. Classical realists consider anarchy an external condition but also place substantial emphasis on the nature of political actors and their pursuit of power. Neorealists, by contrast, emphasize the position occupied by a state within the anarchic system.

For example, Belgium and China face the same general condition of anarchy, but their positions within the system differ because Belgium is a small state while China is decisive in almost every dimension of world politics. They therefore respond differently to particular events even though both operate under the same organizing principle (Lamy, 2005).

Classical realism and neorealism agree that states remain the most important actors in international relations. States are fundamentally self-interested, and although the possibility of cooperation among them cannot be excluded, self-interest and survival remain decisive within an anarchic and potentially conflictual system. States make decisions on the basis of rational considerations aimed at maximizing benefits and minimizing losses. Neorealists also accept the existence of the security dilemma because ensuring their own survival remains a

critical problem for states. Owing to the mistrust and fear arising from anarchy, they must regard every other state as a potential enemy or future threat to their security.

Based on Waltz's theory, the nature of international structure can be characterized in three points. First, the basic organizing principle of the system may theoretically be hierarchy or anarchy, but since no world government exists, the international structure is organized anarchically. Second, the principal units of international structure are states. They perform broadly comparable functions but possess different capabilities in terms of the intensity and effectiveness with which they can perform those functions. Third, these different capabilities assign different positions to states within the structure. The distribution of capabilities among the principal units therefore becomes a defining characteristic of the international system.

By the early 1970s, however, it had become increasingly evident that reality was far more complex than traditional realists had assumed and that international relations could not be described and explained solely in terms of military power and state interests. The two oil shocks demonstrated that military force alone was insufficient to create security. Economic dependence could generate serious vulnerability even for militarily powerful states.

The intensified cooperation and cyclical process of détente that developed between the United States and the Soviet Union similarly did not fit easily into a purely conflict-centered realist worldview. The growth of international institutions, transnational relations, economic integration, and global communications required a wider conception of international interaction.

Like classical liberalism, neoliberalism is more an umbrella term than a single theory. In the literature, the designation neoliberal generally refers to the neoliberal institutionalist approach. Like neorealism, neoliberalism is not merely a theoretical approach but a paradigmatic framework of thought that influences the way researchers conceptualize problems and determines the direction of research (Lamy, 2005, p. 208).

When examining the international system, liberals emphasize not only its character as a structure but also its character as a process. What is decisive is not exclusively the position occupied by states within the structure or the allocation of power, but the totality of interactions among state and nonstate actors participating in the shaping of international processes. Neoliberals firmly believe

that international institutions and organizations provide appropriate instruments for enabling cooperation to emerge within the international system. They agree with neorealists that the international system is anarchic because no world government exists, but international regimes and institutions help reduce the disadvantages arising from uncertainty and the conflictual potential of the system.

At the same time, international institutions provide states with a framework for securing their national interests through multilateral negotiations. Institutions supply information, reduce transaction costs, facilitate monitoring, create expectations of repeated interaction, and make violations more visible. They therefore do not abolish state interests but alter the conditions under which states pursue them. Cooperation, however, is not always possible. Where the interests of two states do not sufficiently converge, cooperation cannot easily be established. Another major obstacle may arise from the tendency of states to circumvent rules and resort to “cheating” when they seek to secure disproportionate benefits from cooperation.

This problem is particularly serious in fields such as military and defense affairs, where the distribution of gains may directly alter the balance of capabilities. Where one state’s gain is perceived as another state’s loss, agreement becomes less likely and the durability of cooperation decreases. In *Power and Interdependence* (R. O. Keohane & Nye, 1977), Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye seek to identify the principal characteristics of the international system under conditions of global interdependence. They also examine how complex interdependence influences the conditions under which international institutions and regimes operate.

The world is constantly changing as a consequence of economic processes, the development of communications technology, and human aspirations. The state has increasingly become an economic as well as a military and political unit and therefore cannot be explained by relying solely on military dimensions.

An interdependent world does not mean that conflicts disappear, only that they are fundamentally transformed. Complex interdependence appears not only at the level of states but also below and above them, which makes military force an irrelevant or ineffective instrument for addressing many challenges.

States are, of course, not equal because they possess different capacities to manage the challenges of interdependence. Keohane and Nye distinguish

between sensitivity and vulnerability. Interdependence sensitivity concerns the degree to which actors are affected by changes elsewhere before policies can be altered, while interdependence vulnerability concerns the costs actors continue to bear after alternative policies have been adopted (R. Keohane, 1984). Interdependence can therefore produce asymmetry as well as cooperation. Actors that depend more heavily on a particular relationship may become vulnerable to those possessing greater alternatives or greater control over networks, resources, markets, and institutions.

Democratic peace theory found followers among a broad range of liberal thinkers. Democratically governed states project the norms developed within their domestic institutional systems onto their foreign policies and therefore prefer the peaceful and negotiated resolution of conflicts. They are also more willing to reach compromises in order to avoid war. By contrast, leaders who come to power in authoritarian systems frequently seek to eliminate or suppress their political opponents domestically, and their activities are therefore surrounded by persistent mistrust and fear. In foreign relations, authoritarian systems may similarly follow their domestic practices and be less inclined than democratic leaders to resolve conflicts peacefully.

This may also be explained by the fact that the power of democratic leaders is far from unlimited. They encounter constitutional, institutional, electoral, and social constraints when using armed force. The political costs of war are more directly transferred to leaders who depend on public support and institutional authorization (Matus, 2005, pp. 184–190).

The transformations in international politics and the new phenomena of the 1970s forced theories themselves to change. Both realists and liberals sought to explain the new situation as comprehensively as possible while remaining fundamentally within their own paradigms. The two approaches continued to disagree on the most important questions, yet their positions moved significantly closer as a result of continuous dialogue. Both agreed that anarchy was the general condition of the international system and that states were the primary actors in international politics.

Neoliberals, however, did not share the view that every action undertaken by states was directed principally toward survival. They also accused neorealists of failing to devote sufficient attention to important phenomena such as interdependence, globalization, transnational relations, and international regimes seeking to manage anarchic interstate relations.

Neorealists no longer consistently reject the possibility of cooperation (Grieco et al., 2019), as some formulations of classical realism appeared to do, but they believe that cooperation can emerge only when states regard it as compatible with their interests and security. Cooperation is generally difficult to establish and subsequently to maintain, and its success depends substantially on the distribution of power among participating states.

Neoliberals instead emphasize the importance of areas in which the mutual interests of states coincide because the possibility of cooperation exists there. In these mutually beneficial areas, partners seek to achieve absolute gains. Each party may benefit even if the benefits are distributed unequally, provided that cooperation leaves it better off than noncooperation.

This is the point at which neorealists most strongly attack neoliberals. They argue that neoliberals insufficiently account for the importance of relative gains. According to neorealists, states must consider not only whether they benefit but whether their partners benefit more, because unequal gains may later be converted into military, economic, technological, or political advantages. Cooperation is therefore constrained by concern over the future distribution of capabilities. A state may reject an agreement that offers absolute benefits if the other participant gains considerably more and may subsequently use that advantage against it.

In contrast to neorealists, who continue to regard military power as the principal instrument for creating security, neoliberals place greater emphasis on economic questions and also admit into the framework of security analysis considerations such as interdependence, environmental pollution, and other transnational challenges.

Neoliberals believe that states make decisions according to their own preferences but also take the expected intentions and behavior of others into account. Institutions may assist in this process by providing information and increasing transparency.

Neorealists regard reliance on intentions as dangerous because every state can be certain only of its own present intentions, while the intentions of others may change. The most reliable way to create and maintain security is therefore for the state to focus on and develop its own capabilities rather than relying principally on assessments of the intentions of other states.

The mainstream neo-ism debate consequently moved beyond the classical opposition between conflict and cooperation. The central issue became whether the structural consequences of anarchy and concern for relative position would prevent durable cooperation, or whether institutions could mitigate uncertainty and enable states to pursue common interests.

This debate is particularly important for the later distinction between international system and international order. Neorealism focuses principally on the international system as an anarchic structure defined by the distribution of capabilities. Neoliberal institutionalism concentrates more directly on international order by explaining how rules, institutions, regimes, and repeated interaction organize cooperation within that system.

3.1.3 The rationalism debate

The third debate emerged partly from dissatisfaction with the shared assumptions of neorealism and neoliberalism. Despite their disagreements, both approaches treated states as broadly rational actors, accepted the material structure of the international system as the principal environment of action, and generally employed positivist methods of explanation. The rationalism debate questioned whether interests and identities could simply be treated as given, whether material capabilities alone determined political outcomes, and whether the social world could be studied without examining the ideas and meanings through which actors interpreted it.

This debate was broader than a confrontation between constructivism and the mainstream. It included critical theory, poststructuralism, feminism, normative theory, historical sociology, and other approaches challenging the epistemological and ontological assumptions of rationalist theory. Constructivism nevertheless became the most influential bridge between mainstream and critical perspectives because it retained an interest in systematic explanation while incorporating ideas, norms, identity, and social interaction into the analysis of international politics.

Before turning to constructivism, it is necessary to recognize that realism itself continued to develop beyond Waltzian structural theory. These developments did not constitute the critical side of the rationalism debate, but they reflected attempts within realism to address the limitations of an excessively static and parsimonious structural model. Although Waltz attempted to shape realist ideas

into a unified theory, other lines of development naturally emerged within the realist school. These similarly sought to revise or supplement the theory in light of changes in world politics.

Robert Gilpin's theory (Gilpin, 1987) must be mentioned because it supplemented the structural conception of the system with dynamic elements. Gilpin agreed that dominant powers exist within the structure, but argued that they cyclically rise and fall throughout history, a process for which he held economic and technological developments fundamentally responsible.

International systems tend toward equilibrium, but uneven growth changes the relative power of states. Rising powers become dissatisfied with arrangements created by dominant states, while established powers attempt to preserve institutions and distributions of benefits that favor their position. Systemic transformation may therefore occur when the distribution of power no longer corresponds to the existing international order.

Researchers described as postclassical or neoclassical realists (Lobell et al., 2012) share many realist and neorealist assumptions but differ in several important respects. Neoclassical realism seeks to explain how systemic pressures are interpreted and transmitted through domestic political institutions, state capacity, leadership perceptions, and relations between the state and society. The international system creates opportunities and constraints, but it does not directly and mechanically determine foreign policy. Systemic pressures are filtered through the perceptions of decision-makers and the internal ability of governments to mobilize resources. Postclassical realists also differ in regarding the outbreak of war among states not merely as possible but as a probability that varies according to circumstances. State behavior is therefore shaped by assessments of risk rather than by the assumption that the worst possible outcome will necessarily occur. Because they do not assume that military defeat is always imminent, they allow for the consideration of factors and challenges beyond the military sphere. They perceive a lower or more differentiated level of security risk emanating from the international system and therefore turn in their analyses toward the system's dynamism rather than only its static character. The consideration of long-term interests also represents an innovation and permits more varied conclusions concerning future security. Power and security remain important because the two are closely connected, but power is treated more as a flexible mechanism for creating and maintaining security than as an inherent objective.

So-called think tanks conducting security studies have a long tradition, particularly in the United States. The neorealist theoretical school has played a dominant intellectual role in shaping the thinking of many of these centers. In the literature on security studies, offensive and defensive neorealism are distinguished (Jervis, 1998). Offensive realists accept Waltz's structural starting point but also preserve several assumptions of classical realism. They represent a strongly traditional conception insofar as they regard serious conflict as difficult to avoid and believe that relations among states are governed by their power relative to one another. Because states can never be certain of the intentions of others and because no superior authority can protect them, offensive realists expect major powers to maximize their relative power whenever opportunities arise.

Defensive realists, however, argue that the international system does not always reward expansion. Excessive accumulation of power may provoke balancing coalitions and ultimately reduce the security of the expanding state. States should therefore seek an appropriate amount of power rather than unlimited dominance. Defensive realists also point out that perceptions of another state are fundamentally influenced by whether that state is regarded as a friend or an enemy and whether its military posture appears offensive or defensive.

European countries perceive their security as less threatened by the United States than by a state understood as hostile, despite the much greater material capabilities of the United States. The defensive approach can be associated with certain neoliberal ideas insofar as it accepts the importance of interdependence and regards particular forms of international cooperation, such as military alliances, confidence-building arrangements, and arms-control regimes, as suitable instruments for reducing uncertainty and avoiding war (Lamy, 2005).

These developments expanded realism, but they did not fundamentally reject the rationalist and predominantly materialist foundations of the mainstream. The more radical theoretical challenge emerged through constructivism and related critical approaches. In the early 1990s, constructivist logic still played a relatively marginal role in International Relations theory, but today it is unquestionably regarded as a leading mode of thought. As its name suggests, constructivism emphasizes the constructed character of social and political reality.

Its theoretical roots extend, on the one hand, into neorealism and neoliberalism and, on the other, into sociology and critical theory. According to the literature,

many scholars believe that constructivism is not a substantive theory comparable to realism or liberalism but an analytical orientation through which a deeper understanding of reality becomes possible (Wendt & Fearon, 2006).

Constructivism does not prescribe one particular expectation about whether states will cooperate or engage in conflict. Instead, it explains how identities, interests, norms, and social structures are produced and how they shape behavior. Researchers following a constructivist approach argue that neorealist and neoliberal theories narrowed their frameworks by assuming that state behavior is fundamentally influenced by material motivations and that state interests can be treated as given.

From the mid-1980s onward, an increasing number of scholars began to challenge this assumption. The criticism did not initially come from representatives of an existing, coherent new theoretical school. Rather, thinkers with neoliberal or occasionally neorealist roots began incorporating sociological and critical-theoretical elements into their explanations. Their fundamental question concerned how the structure or organizing principles of the international system should be conceptualized. They increasingly argued that the structure of the international system not only constrains state behavior but also helps constitute and reconstruct the interests and identities of states. The relationship between actors and structure is therefore reciprocal. States participate in creating the institutions, norms, and practices of international politics, while these same structures influence how states understand themselves and define their interests.

Over the years, a constructivist theoretical orientation and vocabulary gradually emerged, yet it remains difficult to speak of one completely coherent theory. Constructivism contains several approaches that differ in their methods, epistemologies, and views concerning the relationship between explanation and interpretation. The expanded constructivist framework reveals the limitations of neorealism and neoliberalism. The end of the Cold War and the transformation of the bipolar world created intellectual space for new theoretical approaches, including constructivist criticism. Mainstream theories found it difficult to explain why an apparently stable bipolar confrontation ended without a major war and why the identities and interests of the principal actors changed so substantially.

The sociological and critical approach led increasing numbers of scholars to accept the decisive role of norms and identity in the foreign policies of states. State interests are not simply determined by material capabilities or by an

unchanging imperative of survival. They are shaped by historically constructed understandings of legitimacy, threat, friendship, responsibility, and appropriate behavior. The most important innovation in constructivist theoretical thought is that constructivists examine ideas as factors that also shape the structure of the international system. A strong relationship exists between ideas and material forces because actors first interpret the international system through socially constructed categories, and these interpretations are fundamentally shaped by ideology, identity, historical experience, and accepted norms. Material capabilities do not possess one automatic political meaning. The meaning attached to them depends on the relationship among actors. The military power of an ally may be interpreted as a source of protection, while a smaller capability possessed by an adversary may be regarded as a serious threat. The knowledge possessed by actors influences how they explain reality. Problems appearing in reality are therefore “constructed social facts” (Adler, 2006). This does not mean that material reality does not exist. It means that material conditions acquire political significance through shared and contested interpretations.

According to the constructivist conception, the normative structure of the international system shapes the identities of international actors, on the basis of which they define their interests. Identity helps determine which actors are understood as friends, rivals, partners, enemies, responsible members of international society, or outsiders. Social facts such as state sovereignty or human rights exist because political communities have created and reproduced shared understandings that recognize them. They are not naturally given in the same sense as physical objects, yet they exercise real influence over the actions of actors. Sovereignty, for example, depends on the reciprocal recognition of political authority and territorial jurisdiction. Human rights depend on norms concerning the legitimate treatment of individuals. International institutions depend on collectively accepted rules, roles, and procedures. These arrangements are socially constructed but nevertheless constrain behavior and distribute authority. Power is therefore not merely a given material capability but is also shaped by the interests, identities, and shared understandings of actors (Adler, 2006). Constructivism expands the concept of power by drawing attention to the ability to define legitimate behavior, establish categories, shape identities, and determine which forms of political action are regarded as possible or appropriate.

The rationalism debate therefore changed the theoretical study of international politics in two important ways. First, it questioned the assumption that state interests, identities, and preferences could be treated as fixed. Second, it expanded the understanding of international structure beyond material capabilities to include normative, ideational, institutional, and social structures. This does not mean that constructivism eliminated realism or liberalism. Rather, it altered the terms of theoretical debate. Realists and liberals increasingly incorporated norms, identity, perceptions, and domestic interpretation into their analyses, while constructivists examined how power and institutions contributed to the production and reproduction of social meaning.

3.2 Theoretical perspectives and the study of world order

The three debates produced different but partially complementary understandings of international politics. Realist theories emphasize power, security, survival, hierarchy, and the constraints arising from anarchy. Liberal theories focus on cooperation, institutions, law, domestic political arrangements, economic interaction, and the possibility of reform. Constructivist approaches examine how ideas, identities, norms, and shared understandings shape both actors and structures. These differences influence how each theoretical tradition understands the relationship among the international system, international order, and world order.

For realism, the international system provides the principal starting point. Its structure is shaped by anarchy, the distribution of capabilities, and the relations among major powers. International order is primarily a product of power, balance, hierarchy, or hegemony. It remains stable as long as the distribution of power supporting it remains sufficiently durable.

For liberalism, international order occupies a more central position. Rules, regimes, organizations, economic interdependence, and domestic political institutions can moderate the effects of anarchy and create durable forms of cooperation. Order is therefore not merely an indirect consequence of power. It can be deliberately constructed and preserved through institutions and common interests.

For constructivism, neither the international system nor international order can be understood exclusively through material structure. Systems and orders are also constituted through ideas, identities, norms, legitimacy, and socially constructed practices. World orders persist not only because dominant states possess superior capabilities, but because particular rules and authority arrangements are accepted, internalized, contested, or resisted.

The theoretical debates consequently reveal that the international system, international order, and world order cannot be explained through a single dimension. Material power, institutional design, domestic politics, economic interdependence, authority, identity, and legitimacy all contribute to their formation and transformation.

The following section therefore distinguishes more precisely among these three concepts. This conceptual clarification is necessary before examining the emergence and transformation of the Liberal World Order, which was simultaneously rooted in a particular distribution of power, organized through institutions and rules, and sustained by a broader normative and historical project.

3.2.1 International system, international order, and world order

The concepts of international system, international order, and world order occupy a central place in debates about how global politics is organized, governed, and transformed. Although the terms are closely related, they are not interchangeable. Each captures a different dimension and level of abstraction in international politics. The international system generally refers to the configuration of actors, power relations, and structural conditions within which international interaction occurs. International order describes the rules, norms, institutions, authority relations, and legitimating principles that regulate interaction within that system. World order constitutes the widest historical and geopolitical framework, encompassing the broader settlement within which international systems, competing orders, dominant powers, and normative projects are embedded (Lake, 2017; Sakwa, 2024; Schweller, 2001).

The distinction is important because conceptual slippage can obscure the difference between structural claims about the distribution of power and normative claims about legitimate governance. Discussions of systemic change may concern shifts in the number, status, or capabilities of actors, whereas debates about the transformation of international order usually address the rules and institutions through which those actors manage their relations. World-order debates operate at a still broader level, connecting systemic change and institutional transformation to historically specific geopolitical settlements and competing visions of global organization (Mazarr et al., 2016; Sakwa, 2019; Slaughter, 1997). Across the literature, the strongest convergence is that international order is more specific and more explicitly institutional and normative than the international system. World order, in turn, is the most expansive and historically contingent concept, frequently used to capture periods of transition, pluralization, contestation, or the coexistence of competing global projects (Ikenberry, 2009; Sakwa, 2019; Sørensen, 2006). Considerable disagreement nevertheless remains about the boundaries among the concepts.

Scholars differ over whether the international order should be understood as liberal, rules-based, hierarchical, charter-centered, or pluralistic, and whether contemporary change constitutes decline, renegotiation, fragmentation, or broader reconfiguration (Barnett, 2021; Lipsky, 2017; Trachtenberg, 2025).

The differentiation developed here therefore serves as an analytical framework for the discussion of the Liberal World Order. It begins with the international system as the structural and relational environment of international politics, moves to international order as the institutionalized governance of relations within that environment, and then situates both within the broader and historically contingent concept of world order.

3.2.2 The international system: structure, composition, and environment

The international system is commonly understood as the structural field within which states and other actors interact. It comprises the actors participating in international politics, the relationships among them, their relative positions and capabilities, and the broader configuration of power that shapes the possibilities and limitations of their behavior. In this understanding, the system does not presuppose a particular institutional settlement or normative project. It identifies the environment of interaction before specifying the rules through which that interaction is governed. A dominant pattern in the literature is therefore to treat the international system as a broad structural container. It includes actors, distributions of power, institutional positions, social relationships, and, in some accounts, political relations extending beyond states to international institutions, civil society, and social movements (Lake, 2017; Paterson, 1995; Singer & Small, 1966). The concept is particularly prominent in studies concerned with system membership, status hierarchies, polarity, or the structural effects generated by relations among the principal units of international politics.

Historical studies illustrate this structural emphasis by defining the international system through changing patterns of membership and differentiated status among states. In analyses of the period between 1815 and 1940, for example, the system is reconstructed through the gradual expansion of recognized membership and the changing position of states within a hierarchy of status and influence (Singer & Small, 1966). This approach treats the system not simply as

the totality of existing states but as a structured field whose composition and internal relationships change historically.

The system is also understood as a relational environment. Its characteristics cannot be reduced to the independent capabilities of its units because the meaning and effects of those capabilities depend on relations among actors. A state's position is shaped not only by its material resources but also by its alliances, institutional roles, authority relations, recognition, and capacity to influence others. The international system therefore encompasses both the units and the structured relationships through which their roles and positions are constituted. This broader interpretation has encouraged scholars to challenge the assumption that the international system is adequately captured by a single organizing principle. Classical structural realism emphasized anarchy as the defining feature of international politics. Because no central government possesses a monopoly of legitimate authority above states, the system was conceived as formally decentralized and composed of functionally similar units. Yet subsequent scholarship has shown that the absence of a world government does not eliminate substantial differences in authority, status, function, and political centralization.

One strand of scholarship extends the traditional distinction between anarchy and hierarchy by adding political centralization and functional differentiation as separate dimensions of systemic organization. This produces several ideal types of international systems and reveals forms of change that a one-dimensional model of anarchy may obscure (Griffiths, 2018). From this perspective, systems may differ not only in whether authority is formally centralized but also in the degree to which their constituent units perform differentiated functions or occupy unequal institutional positions. A related argument rejects the assumption that anarchy produces uniform effects. Different anarchic systems may vary substantially in their institutions, practices, behavioral expectations, and distributions of authority. Anarchy describes the absence of a central sovereign, but it does not by itself explain the full variety of orders that may emerge within decentralized political environments (Donnelly, 2009). Treating anarchy as a complete description of the international system risks overlooking how different arrangements of power, authority, recognition, and governance shape the behavior of states.

Hierarchy-centered approaches advance this criticism further by demonstrating that states frequently exercise authority over one another and that dominant–

subordinate relations are historically pervasive. International hierarchy does not necessarily require the disappearance of state sovereignty or the creation of a formal global government. It can emerge through unequal security relationships, differentiated institutional privileges, economic dependence, rule-making authority, and forms of political protection or control. These relationships may become sufficiently stable and legitimate to produce durable forms of hierarchy within the broader international system (Lake, 2017).

The United States-led international environment provides an important illustration. Although formally constituted by sovereign states, it has also contained asymmetric relationships in which the United States supplied security, market access, institutional leadership, or political protection in exchange for varying degrees of compliance and acceptance of its authority. Such arrangements complicate the depiction of the international system as a flat field of formally equivalent units. They demonstrate that formal sovereignty may coexist with substantial variation in practical autonomy, institutional influence, and political authority. A similar broadening appears in models that conceptualize the international system as a multilayered structure. Sakwa's three-story model, for example, distinguishes among international governance institutions, sovereign states, and civil society or social movements. Rather than limiting the system to interstate relations, this approach incorporates the institutions and social forces through which international political life is organized and contested (Sakwa, 2024). The system thus includes different categories of actors operating at distinct but interacting levels.

These debates do not eliminate anarchy from the analysis of international politics. They instead suggest that anarchy should be treated as a minimal structural condition rather than as a complete account of international organization. The absence of a universal sovereign may coexist with hierarchy, institutionalization, functional differentiation, and unequal distributions of authority. The international system cannot therefore be understood as a uniform or politically empty space. Its structure is shaped by the composition of its actors, the distribution of capabilities, patterns of dependence, and the authority relationships connecting its constituent units. Across these theoretical differences, the literature remains highly consistent in treating the international system as the broad structural and relational environment within which international politics unfolds. It refers primarily to actor composition, distributions of power, relationships, and positions rather than to one specific

normative settlement. The system may be more or less anarchic, hierarchical, centralized, differentiated, or institutionally dense, but it exists as the wider environment within which particular forms of international order develop.

3.2.3 International order: rules, institutions, authority, and legitimacy

International order is more specific than the international system. It refers to the rules, norms, laws, institutions, agreements, practices, and authority arrangements through which interaction within the international system becomes organized and predictable. Whereas the system identifies the actors and structural relationships of international politics, order concerns the governance of those relationships. The strongest convergence across the literature is therefore that international order possesses an explicitly institutional and normative dimension. It is repeatedly defined through the rules and arrangements that regulate behavior, establish expectations, allocate authority, and provide mechanisms for cooperation and conflict management (Mazarr et al., 2016). Order does not imply the absence of conflict. It refers instead to the existence of relatively stable patterns that shape how conflict, cooperation, and competition occur.

International order is also linked to legitimacy. Rules become more durable when actors regard them as appropriate, necessary, beneficial, or at least acceptable. Institutions derive stability not only from material power but also from beliefs about rightful authority and legitimate procedures. Consequently, order cannot be reduced to the mechanical effects of the distribution of capabilities. It involves claims concerning who may formulate rules, which actors are entitled to exercise authority, and why particular arrangements should be accepted. Different theoretical traditions identify different foundations of international order. Liberal institutionalist accounts emphasize rules, organizations, cooperation, and the capacity of institutions to reduce uncertainty, facilitate coordination, and stabilize expectations. Within this approach, international order is created and maintained through institutional bargains that allow states to manage interdependence and constrain the arbitrary exercise of power (Ikenberry et al., 2018).

The post-1945 order is frequently interpreted through this liberal institutionalist framework. It is associated with multilateral institutions, open economic

relations, collective security arrangements, international law, and the political leadership of the United States. These features are often presented as components of a broader institutional settlement designed to combine American power with rules and organizations that made that power more predictable and acceptable to other states. However, liberal international order is not equivalent to international order in general. It represents one historically specific ordering project. International orders existed before the emergence of liberal internationalism and may be based on principles other than liberal universalism. They may be hierarchical, pluralistic, regional, imperial, charter-based, functional, or organized around sovereign coexistence rather than political convergence. This distinction becomes especially important in debates concerning the legitimacy of the Liberal World Order. Some scholars interpret liberal order as an institutional achievement grounded in ideas of moral progress, human dignity, political openness, and cooperative governance. At the same time, they identify internal vulnerabilities arising from declining political consent, excessive individualism, social fragmentation, and the weakening of shared purposes (Barnett, 2021). From this perspective, the crisis of liberal order is not produced exclusively by the rise of external challengers. It also reflects tensions within liberal societies and institutions.

The concept of a rules-based international order similarly describes a post-1945 institutional settlement organized around common rules, multilateral institutions, and restraints on unilateral behavior. Yet historical analysis has questioned whether the contemporary narrative of a coherent rules-based order accurately reflects its origins and operation. The language of a rules-based order may retroactively impose greater consistency on the postwar settlement than existed in practice, particularly when the rules were applied selectively or subordinated to strategic considerations (Trachtenberg, 2025). The legitimacy of international order may also derive from hierarchy and authority rather than from formal equality or universal norms. In hierarchical accounts, order emerges through authority relationships and implicit social contracts between dominant and subordinate states. A dominant power provides security, protection, institutional benefits, or economic opportunities, while subordinate actors accept some limitations on their autonomy and acknowledge the leading state's authority (Lake, 2017). Such arrangements may generate order even in the absence of legal equality or liberal universalism. This interpretation underscores the distinction between system and order. Hierarchy may be a structural characteristic of the international system, but it becomes a form of international

order when authority is institutionalized, expectations become stable, and dominant-subordinate relations acquire practical or normative legitimacy. The same material asymmetry may therefore generate different forms of order depending on how it is organized and justified. Other approaches locate the foundations of international order in international law, sovereign coexistence, or charter-based multilateralism. The United Nations Charter represents an attempt to formulate universal principles of international conduct around sovereign equality, territorial integrity, non-aggression, and collective responsibility. From this perspective, a distinction must be made between the universal normative framework of the charter system and particular ordering projects that claim special leadership or tutelary privileges within it (Sakwa, 2019).

This distinction complicates claims that the Liberal World Order and the post-1945 international order are identical. The charter system established principles applicable to the international community as a whole, while the liberal order developed through a more restricted set of institutions, alliances, practices, and political relationships centered largely on the Western world. These two arrangements overlap, but they are neither historically nor conceptually identical. The literature therefore contains a persistent contradiction between universalist and pluralist understandings of international order. Liberal internationalist accounts often present order as an institutional achievement whose rules can be generalized, defended, and extended (Mazarr et al., 2016). Historical and critical scholarship argues that such claims of universality may overstate the geographical reach, normative acceptance, and consistent application of liberal rules. From this perspective, the liberal or rules-based order remained dependent on specific post-1945 power relations, institutional compromises, and selective interpretations of history (Trachtenberg, 2025).

The disagreement partly reflects different evidentiary and methodological approaches. Institutional studies emphasize organizational design, patterns of cooperation, and the benefits produced by stable rules. Historical analyses are more likely to challenge retrospective narratives about the emergence, coherence, and universality of postwar order. Normative interventions focus on legitimacy, crisis, and political renewal, while structural approaches emphasize the power asymmetries supporting institutional arrangements. Despite these disagreements, international order is consistently understood as more specific and governance-oriented than the international system. The main dispute is not whether order contains rules and institutions, but which principles and authority

structures provide its foundation. Liberal universalism, charter-based multilateralism, hierarchy, sovereignty, and functional cooperation offer different answers to the same fundamental question: how are relations within the international system organized and legitimized?

International order is therefore best understood as an institutionalized and historically contingent governance arrangement within the broader international system. It encompasses the rules, norms, institutions, and authority relations through which actors regulate their interactions. It may be supported by material power, but it cannot be explained by material capabilities alone because order also depends on legitimacy, consent, recognition, and established expectations.

3.2.4 Historical settlement and competing projects

World order is the broadest and least fixed of the three concepts. It refers to the overarching historical and geopolitical configuration within which international systems and particular international orders are embedded. The concept is most frequently used when the analysis extends beyond institutional governance to include transformations in global power, the coexistence of rival normative projects, and competing visions of political or civilizational organization.

Whereas international order focuses on the rules and institutions regulating interaction, world order captures the broader settlement within which such arrangements become possible. It includes dominant powers, distributions of influence, geopolitical divisions, institutional structures, ideological projects, and the historical narratives through which different actors interpret the organization of global politics (Sørensen, 2006).

World order may describe periods of relative stability in which dominant powers and established institutions create a recognizable framework of global organization. It may also refer to transitional or unsettled conditions characterized by fragmentation, interregnum, the erosion of established authority, or competition among rival orders (Schweller, 2001). The concept is therefore closely associated with historical change.

The use of world order becomes especially prominent when the existing configuration appears to be undergoing transformation. Debates about the contemporary international environment commonly ask whether the post-Cold War settlement is declining, whether multipolarity is emerging, whether Western power is being displaced, and whether a new geopolitical arrangement is

replacing the Liberal World Order. Such questions concern more than the effectiveness of particular institutions. They address the wider historical configuration of power, legitimacy, identity, and political purpose. World order also constitutes the level at which competing normative projects are most clearly articulated. Liberal internationalism, sovereign internationalism, conservative internationalism, mercantilist nationalism, and transformational or democratic internationalism are not merely alternative institutional designs. They express different understandings of how global politics should be organized and what principles should structure relations among states and societies.

These projects may overlap, coexist, and compete within the same international system. Their interaction demonstrates why world order should not be equated with a single institutional arrangement. A world order may contain multiple international orders, regional arrangements, ideological projects, and authority structures. Some of these may be compatible, while others may directly contest one another. Contemporary scholarship increasingly describes the present as a contest among rival models of world order rather than as a settled institutional hierarchy. Liberal international order, sovereign internationalism, democratic or transformational internationalism, mercantilist nationalism, and conservative internationalism are positioned as competing logics that overlap and intersect without forming a single coherent settlement (Sakwa, 2024). The “Three Worlds” framework similarly portrays the global West, global East, and global South as loose and evolving political formations competing over institutions, rules, representation, and the distribution of authority. These categories do not describe unified blocs. They identify broad arenas of political alignment and contestation within which states pursue different combinations of strategic autonomy, institutional reform, sovereignty, and cooperation.

From this perspective, contemporary world order is not simply being replaced by a clearly defined successor. It is being renegotiated through multiple and partially overlapping projects. The international system is becoming more pluralistic and contested, while international order is increasingly fragmented among alternative rules, institutions, and legitimacy claims. This interpretation is particularly visible in analyses of the post-Cold War and post-2022 international environment. The Liberal World Order is widely described as being under pressure, but it has not disappeared. Its institutions continue to shape international interaction, while its principles remain influential among many states. At the same time, its authority, universality, and legitimacy are

increasingly contested by rising powers, non-Western states, nationalist political movements, and critics within liberal societies themselves (Ikenberry et al., 2018).

The concept of world order is therefore especially useful for describing coexistence and contestation. It allows the analysis to move beyond a binary choice between continuity and collapse. Established institutions may persist while the geopolitical and normative environment surrounding them changes. New coalitions may emerge without fully displacing older arrangements. Alternative projects may challenge the legitimacy of existing institutions while continuing to participate in them. This helps explain why the language of interregnum, pluralization, and renegotiation appears so frequently in contemporary scholarship. World order may become less coherent without disappearing. It may contain several competing orders rather than one universal settlement. The transformation of world order can therefore proceed through gradual reconfiguration, institutional layering, regional divergence, and the erosion of shared legitimacy rather than through a single moment of systemic replacement.

The literature does not provide one universally accepted definition of world order. Some authors use it to describe a stable framework shaped by dominant powers and common institutions, while others employ it for broad civilizational or geopolitical patterns. Nevertheless, there is a consistent tendency to reserve the term for the widest and most historically contingent level of analysis. World order becomes relevant when the question concerns not only how relations are governed, but what broader geopolitical and normative settlement is emerging.

3.2.5 The conceptual hierarchy

The relation among the international system, international order, and world order is best understood as a hierarchy of analytical abstraction rather than as a set of interchangeable definitions. Each concept highlights a distinct dimension of international politics, although the phenomena to which they refer remain closely connected. The international system describes the structural and relational environment. It identifies the actors, distributions of capabilities, status positions, authority relationships, and patterns of interaction that constitute international political life. Its principal concern is the composition and structure of the environment in which political interaction occurs. International order describes the institutionalized governance of relations within that environment.

It concerns the rules, norms, laws, institutions, practices, and authority arrangements that organize behavior and stabilize expectations. Its central questions involve governance, predictability, legitimacy, and the allocation of rule-making authority. World order provides the broadest historical and geopolitical frame. It encompasses the wider settlement within which systems and orders are embedded, including dominant powers, competing projects, ideological claims, geopolitical divisions, and historically specific understandings of global organization. This relationship may be expressed schematically with FIGURE 1.



1. Figure: World order, international system, international order. Source: Author's own compilation.

The hierarchy is analytical rather than strictly causal. International systems influence the forms of order that can emerge because distributions of power and authority shape institutional possibilities. At the same time, international orders influence the system by affecting state behavior, redistributing institutional

advantages, legitimizing hierarchies, and enabling some actors to exercise greater authority than their material capabilities alone would suggest. World order connects these processes to historical transformation. Changes in the international system may weaken an existing international order, but systemic change does not automatically produce a new world order. Institutional arrangements may persist after the power relations that created them have begun to shift. Conversely, changes in legitimacy, ideology, and political purpose may transform world order even when the material structure of the system changes more slowly.

The distinction also clarifies the apparent contradiction between anarchy and hierarchy. Anarchy may describe the absence of a universal government at the systemic level, while hierarchy characterizes many authority relations operating within particular international orders. The two conditions may coexist. A formally anarchic system can contain hierarchical institutions, dominant-subordinate relationships, unequal rule-making authority, and differentiated political roles (Donnelly, 2012).

Similarly, the existence of one international system does not imply the existence of one uniform international order. Different regions, institutions, and functional domains may develop distinct ordering arrangements. Security relations may be governed by alliances and deterrence, economic relations by trade and financial institutions, and normative relations by international law and political expectations. These arrangements may overlap without forming a completely unified order. World order is broader still because it contains the interaction and contestation among such arrangements. It can accommodate the coexistence of liberal, sovereign, regional, hierarchical, and pluralistic orders. This is particularly important in periods of transition, when no single political project possesses sufficient power or legitimacy to organize the entire international environment. The conceptual differentiation is therefore not merely semantic. It determines how change is diagnosed. A shift in power distribution constitutes systemic change. The weakening of rules or institutions indicates a transformation of international order. The emergence of competing geopolitical settlements and normative projects signals a broader transformation of world order.

Without this distinction, the decline of one institution may be incorrectly interpreted as the collapse of the entire international system, while the weakening of liberal legitimacy may be equated with the disappearance of all international order. Conversely, institutional continuity may obscure deeper

changes in the distribution of power or in the historical settlement supporting those institutions.

3.2.6 The Liberal World Order within the conceptual hierarchy

The conceptual hierarchy also clarifies the position of the Liberal World Order. It should not be treated as a synonym for the international system, international order, or world order in general. It represents a historically specific ordering project that developed within a particular international system and became sufficiently influential to shape the broader post-1945 and post-Cold War world order.

Liberal internationalism emerged as an approach to order-making grounded in institutions, cooperation, economic openness, multilateralism, and claims of universal political principles (Ikenberry et al., 2018; Mazarr et al., 2016). Its institutional foundations were closely connected to the power and leadership of the United States, but its legitimacy also depended on the claim that rules and institutions would constrain power and generate benefits extending beyond the leading state. The Liberal World Order therefore combined material hierarchy with institutional restraint. It was neither a purely liberal arrangement nor simply a manifestation of American dominance. Its durability resulted from the interaction between power, institutions, political bargains, and normative claims.

At the same time, the extent to which this order was genuinely global remains contested. Many of its central institutions had broad membership, but the political and security core of liberal order was concentrated primarily among Western states and their allies. The universal language of liberal internationalism often exceeded the geographical reach and political consent underlying its practical operation. This tension explains why the Liberal World Order may be understood simultaneously as an international order and as a project of world order. As an international order, it consists of institutions, rules, alliances, economic arrangements, and political practices. As a world-order project, it advances a broader vision of legitimate global organization based on liberal principles and Western-led institutional governance.

The crisis of liberal order likewise operates at several levels. Changes in the distribution of power affect the international system. The weakening of institutions, rules, and political cooperation affects the international order. The emergence of alternative normative and geopolitical projects transforms the

wider world order. Several studies therefore distinguish between the decline of liberal primacy and the disappearance of international order itself. The weakening of one ordering project does not produce a complete absence of rules or institutions. It may instead generate a more pluralistic environment in which several projects compete to shape the content and legitimacy of international governance (Ikenberry, 2024).

The contemporary transformation is consequently better understood as a struggle over the content and legitimacy of international order within a changing international system rather than as the simple rise or fall of world order as such (Sakwa, 2024). This struggle includes competition over institutional representation, sovereign authority, economic rules, security arrangements, political values, and the right to define legitimate international conduct. For policy and public debate, this distinction is significant. Strategies focused exclusively on defending the Liberal World Order may overlook the need to renegotiate institutional bargains, address legitimacy deficits, and accommodate changing patterns of power and representation. Preserving existing institutions without addressing unequal rule-making authority or selective application may reinforce rather than resolve contestation (Barnett, 2021).

At the same time, the emergence of competing projects does not necessarily imply the complete fragmentation of international politics. Existing rules, institutions, and practices continue to structure interaction. The current environment is therefore characterized by the coexistence of continuity and transformation: established institutions remain influential, while their legitimacy, interpretation, and political foundations are increasingly contested. The strongest explanatory frameworks are consequently those that connect structural change in the international system to the transformation of international order and the wider contestation of world order. Approaches that isolate one level risk misdiagnosing the nature of contemporary change. Material power alone cannot explain the persistence of institutions, while institutional continuity alone cannot conceal shifts in hierarchy, authority, and geopolitical influence. The evidence supports a clear but qualified conceptual conclusion. The international system is the structural field of actors, power distributions, authority relations, and interactions. International order is the institutional and normative arrangement through which those relations are governed. World order is the broadest historical and geopolitical settlement within which one or

more international orders are embedded, coexist, or compete (Mazarr et al., 2016).

The concepts remain interdependent. Structural change affects institutions and rules, while institutions and legitimacy influence the operation of power. Broader world-order transformations emerge from the interaction of these processes. Nevertheless, maintaining the distinction among the concepts is essential because it allows changes in power, governance, and historical settlement to be analyzed separately before their interaction is assessed. The Liberal World Order should therefore be examined as one historically specific international order and world-order project rather than as the international order in its entirety. Its emergence, consolidation, and contemporary crisis can only be understood by situating its institutions and normative claims within the changing structure of the international system and the broader contest over the future organization of world politics.

3.3 The origins of the Liberal World Order

The theoretical traditions discussed above offer different explanations of international order, but they also reveal why no account based on a single mechanism is sufficient. Realism directs attention to power, hierarchy, and the strategic interests of states. Liberalism explains how cooperation may become rational and how institutions can reduce uncertainty, regulate interdependence, and constrain behavior. Constructivist approaches add the role of legitimacy, identity, norms, and shared interpretations. The emergence of the liberal world order can therefore be understood only through the interaction of these dimensions. The origins of this order remain central to debates about how international arrangements are created, stabilized, and transmitted across periods of political disruption. In the discussion that follows, the liberal world order refers to an international system organized around open markets, multilateral institutions, cooperative security, rule-based governance, and a claim to legitimate political purpose rather than unrestricted domination (Ikenberry, 2009). These principles were never applied consistently or universally. They nevertheless formed the central language through which the Western-led international order described and justified itself.

The liberal world order is most commonly associated with the settlement established after the Second World War. This interpretation is understandable. The creation of the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, new trade arrangements, and the Western alliance system gave the order a recognizable institutional structure. Yet the postwar settlement did not emerge from an intellectual or institutional vacuum. Several studies locate its foundations in interwar internationalism, nineteenth-century diplomatic change, or even the economic and political liberalization of the late eighteenth century (Florea, 2022; Makei, 2023; Navascués, 2025). These different starting points create an analytical difficulty. If the liberal order began in 1945, its origin may be explained primarily through American power and postwar institutional design. If its origins are traced to the League of Nations, nineteenth-century diplomacy, or early liberal political economy, the explanation must also account for the gradual development and transmission of ideas and practices. The most convincing interpretation is therefore cumulative. The liberal world order was not founded at a single moment but developed through successive historical layers that converged after the Second World War.

Accounts based exclusively on material power cannot fully explain this process. The postwar order undoubtedly reflected an exceptional concentration of power in the hands of the United States. Yet it also combined hierarchy with restraint and sovereign independence with institutionalized cooperation. Other states accepted an unequal distribution of influence because American leadership was embedded in institutions, presented as rule-governed, and connected to wider benefits such as economic reconstruction, security guarantees, and access to an open international economy (Kang, 2020).

American hegemony was therefore a necessary condition for the postwar settlement, but it was not sufficient by itself. The United States possessed the capabilities required to shape the emerging order, but power became durable order-making capacity only when it was translated into rules and institutions. The resulting arrangements reduced uncertainty, created procedures for bargaining, and reassured other states that American predominance would not be exercised without limits. Institutions allowed the dominant power to make commitments that appeared more credible and predictable than unilateral political promises. This is the central insight of the argument concerning strategic restraint. The United States did not abandon power politics. Nor did the institutional order eliminate hierarchy. Rather, American power was partially restrained and channelled through multilateral arrangements. The United Nations, Bretton Woods, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and later trade and security institutions transformed material predominance into an organized political settlement (Puchala, 2005).

The institutional structure benefited the United States, but it also imposed costs and constraints on it. This feature distinguished the emerging order from a more conventional imperial system. American leadership remained privileged, yet other participants gained access to rules, procedures, consultation, and forms of institutional protection. The order was asymmetrical, but the asymmetry was moderated through what Deudney and Ikenberry describe as co-binding institutions and a penetrated form of hegemony (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999). This restraint should not be exaggerated. The United States retained considerable influence over the institutions it helped establish, and the distribution of decision-making rights reflected the power relations of the period. Even so, the willingness of the leading state to operate through institutions helped make the hierarchy more acceptable. The order gained stability because

American influence appeared to serve a wider system of cooperation rather than merely the short-term interests of the dominant power.

Liberal principles reinforced this institutional structure. Rule-based governance, openness, consultation, and cooperation gave American leadership a political language that differed from direct domination. The order was therefore presented as something more than a system created by the strongest state for its own advantage. It claimed to offer a framework within which other states could pursue security, reconstruction, development, and economic growth. The postwar order also drew heavily on lessons from the interwar period. The failure of the League of Nations is often treated as evidence that interwar internationalism was politically ineffective. This assessment is only partly correct. The League failed to prevent renewed great-power conflict, but it created technical agencies, administrative practices, professional networks, and habits of international governance that did not disappear with its political collapse. The League of Nations served as an institutional bridge between earlier diplomatic arrangements and the post-1945 system. Its officials and associated experts developed practical knowledge in areas such as health, economic cooperation, minority protection, humanitarian assistance, and international administration. These experiences later informed the design and operation of the United Nations and related institutions (Navascués, 2025). The transfer of knowledge did not occur only between formal organizations. American civil-society actors, European professionals in exile, international experts, and officials who had worked within League institutions carried administrative practices and ideas into wartime and postwar planning. The new order consequently incorporated older forms of expertise even when its political architects sought to distance themselves from the perceived failures of the interwar period.

The nineteenth century provides another layer of historical continuity. The diplomatic system that followed the Napoleonic Wars remained based on great-power management and did not constitute a liberal order in the modern sense. Yet it contributed to changes in diplomatic procedure, regularized consultation, conference diplomacy, and the management of international crises. These practices gradually altered expectations about how relations among states could be organized (Florea, 2022). The Concert of Europe was hierarchical and exclusionary. Its principal purpose was to preserve stability among the major powers rather than establish universal equality or democratic governance. Even so, it demonstrated that international order could be sustained through

repeated consultation, shared diplomatic practices, and a degree of collective responsibility. Later liberal projects inherited some of these procedural ideas while attaching them to broader claims about law, institutions, and political legitimacy. Some interpretations extend the historical origins even further, to changes in political economy during the late eighteenth century. The transition from mercantilist thinking toward more open trading arrangements helped establish one of the intellectual foundations of liberal order. Britain's partial movement toward commercial openness and the growing influence of ideas associated with Adam Smith contributed to the belief that trade could produce mutual benefits rather than merely redistribute wealth between rival states (Morrison, 2012).

This development did not immediately create a liberal international order. Economic openness remained uneven, frequently coercive, and closely connected to imperial power. Nevertheless, the idea that prosperity could be advanced through an international trading system introduced a lasting alternative to economic nationalism. It also supplied later liberal internationalists with an argument that commercial interdependence could moderate political conflict. The post-1945 settlement brought these earlier elements together under new geopolitical conditions. American power supplied the material foundation. Interwar and nineteenth-century experiences supplied institutional and diplomatic practices. Liberal economic thought supplied a justification for commercial openness. The destruction caused by two world wars supplied the political urgency required to turn those elements into a more organized system. The resulting order was not simply American, although the United States occupied its central position. Britain contributed intellectual and institutional experience, particularly in economic negotiations. European states participated in the construction of regional institutions and security arrangements. International officials, economists, diplomats, and legal experts helped convert broad political goals into operational rules. The Bretton Woods negotiations illustrate this interactive character. They are often presented primarily as an agreement between the United States and the United Kingdom, shaped by the unequal influence of their governments and leading economic officials. That description captures the main distribution of power but does not fully account for the bargaining process. Developmental concerns, the preferences of smaller states, and the ideas introduced by actors outside the dominant Anglo-American relationship also affected the emerging framework (Cohen, 2015; Farese, 2015). China's role in the transition toward the Bretton Woods order is particularly

instructive. Subordinate states did not simply accept ideas designed by stronger powers. They could amplify certain principles, attach their own concerns to dominant proposals, or appropriate established concepts in ways that altered their meaning. These mechanisms of amplifying, grafting, and resistance by appropriation demonstrate that order formation was interactive even under conditions of pronounced inequality (King, 2022).

This does not mean that all participants exercised equal influence. The postwar settlement remained hierarchical, and powerful states controlled the main parameters of institutional design. Yet the normative and technical architecture of the order was co-produced through negotiation. Ideas moved in several directions, even when their adoption depended on approval from the dominant powers. Transnational actors also contributed to this process. Economists, lawyers, administrators, and policy specialists carried ideas between universities, governments, philanthropic organizations, international bodies, and wartime planning agencies. Their work shaped the technical form of institutions and helped preserve ideas across political ruptures. The continuity between the League of Nations and the United Nations is therefore partly a history of people and professional knowledge, not simply a history of formal organizations. The economic foundations of the order were especially significant. Liberal internationalism assumed that an open international economy could promote prosperity and reduce the incentives for conflict. Yet policymakers had also learned from the instability of the interwar period that economic openness could not be separated from domestic political conditions. Unregulated markets and unrestricted capital movements could produce unemployment, social dislocation, and political radicalization. The postwar economic settlement sought to avoid a return to both protectionist nationalism and nineteenth-century *laissez-faire*. Ruggie described this compromise as embedded liberalism: an arrangement that combined international economic openness with the authority of states to pursue domestic stability and social protection (Ruggie, 1982). Governments accepted multilateral economic cooperation but retained room to manage employment, welfare, reconstruction, and development.

This compromise was political rather than purely economic. Open markets were made more acceptable because they were embedded within national arrangements that allowed governments to respond to domestic pressures. The international system did not require states to surrender all control over their economies. Instead, it attempted to reconcile trade and monetary cooperation

with political responsibility at home. Bretton Woods formed the institutional core of this arrangement. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were intended to support monetary stability, reconstruction, and development. Their design reflected the belief that a functioning international economy required organized public authority rather than automatic market adjustment (Cohen, 2015).

Development was therefore present in the order from its foundation, although its meaning and application remained contested. Reconstruction in Europe received immediate priority, while the concerns of colonial and postcolonial societies occupied a more ambiguous position. The language of development helped broaden the legitimacy of the economic order, but it also reproduced hierarchies concerning who defined progress and who possessed the authority to prescribe the means of achieving it. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade complemented the monetary institutions by promoting the gradual reduction of trade barriers. It did not establish unrestricted free trade. Its rules contained exceptions, bargaining mechanisms, and safeguards that reflected political realities. This again indicates that the postwar order was liberal in a managed and institutionally embedded sense rather than through the application of pure laissez-faire principles.

Security institutions developed according to a similar logic. The United Nations offered a formally universal framework, while NATO and the American alliance system created a more concentrated Western security order. These arrangements institutionalized cooperation but also reflected the geopolitical division of the Cold War. The liberal order was therefore global in aspiration while remaining Western in its strongest institutional and normative foundations (Scott-Smith, 2024).

The order also depended on legitimacy. Material power may explain why the United States could create institutions, but it does not fully explain why those institutions were accepted, reproduced, or treated as appropriate. International order requires participants to believe, at least to some degree, that its rules serve a recognizable social purpose. Ruggie's account of embedded liberalism already incorporated this ideational dimension. International regimes were sustained through a fusion of power and legitimate social purpose rather than through capabilities alone (Ruggie, 1982). Economic openness survived because it was linked to employment, welfare, reconstruction, and political stability. The legitimacy of the arrangement rested on the belief that it could reconcile

international cooperation with domestic social needs. The United Nations was likewise conceived as more than a mechanism for interstate coordination. It was associated with a broader project of normative integration. Its institutions, declarations, and practices encouraged identification with certain principles and helped define legitimate membership in international society (Barnett, 2021).

This normative role was never politically neutral. The values associated with the order emerged largely from Western liberal traditions, even though they were frequently reformulated through wider international negotiation. Claims concerning universal rights, human dignity, political progress, and international cooperation provided the order with moral purpose, but they could also conceal unequal power relations or selective implementation. The postwar order was therefore both institutional and moral. It contained rules about how states should behave and ideas about why those rules deserved support. Liberalism was tied to narratives of progress, humanity, peace, and development, which distinguished the order from an arrangement justified solely by force or necessity. Legitimacy formed part of the causal structure of the order rather than an additional feature placed on top of material power. Institutions could constrain behavior because actors regarded them as appropriate or useful. Rules could shape expectations because governments believed that others would continue to observe them. The order endured because its participants reproduced its principles through repeated practice.

This helps explain why the liberal world order proved more durable than the immediate distribution of power might suggest. Its survival did not depend exclusively on continuous American coercion. Institutions acquired routines, constituencies, and a degree of autonomy. States adjusted their policies to existing rules, and domestic actors developed interests in preserving international cooperation. The order also became embedded within national political systems. Governments justified policies through the language of multilateralism, development, security cooperation, and international law. Economic sectors benefited from open trade, while political and administrative elites became connected through international institutions. These domestic foundations made the order more difficult to dismantle.

At the same time, the relationship between domestic liberalism and international liberalism contained a persistent tension. International openness could weaken the capacity of governments to meet domestic demands, while domestic democratic decisions could challenge international commitments. Liberalism's

attempt to organize both sovereign national politics and an increasingly institutionalized international sphere created constitutional and political contradictions that never fully disappeared (Jahn, 2018). These tensions became more visible as economic integration deepened. The original embedded-liberal compromise depended on governments retaining enough policy space to protect domestic stability. As later forms of globalization limited that space, the political legitimacy of the international economic order weakened. The crisis of contemporary liberal order can therefore be traced partly to the erosion of the compromise on which its postwar legitimacy rested.

The origins of the order also reveal its exclusions. Much of the literature concentrates on the United States, Western Europe, and Atlantic institutions. Colonial structures, racial hierarchies, and coercive economic relations receive less systematic treatment. Many societies were incorporated into the emerging order under conditions they had played little part in defining. The universal claims of liberal order therefore coexisted with unequal participation. Sovereign equality was formally recognized, but political and economic influence remained highly uneven. Institutions provided weaker states with rules and forums, yet those same institutions often reflected the preferences of their most powerful members. This contradiction does not invalidate the liberal character of the order, but it complicates claims that it represented a neutral or universally accepted system. The postwar settlement combined genuine cooperation with hierarchy, inclusion with exclusion, and legal equality with material inequality. Its legitimacy rested partly on its capacity to manage these tensions without eliminating them.

The historical literature differs in how it evaluates this balance. Studies centered on American strategic restraint emphasize the unusual willingness of the hegemon to bind itself through institutions (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999). More critical or historically expansive accounts draw attention to the antecedents, exclusions, and asymmetric transfers through which the order was assembled (Florea, 2022; Navascués, 2025).

These explanations are not necessarily contradictory. They address different levels of the same historical process. Postwar-centered accounts explain when liberal ideas became organized into a coherent institutional settlement. Deeper historical accounts explain where those ideas and practices originated. Critical perspectives reveal which actors possessed the authority to define their content and which interests remained marginal. A layered historical interpretation

reconciles these approaches. Liberal political economy supplied ideas concerning trade and mutual benefit. Nineteenth-century diplomacy contributed practices of consultation and managed order. Interwar institutions developed technical knowledge and administrative routines. The geopolitical conditions after 1945 allowed the United States and its partners to combine those elements within a more extensive institutional framework. The order was therefore assembled through translation. Earlier ideas were adapted to new political conditions rather than simply reproduced. The experience of the Great Depression modified faith in unrestricted markets. The failure of the League of Nations encouraged stronger institutional arrangements and a more direct involvement of the United States. The experience of total war strengthened demands for collective security, economic reconstruction, and international political legitimacy.

The immediate postwar moment nevertheless remains decisive. Earlier traditions created possibilities, but they did not make the resulting order inevitable. The institutional settlement depended on a particular distribution of power, the destruction or exhaustion of alternative centers of authority, and the political choices made by American and European leaders. Historical continuity existed alongside contingency. The strength of the evidence is therefore greatest regarding the post-1945 institutional core. There is broad agreement that American leadership, multilateral institutions, economic openness, and strategic restraint formed the main pillars of the Western-led order (Hurrell, 2006). The argument that legitimacy and moral purpose contributed to its durability is similarly well supported (Barnett, 2021).

Claims about deeper origins are more difficult to establish with the same precision. The literature identifies relevant antecedents in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but it does not always demonstrate a continuous causal chain connecting them to 1945. The meaning of “origin” also varies. It may refer to the first appearance of liberal ideas, the creation of international administrative practices, or the establishment of a recognizable institutional order. It is therefore useful to distinguish among intellectual, institutional, and political origins. The intellectual origins lie in liberal ideas concerning trade, law, constitutional restraint, and cooperation. The institutional origins can be found in diplomatic conferences, nineteenth-century arrangements, and the League of Nations. The political origin of the liberal world order in its recognizable form lies in the postwar settlement led by the United States.

This distinction helps avoid treating 1945 either as a complete beginning or merely as one event within an uninterrupted evolution. The postwar order was new in its scale, institutional density, and concentration of American leadership. Yet the ideas and practices from which it was constructed had longer histories. The origins also provide insight into the conditions under which the order could be preserved or reformed. Durable order depends on more than the continued existence of its organizations. Institutions remain effective only when participants believe that rules are reasonably predictable, that hierarchy is exercised with restraint, and that cooperation offers benefits that cannot be achieved through unilateral action. Economic legitimacy is especially significant. The postwar order succeeded partly because openness was linked to reconstruction, employment, and development. When international economic arrangements appear to undermine domestic stability or distribute gains unfairly, their political foundations weaken. The tension between international openness and national democratic accountability then becomes harder to manage. The same applies to political legitimacy. Institutions created under an earlier distribution of power face growing demands for representation and reform. Rising and subordinate states are unlikely to accept indefinitely an order in which their economic and political importance is not reflected in decision-making authority. The historical evidence indicates that they have never been entirely passive, even when their influence has been limited.

A viable order must therefore allow adaptation. The postwar settlement survived because it was capable of expanding, incorporating new members, and developing new areas of governance. Yet adaptation also changes the meaning of the order. Wider participation introduces different interests, historical experiences, and interpretations of legitimacy. The present crisis should be understood in this context. The liberal world order is not simply ending or surviving unchanged. It is being reconstituted through a contested interaction among power, institutions, and meaning. This process remains most visible at the systemic level, but many of the pressures driving it originate in domestic political change, regional dissatisfaction, and challenges to the legitimacy of Western leadership rather than in interstate rivalry alone (Loh et al., 2026).

The central unresolved question is whether this pluralization will produce a more representative and workable order or consolidate fragmentation and prolonged rivalry. The answer will shape the prospects for international cooperation, conflict management, and global governance. It will also determine whether

institutions created under Western predominance can acquire legitimacy in a more diverse and politically polarized international system. The history examined here suggests that international orders survive when power is connected to restraint, institutions accommodate change, and political arrangements retain a credible social purpose. They become fragile when hierarchy loses legitimacy, economic cooperation appears incompatible with domestic welfare, or institutions cease to reflect the distribution of influence among their members. The liberal world order originated through a complex process. American power provided the main material foundation after the Second World War, but power became order only when it was institutionalized and partially restrained. Liberal ideas supplied a political and moral vocabulary. Earlier experiments in diplomacy, economic openness, and international administration provided practices that could be adapted to the postwar environment. Its creation was neither entirely imposed from above nor produced through equal cooperation. The United States remained the principal architect, but other states, international officials, experts, and transnational networks influenced its design. The order was hierarchical, yet interactive. It was Western-led, yet expressed universal aspirations. It promoted sovereign equality while preserving substantial inequalities of power.

These contradictions were present from the beginning. They did not prevent the order from functioning, but they shaped both its achievements and its vulnerabilities. The origins of the liberal world order therefore offer more than a historical explanation. They reveal the conditions under which international hierarchy may be converted into cooperation and the circumstances in which that cooperation begins to lose its legitimacy. The most defensible interpretation is that the liberal world order crystallized after 1945 through the convergence of American leadership, institutional restraint, managed economic openness, and claims to moral and political legitimacy. It nevertheless drew on much older antecedents in liberal political economy, diplomatic practice, and interwar governance.

This interpretation requires one qualification. Much of the supporting literature examines the Atlantic world and the Western-led international order. Its conclusions are therefore stronger as an explanation of that particular historical formation than as a universal theory of international order. More attention is required to the role of non-Western states, colonial and postcolonial societies, and actors whose participation was filtered or excluded. Even with this limitation,

the central lesson remains clear. The liberal world order was not produced by material superiority alone. Its durability depended on whether institutions could make power appear restrained, provide practical benefits, accommodate development, and command sufficient legitimacy among unequal states. As these foundations weaken, the history of the order's construction becomes directly relevant to the question of whether it can be preserved, reformed, or replaced.

3.3.1 The liberal world order and its theoretic explanations

The preceding account showed that the liberal world order did not emerge from a single source or founding moment. It developed through the interaction of material power, institutional construction, political ideas, and claims to legitimacy. Understanding both its consolidation and its subsequent transformation therefore requires a theoretical framework capable of examining not only the distribution of power, but also cooperation, institutions, perceptions, identities, and the meanings attached to international order. The end of the Cold War led to the emergence of a new international political environment and, at the same time, rendered obsolete the simplified mode of thinking associated with a world divided into blocs. We must confront the growing complexity of the international political environment, in which threats that previously seemed distant have moved within immediate reach. The new environment also brings new challenges, and the interpretation of the concept of security must necessarily change. Yet security will continue to remain a central concern.

Ever since political thought has existed, different authors and theoretical schools have sought answers to the question of how we can live in security. The two most influential theoretical paradigms, realism and liberalism, seek to provide as comprehensive an explanation as possible of international relations and security, complementing one another while criticizing each other on many points. This chapter reviews the findings of the most important schools of political theory, their conceptions of security, and their proposals for addressing security challenges.

Each theory of international politics attempts to reflect on the operation of international relations and, with different emphases and approaches, seeks answers concerning the actors of the international system or their

characteristics, the relationships among those actors, and the international system itself. Structural approaches that treat the international system as an independent and, in certain respects, autonomous entity are not fundamentally alien to any theoretical school, although they differ regarding the extent to which world order itself determines the characteristics, opportunities, and actions of its actors. Therefore, before discussing the transformations and characteristics of the international order, it is worth briefly reviewing the most influential theories of our time, which, in our view, have had the greatest impact on the study of international relations. Within the present framework, when interpreting world order, analyzing EU–United States relations, and assessing the possibilities for regional Visegrád cooperation, we draw on these theoretical approaches in combination, based fundamentally on the logic that distinguishes rational “mainstream” theories, such as realism and liberalism and their variants, from post-rational constructivist approaches, including critical approaches and theories that adopt a sociological point of departure by examining the society of states.

Although thinkers from the ancient philosophers onward sought eternal truth – see Plato or Aristotle—and religions provided their followers with the experience of having found it – see, for example, the work of Saint Augustine—it was clear that no single truth could exist. Accordingly, there can be no single theory that may claim exclusivity while also being capable of explaining the extraordinarily complex world of international relations without gaps. It is therefore unsurprising that the theory of international politics is neither coherent nor unified, but instead extremely diverse, a feature that frequently discourages students encountering it for the first time. Even within the principal theoretical traditions, numerous variants exist, and entirely new theories may emerge within the same family, either moving beyond the original or supplementing it. At the same time, political science itself is extremely difficult to locate on the scientific spectrum, and international relations is even more difficult to place. According to Hungarian academic classification, international relations is not considered a genuine and independent discipline. Its practitioners may choose to earn an academic degree in political science, economics, military science, sociology, or even public administration. Naturally, each of these fields is genuinely independent and possesses its own methodology and logical system, the application of which to international relations has also enriched the discipline to an extraordinary degree.

Very few scholars can be identified – if one nevertheless wished to identify someone, Hans Morgenthau would be worth mentioning – who believe exclusively in one theory or another, and virtually no one has pursued an academic career without identifying, at least within their principal field, a contradiction that they wished to resolve. Ultimately, everyone is a constructivist in the sense that they accept that theories are matters of perspective and that frameworks emerge through our thinking. Yet not everyone is a constructivist in the sense of believing whether fundamental laws exist independently of our thought. Nevertheless, it is not impossible to classify theoretical schools, approaches, and their representatives. The best method is to examine what constitutes the object of their inquiry, what they regard as the independent and dependent variables, or, in cases that do not fit rational deductive logic, what their principal focus is. In the case of the international order, there is no single theory capable of offering an explanation without necessary simplifications or generalizations that could not be subjected to criticism. The review of theoretical approaches therefore also serves to demonstrate the remarkable complexity of the range of available theoretical choices and the many alternative paths that could have been taken in formulating our claims concerning world order. The number of theoretical works devoted exclusively to explaining the operation of world order is limited, unless we include every theoretically oriented study, as well as textbooks that summarize and categorize existing theories. It should also be added that authors reveal their perspective through the very manner in which they conduct such classifications. Impartiality and complete objectivity may be possible in physics and mathematics, where this is not even an issue, but not in the theory of international politics, which constitutes an exceptionally distinctive field within the social sciences.

A generally accepted realist premise, one that even readers less familiar with theory can probably identify, is the anarchic nature of international relations, resulting from the absence of a world government or any other existing central authority. The most important actors and basic units of the international system are sovereign states, which possess complete freedom to govern their domestic affairs, while the projection of their internal structures, even if they desire it, cannot permanently regulate their relations with one another. Relations among states are therefore conflictual because their interests differ, and the logic of the system and the dynamics of state behavior are shaped either by coercion or by voluntary agreement. In both coercion and agreement, the most important factor is the “quantity” of power possessed by sovereign states relative to one

another. The primary objective of every state is survival, and, recognizing that this depends primarily on the material distribution of power, each seeks to maximize its power—military, economic, or even soft. This constitutes the rational foundation of state action, from which states cannot detach themselves even if they wish to, given that the other actors are motivated by the same considerations. It also follows that state consent to cooperation, for example, is temporary and relative because, in the long term, every state can rely only on itself to ensure its survival. In summary, the realist family of theories can be described simply, using English definitions and terminology, through the logic of the three Ss: statism, survival, and self-help. It is easy to see that, if we accept all of this, the chances of survival for small and medium-sized states are significantly limited within an international system that also includes great powers. The key to their survival is therefore to “associate” themselves with a great power, ideally, under the best possible scenario, with a “benevolent hegemon” that shares their other interests and values. Viewed through the realist lens, history is nothing other than the history of great-power conflicts and struggles for survival, and international relations will continue to be shaped by how great powers assess their own prospects for survival (Kennedy, 1989; Kissinger, 1994). According to realists, these prospects are measurable, although it must be acknowledged that much also depends on the self-image and perception formed by political leaders, which leads us toward other theoretical approaches.

Realists have continuously engaged in disputes—primarily with liberals, who similarly sought exclusivity—with representatives of other theoretical traditions, while sub-schools also emerged within the realist camp itself. These debates contributed significantly to the theoretical development of international relations and continue to sustain the dynamic evolution of the entire discipline. Today, it is generally accepted within the realist camp that neo-realist approaches constitute the mainstream. Within this framework, offensive and defensive realists can be distinguished according to their understanding of how the international system operates: those who do not believe in the durability of the current order and whose pessimistic predictions emphasize the conflictual character of twenty-first-century international relations, and those who are considerably more optimistic and consider the preservation of the status quo possible. Russia’s military aggression in 2022 has made the arguments of the former appear more convincing today.

Perhaps the most frequently cited offensive realist theory in international relations (Mearsheimer, 2001) assumes that states can still rely only on themselves, and therefore on self-help. The alliances they form with one another are temporary, while their interests are more permanent than their friendships. The most fundamental and enduring interest is ensuring survival, that is, establishing the security necessary for the continued existence of the state. This leads to a conception that presents competition for security as a zero-sum game. It is a competitive situation in which the gain of one state is always exactly equal to the loss of the others, so that the sum of changes in the positions of individual states ultimately equals zero—including in terms of security. Under such conditions, a state can secure itself only at the expense of others. Unsurprisingly, given the above, offensive realism has also attracted considerable criticism from within the realist school. Those who focus on the historical evolution of the offense–defense balance, or more precisely on their relative benefits, emphasize that in different periods either the defender or the attacker may hold the advantage, depending, among other things, on the nature of warfare and the types of weapons available. Geographic factors also influence this balance, and the likelihood of success for offense and defense varies according to the nature of the terrain. In light of these factors, it is conceivable that states may best ensure their security not necessarily through offensive actions undertaken at the expense of others—this may, for example, provide a kind of explanation for the European Union, even if not an entirely convincing one. If defenders generally enjoy the advantage, states may ultimately be more inclined to coexist peacefully. In other words, the demand for security does not encourage aggressive action, and the corresponding game may therefore be described as constant-sum-neutral. The security gain of one state does not necessarily represent a loss for the others and may, in fact, be neutral for them. Even more surprising is the claim that pursuing a realist foreign policy directly produces more peaceful international relations. From this, it is evidently only one further step to conclude that the liberal foreign policy of the United States caused Russia to attack Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2019). In other words, the blame lies not with Russia, but with a West that became absorbed in and complacent about its own liberal glory.

Defensive realists – they do not necessarily describe themselves in these terms, but examples include Stephen Walt (Walt, 1991)—although they too attribute importance to the long-term development of the balance of power—warn that seeking security at the expense of others ultimately creates a vicious circle that

may result in a recurring series of conflicts. From this perspective, security is not a zero-sum but a negative-sum game, because ultimately everyone may lose simultaneously. They therefore consider it important to distinguish between power maximization and security maximization. While offensive realists regard the two as one and the same, defensive realists are prepared to recognize a trade-off between the power position attained by a state and the level of security it enjoys. This approach leads toward constructivist-realist analyses, such as those associated with Buzan and his colleagues. According to defensive realists, it is not surprising that an insignificant small state, one that supposedly “does not make waves,” may enjoy a favorable security position, while some of the strongest powers face an entire range of threats.

Liberalism, which developed out of idealism, shares many elements with realism, including the premise that the international system is anarchic because self-interested states—which liberals also regard as the basic units of the system—come into conflict in their efforts to survive. The microeconomic conception of the classical liberal approach, however, places emphasis on the internal operation and characteristics of states. In their view, interests and systems of values are not predetermined or independent but are constructed within the state. Consequently, game-theoretical tools widely used in economics (Morrow, 1994) explain why cooperation is possible and how information can be increased—for example, through international institutions—even in the absence of a world government. Cooperation may be a rational objective even in a selfish world of states (R. Keohane, 1984). Trade is most frequently cited as an example. Adam Smith and David Ricardo (Tamás, 2002) already drew attention to why mercantilism is not a sound strategy and how, through cooperation, the mutual reduction of tariffs, and ultimately free trade, all participants may become mutually better off. The most important role and characteristic of international law and international institutions is that they place anarchy within manageable limits by making international relations more predictable and more amenable to planning through increasing information and reducing the number of unpredictable elements. Law and institutions also “socialize”—which already brings us into the true world of post-rational theories—because, by strengthening reciprocity and trust, they help actors make decisions concerning mutually beneficial actions within what is effectively a repeated game.

Liberalism is less distinctive than realism and is extremely diverse. Nevertheless, certain elements appear across its different branches, albeit with varying

emphasis, and function within the liberal school as a kind of “buzzword” (Moravcsik, 1997), carrying meanings considerably deeper and broader than their literal definitions. Such expressions, theories, and definitions are associated with democratic peace theory, global governance, theories concerning the European Union, such as functionalism and multilevel governance, civil society, and international development assistance. The liberal family of theories places particular emphasis on the still-material but nonmilitary elements of power, such as the economy and international trade. Liberals emphasize that, although the international system is anarchic and based on sovereign states, within a system of interdependence and differing degrees of vulnerability and sensitivity (R. Keohane, 1984), the room for maneuver available to international actors is far from unlimited, and states cannot be completely sovereign in foreign policy. “Modern” liberals (Moravcsik, 2003) further argue that, alongside states, or even instead of them, international relations are significantly influenced by the interests and presence of nonstate actors. Theories have traditionally acknowledged that the interests of multinational corporations and nongovernmental groups may differ from those of states and that such actors are very difficult to manage within an order based on the logic of sovereign states. Yet few outside the liberal tradition place genuine emphasis on this issue. The various approaches generally classified as liberal first question the necessity of negative-sum games. They regard war as avoidable, and indeed as something that should be avoided, in an interdependent world in which the outbreak of a destructive conflict damages everyone’s economic interests. This is also reflected in statements by the Hungarian government concerning wartime inflation. Going further, liberals also allow for the possibility of positive-sum games, even in relation to the pursuit of security. Here we find important differences between liberalism and realism. In a vulnerable world, within a network of interdependencies, states may have an interest in cooperative threat reduction, meaning joint action against threats affecting states—whether a single state, a group of states, or all states in the world. Everyone may benefit if cooperation of this kind is achieved. Such cooperation, however, may be imperfect. Liberal theories also account for the phenomenon of free riding. Even in an environment of harmonious cooperation, it is conceivable that a state will assess the relative gains arising from cooperation and will not be satisfied merely with achieving a gain of its own. Where possible, it may “cheat” and contribute disproportionately little to joint action against threats, or do nothing at all if the others will perform the necessary tasks anyway. By saving effort, it secures a relative advantage: it

obtains more cheaply the favorable outcome produced through cooperation and enjoyed by everyone, including itself.

Constructivism does not originally proceed from the foundations of rationality and also differs from the realist-liberal approaches that remain mainstream today in that it cannot truly be described as a coherent theory. Rather, it supplements existing approaches through its methodology. Anne-Marie Slaughter aptly describes constructivism as an ontology (Slaughter, 2011), a characterization that clearly reflects the intellectual world of constructivism and the transition into the realm of philosophy once the limits of measurable economic tools are reached. Fully agreeing with this assessment, the present study also spends more time within this philosophical world of international relations when characterizing world order. Constructivism is particularly useful when examining the EU-United States agenda and—hence the inclusion of a detailed, quasi-methodological constructivist supplement—when discussing the issues and future outlook affecting Hungary and our region in light of that agenda, with the assistance of the logic of regional security complexes.

Constructivism is based on examining assumptions concerning world order and the motivations and roles of international actors. In doing so, it does not refute other theories but supplements them by taking nonmeasurable elements into account and incorporating nonmaterial, non-lawlike, and therefore nonrational phenomena into analysis. According to constructivists, the material world is a given; what drives international relations is how its actors interpret these given conditions from their own perspective and from the perspective of the other actors. Facts therefore do not exist objectively and independently of actors, but are interpreted subjectively through the filter of the society of international actors. In the social constructivist approach, this is described as intersubjective reality (Wendt, 1995). Ontology also makes it possible to analyze questions such as why enduring alliances exist; what friendship and enmity mean; what identity is; and what role is played by beliefs, history, and a shared past. Ultimately, it allows us to ask what significance interests and values—frequently discussed by other theoretical schools as well—possess, how they emerge, and how they change.

According to constructivists, the range of possibilities is in fact broader than merely accounting for negative-, zero-, neutral-, or positive-sum games. States, or more precisely their leaders, do not always know exactly what kind of game they are playing. This may not even be knowable. It is therefore possible for those

involved to misunderstand or misperceive the situation entirely in this respect, or to view it one-sidedly, particularly regarding the other side's payoff. Even their assessment of their own payoff may prove mistaken. A good example may be the frequently biased and exclusively negative perception in wealthy receiving countries of migration, despite its multifaceted effects, including significant positive economic benefits, or, conversely, beliefs that present only the positive side of the same phenomenon. Unsurprisingly, many analysts now argue – see, for example, the argument influential in Democratic circles regarding Russia (Kupchan, 2022)—without really acknowledging that they have entered the domain of constructivist ontology—that Putin miscalculated and misunderstood the world.

The theoretical approaches reviewed here consequently offer different but complementary accounts of the international order. Realism emphasizes the material constraints of power and survival; liberalism explains the possibilities and limitations of cooperation; and constructivism reveals how perceptions, identities, and intersubjective meanings shape the interpretation of the same material environment. None of them, however, fully captures the growing distance between the liberal order's declared principles, its institutional appearance, and its political operation. It is precisely within this distance—between reality and its representation, between the rational language of order and the increasingly contradictory practices carried out in its name—that the surrealism of the contemporary liberal world order begins to emerge.

3.4 SurRealism as a realist–constructivist synthesis

The preceding theoretical discussion demonstrated that realism, liberalism, and constructivism illuminate different dimensions of international order, but none of them provides a complete account on its own. Realism explains the persistence of power competition, insecurity, and hierarchy. Liberalism draws attention to cooperation, institutions, and the possibility of limiting the consequences of anarchy. Constructivism shows that actors do not respond mechanically to material conditions but interpret them through identities, norms, memories, and historically formed expectations. SurRealism begins from the proposition that these perspectives should not simply be placed beside one another. Their relationship is itself central to understanding the contemporary liberal world order.

SurRealism argues that international politics cannot be understood through realism or liberalism alone. The international system remains fundamentally realist in its distribution of power and security competition, yet political actors never interact with this reality directly. Their perceptions are mediated by institutions, identities, norms, and historical narratives. Constructivism therefore does not replace realism as the ontology of international politics; rather, it explains how decision-makers interpret, institutionalize, and sometimes misperceive that reality. The liberal world order is consequently neither an alternative to realism nor its negation, but an institutional manifestation built upon enduring realist foundations.

The literature provides considerable support for a pluralist synthesis of this kind. Realism remains the most persistent explanation of power, anarchy, and security competition, while constructivism explains how actors understand these pressures and translate them into political action through identities, norms, and institutions (Barkin, 2020; Copeland, 2000). Liberal order is usually treated not as an escape from power politics, but as a set of cooperative and governance arrangements operating under conditions still characterized by self-help, asymmetry, and conflict (Alam, 2024). Its institutions may alter incentives and constrain conduct, but they do not abolish the material environment in which states act.

This realist foundation remains visible across much of the literature. The international system is still generally understood as being structured by anarchy, survival, and competition over power and security (Kumar, 2025; Ogunbanjo,

2020). Realism continues to offer one of the most durable accounts of war, rivalry, and the fragility of international order, even where other theories reveal the limitations of its assumptions or its tendency toward simplification (Chen et al., 2021; Latoon, 2025). Recurrent conflict, uncertainty, and the continued importance of state power ensure that realist reasoning cannot simply be discarded (Copeland, 2000).

Later realist approaches have expanded this framework without abandoning its central premises. Neoclassical, subaltern, and context-sensitive variants incorporate domestic politics, historical experience, perception, and local variation while retaining the importance of structure and self-help (Cerioli, 2024). Even studies that criticize liberal internationalism frequently describe world politics as deeply unequal, persistently conflictual, and resistant to lasting institutional restraint (Ozkan & Çetin, 2016). The disagreement is therefore less about whether power matters than about how material pressures are interpreted and converted into policy.

This is where constructivism becomes indispensable. Constructivist approaches do not usually claim that material conditions are irrelevant. Rather, they argue that actors encounter those conditions through socially produced meanings, identities, and norms that shape both interests and action (Filho, 2019; Jung, 2019; Wendt, 1995). States may face the same distribution of capabilities and nevertheless interpret it differently because they possess different historical experiences, political identities, and expectations concerning the intentions of others. Such an approach corresponds closely to the central claim of SurRealism. Constructivism explains perception, interpretation, and institutionalization more convincingly than it explains the underlying distribution of material capabilities. Realism, in turn, identifies the structural pressures to which actors respond but often provides a thinner account of why responses differ so significantly. Work on realist constructivism has therefore argued that the two approaches are not necessarily incompatible and may be combined without eliminating the tensions between them (Barkin, 2010). Constructivism is particularly suitable for such a combination because it is frequently presented less as a self-contained substantive theory of international politics than as a social theory or analytical orientation. It asks how shared ideas shape identities and interests, thereby challenging accounts that treat preferences as predetermined or purely material. This allows constructivist insights to supplement structural explanations rather than requiring the complete rejection of realism. Several studies consequently

favor multi-theoretical or synthetic approaches over exclusive reliance on a single paradigm (Hussein, 2026).

The liberal world order can be understood most clearly within this combined framework. Liberal institutionalism argues that institutions mitigate anarchy by facilitating cooperation, increasing information, and allowing states to pursue absolute gains. SurRealism accepts this possibility, but only under particular political and material conditions. Institutions may soften the effects of anarchy, yet their operation depends on the distribution of power, the willingness of major states to sustain them, and the extent to which actors believe that the arrangements continue to serve their interests. Realist criticism emphasizes that states remain reluctant to accept constraints when those constraints threaten security or relative advantage. This does not demonstrate that institutions are meaningless. It shows instead that liberal order rests on pressures that it cannot itself remove. Cooperation becomes easier under conditions of high interdependence and lower power disparity, while institutional restraints become less effective as strategic rivalry and asymmetry increase. Liberal order is therefore contingent rather than autonomous (Alam, 2024). Its political construction is equally important. International order is not merely a collection of rules and organizations but also a site of struggle over legitimacy, authority, and the meaning of acceptable conduct. Norms are interpreted, contested, and strategically employed under conditions of unequal power (Bettiza et al., 2023). Institutions do not stand outside competition. They may become instruments through which actors preserve influence, challenge established hierarchies, or seek recognition for alternative understandings of order.

Regime theory points toward a similar conclusion. International regimes reconcile norms and institutional expectations with national interests rather than replacing those interests altogether (Ozkan & Çetin, 2016). Rules matter because they structure conduct and expectations, but they continue to operate in a world in which states seek security, influence, and advantage. Liberal institutions are thus neither superficial disguises nor independent forces detached from material politics. They are the political forms through which power relations are organized, moderated, and legitimized.

Historical and narrative approaches strengthen this interpretation. International relations theories themselves are shaped through disciplinary storytelling and processes of identity formation, meaning that the categories used to describe world politics are not neutral representations of an external reality (Thies, 2002).

Work on norm contestation similarly shows that liberal order is continuously fought over through symbolic and ideational means under conditions of hierarchy and asymmetric power. The order exists materially through institutions, but it also survives through narratives concerning what those institutions represent.

Taken together, these arguments support the core proposition of SurRealism. Realist structure endures, but actors perceive and institutionalize that structure through constructivist mechanisms. The liberal world order is best understood as a historically contingent institutional expression of underlying realist conditions, interpreted and sustained through norms, identities, and narratives. Its apparent liberalism does not eliminate power politics. It gives power politics a particular institutional and moral form. The term SurRealism enters a theoretical field in which several related combinations already exist. The literature uses labels such as realist constructivism, analytical eclecticism, pluralism, and synthetic or bridge-building theory to describe approaches that cross conventional paradigmatic boundaries. SurRealism is therefore not situated in an intellectual vacuum. Its closest relatives are those approaches that retain realist attention to power and constraint while incorporating constructivist, historical, and contextual explanations of how actors interpret and enact the world around them (Barkin, 2010, 2020).

Realist constructivism offers the closest precedent. It begins from the position that realism and constructivism are not irreconcilable and may be combined in theoretically productive ways (Jackson & Nexon, 2004). The strongest points of contact appear where realism supplies the analysis of material constraint, security competition, and unequal capabilities, while constructivism explains the significance of ideas, identity, norms, and agency (Beyer, 2009; Michaels, 2022). The possibility of such a synthesis is strengthened by approaches that define constructivism as a social theory or analytical toolkit rather than as a rigid alternative to all rationalist theories (Guzzini, 2000). This interpretation makes combination possible because constructivism need not provide a competing account of every dimension of international politics. It may instead explain how material conditions acquire meaning and how actors reproduce or transform the structures within which they operate.

Analytical eclecticism provides a broader parallel. It deliberately moves beyond fixed paradigmatic boundaries in order to identify the mechanisms most useful for explaining complex political problems (Lees, 2023). Theory synthesis similarly

allows multiple approaches to be combined when empirical analysis cannot be adequately sustained by a single theoretical tradition (Moravcsik, 2003).

Pluralism goes further by rejecting the expectation that international relations should be reduced to universal, law-like explanations applicable across every historical and political context (Ayoob, 2002).

SurRealism shares features with all of these approaches but is not identical to any one of them. Realist constructivism offers the closest conceptual foundation, although it is often presented as a field of dialogue rather than as a fully unified doctrine. Analytical eclecticism is broader and generally more problem-driven, while pluralism does not necessarily specify which elements of different theories should be retained. SurRealism is narrower in its intended meaning: it identifies a realist material ontology combined with a constructivist explanation of interpretation, institutionalization, and political practice. This distinction is important because the literature remains divided over whether synthesis should be the objective. Some scholars argue that theoretical combination is both normal and desirable in international relations, particularly when dealing with phenomena whose complexity exceeds the explanatory reach of a single paradigm. Others warn that synthesis may flatten meaningful differences, hide incompatible assumptions, and narrow rather than expand the field. From this perspective, dialogue and pluralism may be preferable to the construction of a single merged theory. That caution is relevant to SurRealism. It should not attempt to dissolve realism and constructivism into an internally seamless framework. Their differences remain analytically useful. Realism emphasizes external constraint and the enduring significance of power, while constructivism draws attention to interpretation, agency, and the social production of meaning. SurRealism preserves the tension between them because that tension reflects the very relationship it seeks to explain: actors are constrained by a material world that they never perceive in a purely material manner.

Recent developments within realism already move in this direction. Neoclassical and other contextual approaches increasingly incorporate history, domestic politics, leadership, and local variation into structural explanations (Foulon & Meibauer, 2020). Global and subaltern realist arguments likewise reject excessively universalist versions of realism and call for theorizing grounded more firmly in historical diversity and unequal political experience (Ayoob, 2002; Cerioli, 2024).

Constructivist scholarship approaches the same terrain from the opposite direction. It consistently emphasizes that international reality is understood through cognitive, normative, and intersubjective structures, placing constructivism between rationalist and interpretive traditions rather than entirely outside them (Adler, 2006). Material reality does not disappear, but it cannot explain action without accounting for how actors define themselves, identify threats, and attribute meaning to the conduct of others.

SurRealism should therefore be understood as a new label for an established family of theoretical combinations rather than as an entirely new theory without antecedents. Its originality lies less in claiming that realism and constructivism have never been brought together than in applying their synthesis specifically to the contradictory operation of the contemporary liberal world order. Its clearest formulation is a realist ontology of power and constraint combined with constructivist and contextual explanations of interpretation, identity, institutions, and practice. This formulation also explains the term itself. The contemporary order appears liberal in its institutional language, normative claims, and declared commitment to rules, yet it continues to operate through hierarchy, strategic competition, coercion, and unequal power. The resulting contradiction is not simply one between ideals and imperfect implementation. Political actors frequently interpret realist practices through liberal narratives and use liberal institutions to pursue objectives shaped by realist imperatives. SurRealism captures this coexistence of material reality and politically constructed representation.

The surreal quality of the order emerges when the language used to describe it becomes increasingly detached from its observable operation, while continuing to shape political perception and legitimate action. Institutions remain real, norms retain influence, and narratives affect behavior; they cannot be dismissed as mere appearances. At the same time, they may obscure the persistence of power relations on which the order depends. SurRealism therefore describes neither illusion nor deception alone, but a political environment in which reality is continuously interpreted, institutionalized, and represented in forms that may both reveal and conceal its underlying structure.

4 The transformation of the Liberal World Order

4.1 The critique of the Liberal World Order

With regard to the transformation of the liberal world order claims have emerged that the order has failed and that nationalism and populism are undermining that internationalism (Ikenberry, 2022, p. 58) that has characterized the order operated by the United States and supported by the EU since 1991. It is important to note here that although nationalism is the antonym of internationalism, internationalism is not inherently liberal, and therefore nationalism cannot automatically be the inverse of liberalism. Perhaps it is precisely internationalism that weakens the order, since the forced spread of liberal values (offensive liberalism) in the international arena is not tolerant, and therefore not liberal.

Although the term offensive liberalism is not widely established in the International Relations literature, it does appear in a limited number of studies examining the expansionary and hegemonic dimensions of the post-Cold War liberal order. Unlike offensive realism, which constitutes a well-developed theoretical tradition, offensive liberalism has so far remained an emerging and under-theorized label, used primarily to characterize the assertive promotion of liberal institutions, democracy, and international norms through US foreign policy rather than a coherent theoretical framework in its own right (Borovsky, 2024; Kirshner, 2010). The existing literature therefore suggests that offensive liberalism should be understood as a conceptual extension of debates surrounding liberal hegemony rather than as an independent school of International Relations theory, while its relationship to offensive realism remains only partially articulated (Johnson & Thayer, 2016; Sleat, 2013; Zhu, 2006).

The operation of the world order is more complex than to be reduced in political discourse to a simplifying liberal–illiberal opposition, even if that would be easier and could indeed bring back the “clear-cut” interpretive framework of Cold War bipolarity. The objective of a theory cannot be to deliberately distort reality because of the limitations of its methodology. Rather, methodology should help, through continuous development, to provide a scientific framework for understanding the world order that is capable of summarizing logically coherent and comprehensible claims with practical relevance, without simplifying or thinking in terms of earlier schemas. If supporters of the liberal order make this

simplification, why should they be treated differently scientifically from, for example, those Russian thinkers stigmatized in the West who look back nostalgically at the Soviet Union and, highlighting the excesses of liberal modernity, claim for themselves the right to define normality in a standardized manner (Voskressenski, 2017)?

Dichotomous logic was characteristic of the twentieth century, and the US-led post-Cold War liberal world order transcended precisely this characteristic of interpreting opposition that was also present in theories. It is no coincidence that Fukuyama, who formulated this phenomenon in academic circles, and the theory of the end of history gained popularity with incredible speed among professional audiences globally, and it is no coincidence that this theoretical proposition, or more precisely allegory, has since been criticized by the greatest number of people and in the sharpest terms, even within liberal circles. It is a recurring motif in the history of human thought that we seek to describe reality through opposing pairs (Levine, 2006), and the historical events of the previous century also appeared to confirm the validity of the existence of these oppositions: the First World War and the opposition between a liberal world order and one based on nineteenth-century balance-of-power politics; the Second World War and the struggle between democracies and fascist totalitarian dictatorships; or the aforementioned Cold War and the struggle between liberal democracies and communism. On closer reflection, the Bidenian “world of democracies” (Rada, 2024b) brings back this simplification and an approach more closely resembling the “normal” course of international relations, dividing the world, according to criteria developed in Washington, into liberal democracies and illiberal authoritarian systems.

The earliest formulation to appear on the political agenda of the idea of today's liberal world order is associated with U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, who during the First World War outlined a world “safe for democracy.” Modeled on American values and institutions, this order would have created an international environment that ensured the long-term survival of liberal democracies. Interestingly, this world of thought combines realism and idealism: the iron law of the pursuit of survival and the existence of ideas and norms jointly formulated, accepted, and followed. From the perspective of the evolution of the world order, it was not irrelevant that the Wilsonian plan could not be realized and took shape only after modifications through the creation of the United

Nations. Yet the order had clear limitations during the Cold War. The liberal world order existed, but in reality it did not extend across the entire world.

The liberal order survived the Cold War because it was not exclusive and was capable of coexisting with orders built on different logics. At the dawn of the liberal order, France and Great Britain, unquestioned members of the order, also maintained empires, while the Soviet Union, for example, explicitly designated its sphere of influence on a geographical basis. Liberal internationalism—as several liberal authors and realist critics have noted—was able to become an order-creating force because it could coexist during the twentieth century with other influential processes and forces such as nationalism, imperialism, balance of power, capitalism, globalization, or communism (Ikenberry, 2020).

The possibility of expansion became a reality after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the distinction became even sharper between a “defensive liberal” ideology containing American realist elements and identifying the maintenance and strengthening of the existing order as its objective, and an “offensive liberal” ideology returning to Wilsonian roots but going significantly beyond them, seeking to spread American institutions even at the cost of violating sovereignty. The former is exemplified by the presidency of George H. W. Bush or by pragmatic elements in the foreign policies of Barack Obama and Joe Biden. During these periods, the United States sought dialogue with actors outside the “liberal order” while seeking to strengthen existing achievements such as global liberal institutions. The latter is exemplified by George W. Bush’s two terms and the elevation of democracy promotion into a utopian grand strategy, which sought to increase the number of participants in the order by coercing, or even rebuilding, states that did not fit the liberal logic of operation (Rada 2012). The ultimate objective was the same in both cases: to maintain the liberal world order in a conservative or progressive manner.

The “core of this liberal world order” is the belief that our world can be improved in a manner acceptable to everyone through the protection of the principles of free trade, meaning liberty; the universal protection of human rights, meaning equality; and peaceful coexistence, meaning sovereignty (Ikenberry, 2020). The liberal world order reflects the realist perspective because it accepts that self-interested states create an anarchic international system. This is precisely why international institutions are necessary: they help mitigate the security dilemma, make the system transparent, and harmonize individual interests, thereby placing credible legal and institutional limits on destructive ambitions. Credibility

means that the presence of realist coercive power is important, as illustrated by the structure of the UN Security Council, which reflected the global balance of power envisioned after the Second World War.

The liberal world order is a collection of liberal principles whose application is intended to make the entire world sustainable by resting on the stability of like-minded democracies while making use of the advantages of modernity and mitigating its negative consequences (Ikenberry, 2020). From this perspective, it still makes sense to speak of a liberal world order even if not all international actors are identical. The term loses its meaning, however, if the liberal democracies constituting the core do not exist. The liberal approach to world order is necessarily normative and inherently future-oriented: it evaluates the world through its own lens, and if the latter element becomes dominant, it utopically outlines a better and more livable world as an objective to be achieved (The recurring keywords of foreign-policy strategies in the 2000s are based on this idea. A good example is what is in fact still its only security strategy: European Security Strategy—A Secure Europe in a Better World (EU, 2003)).

According to the metaphor used by John Ikenberry (Ikenberry, 2022, p. 59), the American liberal world order is like an onion, whose outer layer consists of institutionalized liberal rules and norms that represent a sustainable balance between the anarchic competition of nation-states and a hierarchical imperial structure, and have brought previously unknown benefits to the countries of the world and indirectly to their populations. For anthropomorphized states in both realist and liberal approaches, order is preferable to anarchy, but the “liberal order” also provides flexible room for maneuver that is incomparably freer than a hierarchical structure.

The liberal world order is an exception (Kagan, 2018), which could emerge and survive for so long because it rested on the unquestionable and materially interpretable power of the United States, free from challengers. This material power base may have declined relatively, but an even more important pillar of the liberal order is intangible. Ultimately, this order too was created because there was a superpower that established the rules, enforced them, but opened the benefits of the order to other countries willing to obey those rules. In other words, the birth of the order required global imperial dominance, arising from the fact that the United States became an unquestionable hegemon in its own region and therefore had to devote relatively less energy, behind its oceanic

shield, to its own immediate defense, since its neighbors did not threaten its survival.

It is also a contradiction that the United States created the liberal world order with the assistance of realist plans, considerations, and instruments of power. The durability of the order, however, derived from the fact that its stable followers interpreted the world in liberal terms. Germany was compelled through instruments of power to do so after the Second World War, while after the Cold War the countries undergoing regime change would not have had many alternatives other than accepting the already firmly institutionalized transatlantic liberal order. This order also provided guarantees for new actors that renouncing military-power ambitions, insofar as such ambitions existed at all, would bring economic benefits and that powers stronger than them would not abuse, for example, their military force. This makes it possible to answer the question of why the creation of an independent French “nuclear strike force” did not constitute a security threat to Germany, and why it was not followed by an arms race, for example after 1990, when such a development might have been possible. Instead, Germany tolerated criticism that its military power was relatively weak compared with its economic capabilities.

An important element was that the United States was patient, both within and outside the alliance system, regarding the spread and promotion of liberalism. It was possible voluntarily to establish closer ties with the “liberal world order,” for example through NATO or EU accession, although this was already clearly conditional. Those voluntarily seeking accession accepted the principles, voluntarily relinquished part of their sovereignty, and in exchange for security, military and economic, had to democratize their politics and societies and place their economies on market foundations.

Returning to the foundations, the explanation for the emergence, survival, and expansion of the liberal world order is that a core based on voluntary cooperation first became stronger, and the countries of the order themselves sought to develop their internal political and economic systems in such a direction that they could integrate into the order. The literature has called these the various waves of democratization (O'Donnell et al., 1986). The transformation that followed the changes of regime in Central Europe perhaps represents the most extensively analyzed process of democratic transition (Rada, 2011). The undeniable success of the latter continues to provide ammunition for those who seek to share the experience of transformation with countries that have

embarked on the path of transformation, today more commonly European integration, for example in the Western Balkans.

The success of the liberal order lay in the fact that it did not suppress national-state interests but helped participating actors realize their economic and social objectives in the international arena. Compared with hierarchical imperial and “vassal or satellite” relations—in which weaker states feel vulnerable and submit to the stronger only because of their survival instinct—the innovation of the liberal world order was that weaker states did not see the key to survival in increasing their power, but believed in protection within a regulated framework of cooperation and could turn toward the fields most advantageous to them, such as the economy or culture.

What continues to keep the United States at the center of the liberal order is that the members of the order, and in fact even its critics, benefit more from its operation than they contribute to its maintenance. If we consider opportunity costs, the cost would be incomparably higher if every country had to maintain by itself and alone the conditions necessary for security, without international institutions mitigating conflicts in every field of international relations, not only in the military dimension. There is one group of countries within the order—the liberal democracies—that seek to maintain the order voluntarily and in accordance with the values they themselves profess, and there are others that do not share those values but whose interests, at least in the short term, do not contradict the logic of the order. Taking the law of inertia into account, the number of the latter is so large that, together with the first group, it is difficult to imagine that they would seek actively to overthrow the order.

Strong arguments have emerged concerning the decline of the United States, and even stronger ones concerning the bankruptcy of the EU. Yet the fact that the socializing order operating through the values and interests developed by these two actors does not produce automatic alignment from everyone’s perspective does not mean the collapse of the order. In the case of empires, it can be historically demonstrated that the end of expansion also meant the beginning of imperial decline. However, the liberal world order remains decisive independently of its creators, for example through multilateral international organizations, international security agreements, global trade and production chains, the complete globalization of finance, or its capacity to address challenges that also have extremely negative effects on those who criticize the order itself.

According to liberals (Dunne, 2005), one of the most important characteristics of the order is that development has become connected with modernity and capitalist economic development. A very convincing indication of continuous and accelerating human development is that over the past thirty years, that is, during the same period as the timeframe of the present study, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty decreased by 1% every single year, while the world's population increased enormously. It is easy to calculate that this represents a decline of more than 30 percentage points. It is interesting to note that in the United States the progressives who overtake liberals from the left also sharply attack the liberal world order precisely because of capitalism, or criticize it because the order is incapable of "equalizing" according to imperial logic.

According to the traditional liberal conception, the liberal world order was originally a security community, but during its global expansion it acquired increasingly economic characteristics. As a result, many came to see it instead as a framework benefiting the economic transactions of the capitalist elite, and it was sharply criticized from the right, from the left, and from outside the order (Ikenberry, 2020). Another offshoot among the foundational elements is the individualistic demand to prioritize the protection of human rights over every other field. A prominent element of the progressive agenda is a "social-engineering" program that sees opportunity, but also numerous dangers, in modernity and is simultaneously hostile toward the liberal world order and its opponents. At the same time, for those criticizing the order from outside, it presents a target through its dogmatic, coercively equalizing, positively discriminatory, exclusive, and intolerant presence.

Taking this dimension into account, it is not an unfounded question whether liberalism or conservatism, understood along the ideological spectrum, seeks more strongly to preserve the liberal world order. A defensible argument appears to be that, under present processes, the liberal world order can survive if it is capable of returning to its original objectives while naturally responding to contemporary challenges (Ikenberry, 2020). In this conception, the order functions as a form of security umbrella within the order, tolerating individual divergences and giving space to individual interests, while refraining from coercive homogenization outside the order as long as criticism does not intensify into a systemic challenge.

Actors outside the order can be integrated into the solution of truly global problems such as climate change, migration, and pandemics without principles

having to be abandoned. In addition to all this, there unquestionably exist areas in which addressing challenges cannot even be imagined without global cooperation. The neoliberal literature refers to these as interdependence: climate change, global production chains, public health, and numerous other economic, environmental, or even physical security issues.

The principle of sovereignty is an older and stronger element of international relations, and therefore maintaining the order must not violate it. Yet the systematic and deliberate disregard of sovereignty by actors outside the order—for example in the case of an aggressive war—cannot be tolerated either. The latter represents a systemic challenge even when committed by a country that does not regard the liberal world order as binding upon itself. Sovereignty is not contrary to the liberal order, and it is unnecessary to manage the liberal direction as a project aimed at a globally equalizing fusion. Among the countries of the world, the sovereign nation-state is more common—and mainstream international relations theory also operates with states—rather than liberal democracy. The responsibility of the latter, meaning the members of the “liberal bubble”, is to recognize that cooperation should not be ranked through the filter of internal quality, but according to whether the system remains intact. And when an insider raises this point, that actor should not automatically be branded a friend of authoritarians.

If we accept this, then according to the liberal institutional approach, the world order is effective and successful when it is capable of organizing international relations on the basis of liberal democracies, is flexible toward reform—meaning that both external and internal criticism can be accommodated—and is capable of renewal. The foundation of this is that the world order primarily maintains and strengthens the security of liberal democracies, manages their vulnerabilities, and preserves the accustomed living conditions of their citizens. Yet none of this is possible if we interpret the world only from within the “liberal bubble”, because the complex international ecosystem also includes actors that are not closely part of the core and may even have an interest in a kind of new order. One of the most contested elements of the liberal approach is how the order relates to its critics: whether it tolerantly seeks to understand individual interests and gives space to non-liberal democracies within the flexible framework of the order, or treats divergences as sources of danger and moves toward homogenization.

The liberal prescription arising from the logic of the liberal world order is that the liberal core must set an example through strengthening itself, meaning the EU and the United States, and on the basis of internal stability must increase the resilience of the order—to use a term that is extremely fashionable today but employed by many without understanding. The universally accepted principle of national-state sovereignty—which in the case of the EU we are sometimes inclined to forget—continues to help members of the international community cooperate within the international order in confidence in their equality, even if other members of the order may benefit relatively more from cooperation. By its nature, the liberal world order excludes both the conflictual, zero-sum game-theoretical approach and considers the objective of absolute gains superior to relative gains. It is true that, for all this to be accepted as universally valid, it would be logically necessary for every actor in the international system to think similarly.

If the liberal core is united, then it is capable of influencing the international system in the direction of strengthening the world order along the lines of mutually realizable benefits for everyone. The most important foundation of this is an open and internationally interconnected economy, primarily through open trade. For this, it is indispensable that strong and effective multilateral institutions shape the rules and oversee them. According to democratic peace theory (Doyle, 1986), liberal democracies form a community of values on the basis of their shared values, which increases trust among them even without a formal military alliance and creates a circle of cooperative security—or, according to some authors, cooperative sovereignty (Marton, 2004). Through solidarity, this circle increases the security of the participating states while naturally also imposing obligations upon them, such as developing the world outside the order through aid, or setting an example in complying with the rules, particularly when addressing global challenges such as climate change.

In the twenty-first century, expectations were supplemented by another element. This latter is the most criticized element of the liberal order because it brings the individual dimension to the systemic level: the order must create a progressive opportunity for development for every member of society, thereby giving them an interest in accepting the rules of the order. Prosperity, security, and equality are naturally important and attractive slogans, but the question immediately arises as to who exactly determines the direction and speed of development; whether even the order itself has the right to define an agenda that, by violating

state sovereignties, outlines a universal social program and potentially equalizes proactively and coercively.

The Black Lives Matter movement by no means stops at achieving its original objectives (Mattson, 2016), and by reinforcing several similar processes and movements it seeks to appropriate the right to define liberal and “well-functioning” society. This includes questions such as confronting the colonial past—which from another perspective is unquestionably not condemnable—and issues of social exploitation. While placing equality on its banner, the movement categorizes, and with a neo-Marxist tone speaks of social classes and, as their international projection, of guilty rich countries and victimized poor countries. This generates resentment and ultimately conflict not only among the extremely diverse countries within the liberal order, but also alienates countries outside the order and their societies when it seeks to occupy and politicize every global forum. It should be added that this process is inherently not liberal and is anti-liberal in its consequences, even if it hides behind liberal slogans and exploits the advantages of the liberal world order and capitalism while criticizing them.

The principles, norms, and institutions created in the U.S.-led “North Atlantic design center” will remain attractive as long as the United States and the West can represent them credibly. If this credibility declines, for example because of movements such as BLM, or MAGA on the other side, which raise real issues but disproportionately magnify the system’s flaws for self-interested reasons and are incorrectly labeled liberal or conservative, then not only the United States but also the liberal world order loses.

A world order can be created through force, as the Soviet Union did, but without the existence of the second pillar mentioned above, this cannot be achieved without incurring unacceptable costs. To illustrate this with a simple example, one manifestation of soft power in international relations has been the intermediary language. Changes in the intermediary language were closely connected to the political, economic, and not least social and cultural dominance of the language’s “homeland.” The Soviet Union struggled to spread the Russian language for this purpose, but this generated resentment instead, and Russian appeared more as a symbol of oppression. China invests enormous sums in increasing its cultural presence, for example through Confucius Institutes, but Chinese cannot replace English as the intermediary language. Today English is by default the universal “lingua franca” (Srinivas, 2019) and indirectly an instrument strengthening the ideas of the liberal world order. If China, for example, wants to

reach a global audience, it is compelled to formulate its messages in English, but English-language communication gives the Americans a “home-field advantage.”

The surRealism of the liberal world order is that states with less power are not primarily afraid of the overwhelming power of the United States, nor are they most concerned about Washington’s excesses, but rather fear what a “post-American” world would hold. In 2011, the Obama administration announced its “pivot to Asia” policy, which, for example, provoked extremely strong reactions precisely in Central Europe. In U.S. troop withdrawals, or increased pressure to develop European capabilities, many in Europe (Mitchell, 2014) did not see greater freedom of action and opportunity, but a reduction in U.S. commitment to Europe’s defense in direct proportion to the decline in American military bases. That commitment had provided the accustomed comfort necessary for the deepening of European integration or its enlargement to post-socialist countries.

Returning this to a theoretical dimension: European allies continue to want to live within the liberal and regulated order provided by the liberal world order, while leaving the struggle within realist anarchy to the United States. The United States became a European power after the Second World War without having to conquer the continent militarily in the classical sense, and after the Cold War it extended both its power and the order into the former Soviet sphere of influence without having to use physical force. Indeed, by filling the geopolitical power vacuum, it prevented physical violence in Europe and “exploited” the well-understood self-interest of small or medium-sized states seeking to avoid the nightmare of realist anarchy.

The legitimacy of the United States as a superpower is the key, together with the acceptance of this power by others—what the literature calls a hegemon by invitation or a benevolent hegemon (Magyarics, 2008)—whose significance for maintaining the system far exceeds the material capabilities of the United States. In other words, the United States may become physically overstretched, or its military or economic power may decline relatively vis-à-vis China, though it has not declined even relatively vis-à-vis Russia, but belief in American power is not truly damaged by this. What damages it is the questioning of the legitimacy of U.S. efforts to maintain the “liberal order,” as under Bush, or their credibility, as under Trump and partly Obama or Biden.

However—and here the criticisms are correct—the credibility of the liberal order creates a sustainable ecosystem only if the superpower also complies with the

rules and does not employ its military and economic power against weaker members when interests conflict. It is no coincidence that voices concerning the crisis of the liberal world order intensified when the United States violated this principle. The Iraq War became a kind of synonym for the abuse of power and the violation of international law. The United States has indeed violated its “liberal promise” and the international principle of the rule of law countless times, but this still does not vindicate arguments that unfortunately fall for Russian propaganda and claim that Russia committed no greater crime by attacking Ukraine. Russia acted exclusively on the basis of self-interested great-power ambitions that its leadership incorrectly believed realizable, whereas the objective of the United States—also mistakenly, owing to the messianic sense of mission of its leaders—was not to occupy Iraq but radically to reverse the “infection of terrorism and tyranny” that had developed on the body of the liberal order before it could spread further.

Liberal logic defined the “new world order” after 1991, and the existing institutions of contemporary international relations, including the UN and NATO, became central components of its expanded institutional structure. Therefore, if we take only this line of reasoning as our starting point, then any vision discussing a multipolar world (Turner, 2009), or envisioning the global power of China and/or Russia, is certainly premature. This could become possible if China or Russia were able to develop and operate an alternative that is better than the current one and that the international community would voluntarily follow. It is not enough merely to draw attention to the flaws of the present order. These flaws do not call the order into question, at most the role and dominance of the United States, because the liberal order is also a self-limiting ecosystem whose sustainability derives precisely from balancing conflicts of interest arising from differences in values.

The United States was able to define the order for so long because it placed its maintenance at the top of the objectives of its foreign policy even when this involved costs and relatively fewer benefits for the United States itself than for its partners. This constitutes the original foundation, which is also frequently forgotten in Washington, for example when policymakers do not perceive the equilibrium of the ecosystem but instead see the costs arising from differences in values and seek forcefully to make the members of the order identical, as in Bush’s democracy promotion or Biden’s proclamation of superiority, or when

they seek to withdraw from the order and demand greater contributions from its other beneficiaries, as in Trump's neo-isolationist and transactional thinking.

In the liberal euphoria following the Cold War, the question of whether the United States was truly capable of expanding and stably maintaining the order did not arise at the systemic level. Over the past decades, however, as challenges have followed one another with increasing speed, attention has also focused on how long and in what manner the world's leading superpower can effectively use its power to operate the "liberal world order." Closely connected to this is the growing demand in U.S. domestic politics to reassess whether it is worthwhile for the United States—alone, according to certain exaggerated perspectives—to maintain the order, that is, whether the expected benefits exceed the costs (Kagan, 2022, pp. 10–11).

Especially in U.S. domestic politics, processes are present that convey the message that Washington may not be prepared in the long term to "contain" the challengers of the liberal world order at any cost, because it must instead devote its resources—and taxpayers' money—to resolving domestic problems, which naturally also resonates well with public sentiment among voters. For example, influential foreign-policy opinion-forming circles such as the Heritage Foundation already argued in February 2022 that it would be worth examining precisely what the vital American interest was in supplying Ukraine with weapons (Carafano, 2023).

A contradiction arising from liberal democracies is that public opinion also plays a significant role in foreign policy, while generally rejecting every costly international commitment and being unable to interpret the international order. Public opinion is inherently realist and is motivated by survival, or securitization, in contrast to the abstraction of international liberal ideas. Political leaders, meaning the active actors of securitization, bear responsibility for the direction in which they influence public opinion, taking into account that citizens perceive the advantages of an order clearly only after they have lost it. The responsibility of American and European leaders is particularly great from the perspective of the "liberal world order," because, for example, EU–United States cooperation, meaning the transatlantic community, does not exclusively and always aim to avert a specific danger, but to create and maintain conditions in which strategic objectives can be achieved.

Confidence in the liberal-world-order project was shaken during the crisis-filled 2010s, although legitimate criticism had existed earlier as well. Perhaps

surprisingly, societies in the countries constituting the innermost core demanded retreat, with tangible consequences such as the result of the Brexit referendum or the election of Trump, an open skeptic of the liberal world order, both in 2016. The question arises as to why these domestic political processes are so relevant. From the perspective of the evolution of the world order, they matter because they influence the leadership of these core countries and the room for maneuver available to that leadership.

Voters certainly did not intend to overturn a world order that, all things considered, was advantageous to them, especially since they have no experience of the alternative. Nor can it realistically be expected that every voter genuinely understand the complexity of the international system, whose operation is not agreed upon even among experts and theorists. In other words, owing to the internal structure of liberal democracy, voters ultimately decide on the management of complexity and the maintenance of the world order without actually being aware of it, perceiving these matters only through the simplifying messages of political campaigns (Rada & Stepper, 2023).

Public opinion is always more realist because it understands self-interest more easily than interdependence and values that have countless definitions. It is indeed simpler to decide whether I personally want to fight a war or not, or whether I want to become wealthy or not. It is much more difficult to accept the abstraction that I must die, or sacrifice my money through inflation, soaring energy prices, or taxes, so that the principles of the “liberal order” can be universally valid and the inhabitants of countries entirely remote from me can enjoy the same rights and privileges as I do. Voters are the key to obtaining power in a democracy, so it is unsurprising if the power of a political elite detached from the demands of citizens begins to weaken. This matters within the “liberal order” because priorities must be reassessed, and the comfortable and familiar abstract liberal standards no longer function.

At the systemic level, the “liberal bubble” is not homogeneous, but it was precisely the flexibility of the order that made it possible for divergent interests nevertheless to find common ground despite temporary frictions. Increasing numbers of people speak of a crisis of the liberal world order precisely because of internal processes, but it should be taken into account that history provides numerous examples of countries within the “liberal core” entering into serious internal conflict with one another without the order collapsing. Founding member France was not part of NATO’s military structure between 1966 and

2009 because of intensified French–American political disagreements. Another example is that in 2003 neither France nor Germany stood with the United States; both opposed the Iraq War and condemned unilateral American actions that violated international law.

From the liberal perspective, therefore, the present challenges are indeed serious, and the system is probably experiencing a transitional crisis after which it will remain liberal and flexibly regulated, although its Western content may decline relatively. What is not expected to change is that the current world order will remain the most coherent regulated management of anarchy and that its institutions will remain the most widely accepted.

If the function of the order weakens, or if some actors view the order more as an obstacle to achieving domestic political objectives, then it is unsurprising that critical voices grow stronger. The international system itself cannot elect leaders; processes taking place within countries remain decisive in the construction of national-state interests. It is a generally accepted proposition that national governments play a key role, for example, in the process of securitization (Marton et al., 2015). Nor is the system capable of forcing domestic political changes.

At the same time, globalization did not contribute to the stability of democratic systems worldwide, but intensified the negative effects of modernity, while the “liberal bubble” was also unable to respond effectively. This led to ambivalent and unpredictable steps, for example in the process originally called the Arab Spring (Rada, 2012b). On the one hand, both the EU and the United States welcomed the bottom-up demand for democracy, but were unable to control the turbulent processes (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005), thereby calling the credibility of their previous efforts into question. The realpolitik that ultimately preferred stability instead vindicated the realists and called into question the validity of a liberal proposition such as democratic peace (Doyle, 1986).

Uncontrollable violence in the Middle East, civil-war conditions in numerous countries, and unsustainable economic circumstances all directed an otherwise understandable but certainly unexpectedly large wave of migration toward the EU, which had not lost its attractiveness, and within it especially toward Germany. The handling of migration, and particularly its illegal form, also represented a test of liberal principles for the EU. The essence of the liberal order is that we seek primarily to create a secure world for the members of the order, meaning ourselves, while at the same time remaining universally open to

the protection of human rights. In 2015 these two objectives clearly came into conflict, and from the beginning it was evident that both could not be achieved simultaneously in the short term. Few leaders openly accepted responsibility for prioritizing one objective over the other.

This has not changed significantly in relations between the United States and the EU; the debate concerns the validity of the adjective liberal in describing the order. On the one hand, this is a crisis of confidence caused by declining belief within the camp in the usefulness of the order. On the other, it is genuinely a question of power that can be interpreted through a realist lens. According to the latter, if the strength and system-organizing power of the order decline, this increases the desire for an alternative—although no ready-made plan for a replacement order exists—and relatively improves the position of challengers at the level of the international system as well. History has demonstrated that the liberal order could coexist with other ideologies (Kagan, 2018), while capitalism also coexisted successfully with Soviet-type economic philosophy and, more generally, with the existence of authoritarian systems.

By contrast, neither China nor Russia is capable of securing regional hegemony in the South China Sea or Ukraine amid extremely crowded regional geopolitical conditions, in which one of the regional actors—and in some respects still the strongest—is the United States itself. Russia may emphasize the existence of its Eurasian sphere of influence, or China may invoke the “nine-dash line” in relation to its sovereignty (Wang, 2015), but neither material realities nor an alternative to the “liberal world order,” which they have not even outlined, reflect actual great-power relations either regionally or globally.

The liberal world order is a historical exception (Kagan, 2018)—a “bug” in the classical realist logic of the international system—which, despite never becoming universal, was nevertheless capable of preventing great-power wars from breaking out after 1945. Naturally, this does not mean that it created peace, or that great powers did not wage, and do not continue to wage, proxy wars. Opponents of the order naturally acknowledge its flaws, while supporters admit them, but liberal thinkers emphasize that there is no better alternative. Kagan sees the source of these flaws in the fact that the order regulates many areas of life but does not change human nature. Because of the latter, we may perceive that the liberal world order is today under siege by historical forces (Kagan, 2018). Emphasizing the negative characteristics of human nature is clearly a

realist starting point in Kagan's case, while belief in the constraining power of the order is more liberal.

The liberal world order was created by the United States by exploiting the opportunity offered by a highly unusual configuration of power, but it is not the United States, but the EU, that represents the best example and model product of the order. The EU, however, is also the consequence of the power constellation in which the Americans built a security umbrella that enabled relatively stable economic development beneath it, prevented power conflicts among the participants, and protected them from excessive external security threats.

Thus, the order does not appear to be threatened simply because challengers exist, and the collapse of the liberal world order has not been securitized even within the "liberal bubble". As Kagan emphasizes, inaction represents a risk, but it is difficult to price, whereas the cost of an excessive foreign-policy step with potentially tragic consequences is clear. For example, waiting for the war in Ukraine to end by itself is clearly "cheaper" than triggering a world war through a wrong move. In any case, it was the United States that voluntarily undertook the long-term maintenance of the liberal world order, because its national interest dictated it. Inaction is therefore a rational decision and does not make any country less democratic.

The debate over Ukraine nevertheless brings into direct conflict realist and liberal interpretations of the international order. The view that U.S. foreign policy bears some responsibility for the outbreak and development of the war, at minimum for missing the possibility of a mutually acceptable *modus vivendi* from Putin's perspective, is consistent with arguments made by some American critics of continued engagement. Even the liberal, neoconservative Robert Kagan emphasizes (Kagan, 2022) that Russia's foreign-policy steps were motivated, though not entirely, by the growing post-Cold War expansion of the hegemony of the United States and its European allies (Moore, 2007).

At the same time, from a liberal perspective, if these critics are correct, it must be acknowledged that spheres of influence genuinely exist with regard to direct and indirect vital interests, meaning that maintaining the liberal world order is not an American objective and therefore China and Russia may also legitimately demand regional hegemonic roles in their own neighborhoods. Translated in this way, it is clear that this is not what American critics mean.

It is true that realist and liberal evaluations of the international system conflict, but the surRealism of the realist critique—which Kagan labels “unrealist” (Kagan, 2018)—is that recognizing spheres of influence in this manner would increase neither the power nor the security of the United States. On the contrary, according to realist logic, it would reinforce the validity of the security dilemma (Herz, 1951). The situation is complex because the stability of the liberal world order does not threaten, but rather increases, the security of Russia and China as well. Yet the expansion of the order appears as a challenge, primarily from Russia’s perspective, because it narrows the space for realizing great-power ambitions both temporally and geographically (Kagan, 2018).

Realist logic is also flawed insofar as the formation of spheres of influence, owing to the interdependencies of today’s world order, is not simply the result of great-power decisions. The United States cannot decide to “hand over” certain regions. It is also particularly important in this equation to take into account values and interests that do not exist solely on the basis of material calculations.

A recurring element of the Putin narrative is that Russia was betrayed by the West and the United States (Whitmore & Snegovaya, 2022) when Gorbachev was promised that, in exchange for NATO membership for a reunified Germany, NATO would not expand “one inch” eastward. Even if anyone had made such a promise, it must be taken into account that the meeting in question took place in Moscow in September 1990, when both the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union still existed. NATO enlargement in the 1990s took place within the framework of a new world order.

Joining NATO and tightening institutional relations with the Americans were voluntary and autonomous decisions by the former socialist Central European countries, because through joining the West they sought to forget Yalta, make use of the time before Soviet imperial thinking might return, and ensure their own protection. In addition, they sought external guarantees for maintaining the democratic transition undertaken at great cost. Arguments claiming that, for example, the admission of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to NATO was premature (Brzezinski, 1995) overlook precisely the fact that remaining outside NATO does not automatically mean a Russian orientation, as Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate. Even without formal NATO membership, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which the countries of the region would not have attempted to resist neo-Soviet imperial pressure, behind which Russia would likewise have suspected American political influence (Kagan, 2022, p. 12).

It should also be added that the starting point, namely Germany's NATO membership, also provided Russia with a guarantee against a resurgent and uncontrolled German power (let us not forget that part of NATO's motto, attributed to Lord Ismay, NATO's first secretary general, was "keep the Germans down"), and Russia could enjoy unprecedented stability and security on its western front until it overturned that situation first in Georgia in 2008 and then, beginning in 2014, in Ukraine. Furthermore, the claim that the United States intended to build an empire is contradicted by the fact that in 1991 Washington was far from interested in the rapid independence of the Soviet republics, which the U.S. leadership also stated publicly (Fink, 1997), while the Clinton administration was similarly cautious and reluctant regarding NATO enlargement (Asmus, 2004).

A good example of the present contradictions is Ukraine, Russian aggression, and its management. It is clear that there is no unified Western position on the solution, only a majority consensus. It is also clear that from the perspective of the liberal world order, it is unacceptable to accept any status quo that emerged after the outbreak of the war, or perhaps after 2014. Those who blame the West and the liberal world order for the situation are, however, certainly thinking incorrectly or are direct victims of Russian propaganda. The decadent individualism and dictatorship of opinion of the liberal West could not represent a security threat to Russia even if everything disseminated by Russian media and troll armies were true.

Precisely along the characteristics described in detail above, the essence of the liberal world order is that it is sufficiently flexible, shapes the environment for its members, but is by no means imperial, and does not expand in response to military threats. Enlargement, apart from a few failed state-building attempts, is voluntary. The critics are nevertheless certainly correct when they point out that the liberal West became complacent and forgot the rules of realist international relations, and was therefore unable to understand either Putin or Russia more generally after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

NATO enlargement did not reduce Russia's security; before 2014 NATO treated Russia as a partner. NATO and EU enlargement brought stability to Central Europe and increased trust within regional political relations as well. Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration is unacceptable from Moscow's perspective, however, because it would permanently obstruct Putin's neo-Soviet imperial plan. The window of opportunity was continually narrowing, while Putin had been testing

the system and the boundaries since the 2000s (Kupchan, 2022). The West practically did not react at all in 2008 and reacted weakly in 2014. Indeed, newly inaugurated U.S. presidents such as Obama in 2009 or Trump in 2017 did, wanted to begin with a clean slate, forgetting Russian acts of aggression.

Success nevertheless failed to materialize because the rapprochement was neither credible nor sincere and did not address the source of Russian grievance, namely the pain and nostalgia associated with the loss of a global empire. Russia interpreted all this as weakness and, owing to parallel crises elsewhere, felt that its room for maneuver in world politics had expanded. One of the most destructive crises was the migration crisis of 2015, which shook the self-definition of liberal societies because an apparently clear solution to a real security challenge—the strict control of illegal migrants and their exclusion from EU territory, or preventing their arrival in the first place—came into conflict with liberal principles.

The interest of the United States lies in maintaining the liberal order, which the migration crisis weakened from within. Washington's well-understood interest should therefore have been to support strict global regulation of migration, something that Democratic President Obama could not support for domestic political reasons. Unity and credibility matter enormously. Putin would probably not have entered a confrontation certain to result in defeat, but the West was neither united nor appeared resolute or strong (Mearsheimer, 2018). Putin correctly assessed one point: considerably more people had come into conflict with the cultural imperialism of the West than remembered the Soviet Union and the logic of communist dictatorship.

Russia's unilateral decision to attack Ukraine is not only the most serious violation of the existing order, institutions, and rules at the level of great-power politics since the Second World War, but also clear evidence of the contrast that has become visible between the uncontrolled anarchy of realist power-political intentions and the liberal world order. Yet even declining internal credibility or the erosion of legitimacy does not justify the collapse of the liberal world order itself.

A non-negligible element of today's challenge—which Kagan implicitly emphasizes only through examples leaning in an illiberal direction—is the human factor that weakens the order through political leaders. Ultimately, the liberal world order may thus be endangered because of the shortsightedness, selfishness, and incompetence of our own leaders. The more important question

is therefore not whether the liberal world order has already collapsed, but whether its members remain capable of distinguishing between the protection of the order and its coercive homogenization, between legitimate criticism and systemic challenge, and between the relative decline of Western dominance and the disappearance of the regulated order itself.

4.2 What do theories explicitly say about the change?

Theories of International Relations agree that the world order is changing, but this apparent agreement conceals fundamental differences over what exactly is changing, what drives the transformation, and what kind of order may emerge from it. Realism foregrounds power transition, polarity, and sovereignty; liberalism emphasizes institutions, interdependence, norms, and the internal legitimacy of liberal democracies; while constructivism directs attention toward ideational contestation, identity, and the social construction of order. These perspectives do not simply offer different explanations for the same observable process. They begin from different conceptions of world order itself and consequently identify different mechanisms of continuity, crisis, and transformation (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999; Ruggie, 1982; Waltz, 2008).

This distinction is important because contemporary discussions of world order extend far beyond the traditional question of whether China is rising relative to the United States, or whether a unipolar system is being replaced by a multipolar one. The changing international environment is also shaped by domestic polarization within Western democracies, populist mobilization, the resilience of authoritarian systems, the weakening of established political coalitions, and the growing visibility of regional and non-Western perspectives. These processes complicate earlier models of postwar governance and make it increasingly difficult to distinguish clearly between the international and domestic sources of order (Huang, 2020; Ikenberry et al., 2018; Loh et al., 2026).

The three theoretical traditions therefore diagnose not only different causes, but also different types of transformation. Realism is most confident that structural changes in power will eventually reassert competition and balance-of-power politics. Liberalism generally depicts the existing order as adaptable, but increasingly contested from both within and outside. Constructivism shows that order is also being reshaped through changes in political meaning, civilizational narratives, identities, and critiques of the hierarchical or Western character of international institutions (Bettiza et al., 2023; Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999; Mearsheimer, 2019). Taken together, they suggest that the present transformation is not simply a movement from one fixed system to another, but an interaction among shifts in power, declining or changing legitimacy, institutional adjustment, and ideological contestation.

From the realist perspective, international order remains inseparable from the distribution of material capabilities. Order may be expressed through institutions, rules, or diplomatic practices, but its underlying structure is determined by the number and relative strength of the principal powers. The system remains anarchic because no authority stands permanently above sovereign states, and the most basic objective of those states remains survival. Cooperation is possible, but it occurs under the persistent conditions of self-help, uncertainty, and concern about the relative distribution of benefits (Waltz, 2008).

Realist accounts are therefore generally skeptical about the possibility that liberal institutions can fundamentally transform the international system. Institutions may facilitate cooperation or reduce uncertainty, but they cannot remove the security dilemma, eliminate sovereignty, or permanently suppress great-power rivalry. When the distribution of power changes, the institutional structures that reflected an earlier balance come under pressure. From this perspective, the liberal international order was not the natural culmination of political development, but the product of an exceptional historical configuration in which the United States possessed overwhelming power after the Cold War.

The return of multipolarity is consequently not interpreted as one challenge among many. It is the principal structural mechanism through which the feasibility of liberal internationalism declines and security competition re-emerges (Mearsheimer, 2018). As the relative capabilities of China grow and the ability of the United States to define the rules weakens, other major powers gain both the means and the incentive to resist an order whose norms and institutions were largely shaped under American predominance. Nationalism and sovereignty are similarly expected to reassert themselves because states remain unwilling to surrender control over questions directly connected to their security and political survival.

From this position, the liberal international order did not necessarily become vulnerable because its institutions ceased to function. Rather, the balance of power that enabled those institutions to expand has changed. An order built under unipolar conditions cannot be expected to operate in precisely the same manner when the system becomes more competitive. Liberalism may have interpreted the post-Cold War period as evidence that international politics could gradually transcend classical power balancing, but realism sees the same period as an interlude made possible by the temporary absence of a peer competitor.

Realism is not entirely uniform in this respect. Some realist approaches are more deterministic and treat institutions largely as instruments reflecting the preferences of dominant powers. Others accept that regimes, international society, and norms of restraint may influence the conduct of states, even if they do not overturn the structural logic of competition (Buzan, 1993; Jervis, 1998). Institutions can make behavior more predictable, produce expectations, and reduce some of the risks associated with anarchy. Nevertheless, they remain secondary ordering mechanisms because their durability ultimately depends on the willingness and capacity of powerful states to sustain them (Hampson & Cox, 1997).

The realist explanation of world-order change therefore locates the principal source of transformation outside the internal logic of liberal institutions. The decisive developments are changes in polarity, the redistribution of capabilities, the persistence of national interests, and the refusal of sovereign states to accept supranational limits in areas they regard as vital. The central question is not whether international rules are normatively attractive, but whether they remain compatible with the interests of the states possessing sufficient power to challenge them.

Liberal theories begin from a different understanding. They do not deny the importance of power, but reject the proposition that international order is simply a temporary reflection of material distribution. Institutions, interdependence, domestic political structures, and repeated cooperation can create forms of order that acquire durability beyond the power constellation in which they were originally established. Rules shape expectations; institutions reduce uncertainty; economic openness creates mutual interests; and democratic systems may form communities within which the use of force becomes progressively less acceptable (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999).

The strongest liberal accounts therefore treat international order as an evolving institutional project rather than a fixed structure. Liberal internationalism has existed in different versions, each responding to the political, economic, and security conditions of its period. Change does not necessarily mean that the order disappears. It may instead move from one version to another through institutional redesign, the reconstruction of political coalitions, or a recalibration of the balance between openness, sovereignty, and protection (Ikenberry, 2009, 2018). This capacity for adaptation is one of the main reasons liberal scholars generally stop short of declaring the end of the liberal order. Co-binding security

institutions, economic interdependence, and established practices of multilateral cooperation continue to constrain unilateral action and provide benefits that states would find expensive to reproduce independently. The existence of contestation does not by itself demonstrate collapse. An order can accommodate disagreements, institutional reform, changing memberships, and temporary departures from common policy without ceasing to function.

The liberal literature is nevertheless internally divided. More optimistic interpretations emphasize the durability of institutions and the absence of a coherent alternative capable of replacing the existing order. From this perspective, challengers may oppose aspects of Western dominance while continuing to benefit from international trade, finance, diplomatic institutions, and other components of the same order. The crisis is therefore one of adjustment rather than systemic termination. More pessimistic liberal accounts identify deeper problems. They argue that the survival of liberal order depends not only on international institutions but also on the domestic political foundations of liberal internationalism. The postwar order was supported by political coalitions that accepted openness because it was associated with security, prosperity, social mobility, and a degree of economic protection. As inequality increased, industrial communities declined, and the benefits of globalization became more unevenly distributed, the social foundations of internationalism weakened (Ikenberry, 2018; Ikenberry et al., 2018).

The crisis of liberal order is thus increasingly understood as originating within liberal democracies themselves. Domestic polarization, distrust of political elites, populism, and the declining legitimacy of established institutions restrict the ability of governments to maintain international commitments. Liberal democracies may continue to possess the material resources required to sustain the order while losing the domestic political willingness to use them. In this interpretation, the central problem is not simply the rise of external challengers, but the weakening of the coalitions that once regarded international openness as compatible with their own interests.

Some liberal scholars locate the problem even more deeply in the moral and social foundations of liberalism. An international order that emphasizes individual rights, markets, and universal rules may gradually weaken the political communities and solidarities upon which its own legitimacy depends. Its openness may produce prosperity while simultaneously generating insecurity, inequality, or a perception that decisions have been removed from democratic

control. Liberalism is therefore presented both as an institutional order capable of adaptation and as an order threatened by social forces produced partly through its own operation (Barnett, 2021; Stemmet, 2021).

This creates one of the central tensions within liberal scholarship. Institutional resilience is not the same as political legitimacy. International organizations may continue to operate, treaties may remain in force, and economic networks may persist even while public confidence in the purpose of the order declines. The survival of the institutional structure therefore does not automatically guarantee the survival of liberal internationalism as a political project. Adaptation must involve more than technical reform; it must also rebuild the domestic and international legitimacy of cooperation. Liberal theories consequently interpret contemporary transformation conditionally. The order can survive, but not simply by preserving its existing form. It must address domestic inequality, provide greater political protection against the disruptive effects of openness, and accommodate a world in which Western states no longer possess the same relative dominance. Whether liberal order persists depends on its capacity to move from one historical version to another without abandoning the principles that distinguish it from a traditional sphere-of-influence system.

Constructivist approaches shift the discussion in another direction. They argue that neither material power nor institutions alone can explain how international orders are created and maintained. Order is also a social accomplishment. It rests on intersubjective understandings about legitimate authority, appropriate conduct, political identity, and the purpose of international cooperation. Material capabilities matter, but their political meaning is never self-evident. A military alliance can be interpreted as protection by one actor and as domination by another; an international norm may be presented as universal while being experienced as the expression of a particular historical or cultural hierarchy. From this perspective, world-order change takes place not only when capabilities are redistributed or institutions are redesigned, but when the meanings sustaining those arrangements are contested. Actors struggle over who belongs within the order, whose historical experiences are recognized, which values are described as universal, and who possesses the authority to define legitimate behavior. A crisis of order can therefore develop even when its formal institutions remain intact. The contemporary liberal order is increasingly contested through civilizational narratives, identity claims, and non-Western critiques (. These critiques do not always amount to a fully developed alternative

world order. Frequently, they expose what critics regard as the unequal or Western-centered structure of existing arrangements without offering a comprehensive institutional replacement. Nevertheless, they matter because they weaken the claim that the liberal order expresses universally accepted principles rather than a particular historical configuration of power and meaning.

Constructivist studies also show how the expansion of liberal order may generate resistance through symbolic disempowerment. Actors may accept the practical benefits of institutions while rejecting the identities, hierarchies, or civilizational assumptions associated with them. Opposition is therefore not reducible to the material interests of revisionist states. It may arise because governments and societies perceive that their political experience, traditions, or conceptions of sovereignty are treated as inferior within the dominant language of order (Bettiza et al., 2023; Loh et al., 2026).

The growing importance of civilizational politics is one manifestation of this development. Political leaders increasingly frame international conflict not merely as competition among states, but as a struggle among distinct historical communities or models of political order. Such narratives strengthen boundaries between insiders and outsiders, reinterpret geopolitical competition as a defense of identity, and provide legitimacy for resistance to norms associated with the West. Even when these claims are instrumentally employed by political elites, they can reshape the expectations and identities through which international politics is understood.

The idea of “Three Worlds” similarly presents contemporary order as a constructed and evolving pattern of competing political groupings rather than a return to a rigid bipolar bloc structure (Ikenberry, 2024). These groupings are neither fully coherent nor defined exclusively by formal alliances. They are held together through overlapping interests, identities, historical experiences, and views concerning the legitimate organization of international politics. This suggests that the emerging order may be plural without being neatly multipolar in the classical realist sense. Constructivist scholarship also helps explain why populist governments do not necessarily withdraw from international institutions even when they attack liberal internationalism. Such governments may use the institutions themselves as arenas in which to redefine sovereignty, representation, and legitimate cooperation. They contest the liberal order from within by presenting themselves as defenders of popular sovereignty against cosmopolitan elites, while selectively retaining forms of cooperation that serve

their interests (Söderbaum et al., 2021). Continued institutional participation therefore does not necessarily demonstrate agreement with liberal norms. It may instead reflect tactical engagement in a struggle over the meaning and purpose of the institution. The constructivist contribution is thus particularly important for understanding why the liberal order may be materially resilient yet politically fragile. Institutions can survive while their shared meaning changes. Rules can remain formally binding while their legitimacy is disputed. States may comply for strategic reasons without accepting the normative principles upon which the order claims to rest. World-order transformation can therefore occur gradually through reinterpretation, contestation, and the displacement of established narratives rather than through a single systemic rupture.

Despite their different premises, the theoretical traditions increasingly converge on the importance of domestic politics. Earlier debates often treated world order primarily as a systemic phenomenon shaped by great powers, alliances, and institutions. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that international order is co-produced by developments within states. Domestic polarization, inequality, populism, nationalism, elite legitimacy, and public interpretations of globalization influence whether governments can support international commitments and whether societies regard those commitments as legitimate. This does not mean that the theories have reached agreement. Liberalism interprets domestic crisis mainly as a threat to the political foundations of international cooperation. Realism treats nationalism and sovereign resistance as evidence that attempts to transcend the nation-state have inherent limits. Constructivism focuses on the way domestic movements transform political grievances into claims about identity, legitimacy, and the appropriate boundaries of political community. The disagreement is therefore about causal pathways rather than the existence of domestic influence. A populist victory may be understood by liberals as the erosion of support for openness, by realists as the reassertion of national interest, and by constructivists as the successful reconstruction of political identity around a division between the people and transnational elites. The same development consequently produces different theoretical conclusions about the future of international order.

This is especially visible in the debate over whether populism and nationalism are external challenges to liberal order or consequences of its own internal contradictions. Some liberal accounts describe these movements as reactive forces that undermine institutions and international cooperation (Ikenberry et

al., 2018). Others argue that the liberal order's individualism, economic inequality, technocratic governance, and universalizing ambitions helped generate the backlash it now faces (Barnett, 2021; Jahn, 2018). The latter position offers a more complete explanation for why resistance has become powerful within the very societies that created and benefited most from the order.

Constructivist approaches help resolve part of this contradiction. Populist and nationalist movements do not simply reject cooperation. They seek to redefine the political community in whose name cooperation should take place. Their objection is often not to international engagement as such, but to institutions represented as detached from popular sovereignty or as imposing identities and policies without legitimate consent. Cooperation may therefore continue, but its meaning, scope, and normative justification change (Söderbaum et al., 2021).

Another area of broad convergence concerns the pluralization of world order. Realists, liberals, and constructivists all recognize that the international environment is becoming less uniformly organized around Western dominance, but they evaluate this development differently. Realists interpret pluralization as the return of great-power rivalry and the formation of competing centers of power (Mearsheimer, 2019). Liberals see a more difficult environment in which institutional reform and accommodation may preserve cooperation despite a decline in Western predominance (Ikenberry, 2009). Constructivists regard pluralization as an opening for alternative perspectives and a broader contest over the legitimate foundations of order (Bettiza et al., 2023).

Theories therefore often converge on the descriptive diagnosis while diverging on its meaning. A more plural order may represent deterioration and instability, a necessary adjustment to a changing distribution of power, or an opportunity to create arrangements that are less hierarchical and more inclusive. Multipolarity itself does not resolve this disagreement, because polarity describes the distribution of capabilities but does not determine the institutional, normative, or relational character of the resulting order. This distinction also explains why the literature cannot determine clearly whether the present transformation should be described as transition, crisis, fragmentation, or accommodation. The answer depends on what aspect of order is being examined. Materially, the system may be moving away from unipolarity. Institutionally, much of the postwar architecture continues to operate. Normatively, the claims of universality and Western leadership face increasing resistance. Domestically, the coalitions supporting international openness have weakened in several of the core states.

These processes are related, but they do not necessarily move at the same pace or in the same direction.

The most visible theoretical disagreement concerns whether the liberal international order is terminally declining or entering another phase. Realists and some critics of liberalism interpret present developments as confirmation that the order was structurally overextended. Nationalism, sovereignty, and great-power competition return as the distribution of power becomes less favorable to Western predominance (Mearsheimer, 2019; Slaughter, 1997). Liberal authors respond that international orders have repeatedly changed form without disappearing. For them, the central challenge is not necessarily collapse but relegitimation under altered geopolitical and domestic conditions (Ikenberry, 2018).

This disagreement reflects different starting assumptions. Realism begins from structural constraint and therefore asks whether the distribution of power can continue to support the order. Liberalism begins from institutional resilience and asks whether cooperation can be redesigned. Constructivism begins from legitimacy and asks whether actors continue to understand the order as appropriate, inclusive, and meaningful. Each captures a different dimension of the same transformation.

At the level of synthesis, these accounts need not be treated as mutually exclusive explanations of separate worlds. They can instead be understood as identifying interacting dimensions of one changing world order. Power transition can destabilize institutions, but institutions may persist if they continue to provide benefits and retain legitimacy. Legitimacy may decline even in the absence of a decisive material shift, especially when the order is associated with inequality, hierarchy, or exclusion. Ideational change can influence how states interpret their interests, while changing capabilities determine which actors can translate their interpretations into institutional or geopolitical outcomes. This interaction explains why the liberal order can appear resilient and fragile at the same time. It is resilient because its institutions, networks, rules, and practices are deeply embedded and because no coherent alternative has yet replaced them. It is fragile because the political coalitions, identities, and assumptions that sustained those institutions have weakened, while the distribution of power is becoming less favorable to the states that originally designed them.

The practical implications also differ according to theoretical perspective. Liberal scholarship suggests that institutional reform alone will not be sufficient if

domestic societies believe that openness benefits only elites. The maintenance of international order therefore depends partly on distributional policies within advanced industrial democracies and on the reconstruction of a social bargain that connects international cooperation to domestic security and prosperity (Barnett, 2021). Realism warns that attempts to universalize liberal rules will meet growing resistance unless they take sovereignty, security concerns, and regional balances of power seriously (Waltz, 2008). Liberal institutions cannot operate as though the relative distribution of capabilities were irrelevant. An order that fails to accommodate material change risks provoking balancing behavior even from actors that benefit from many of its institutions.

Constructivism adds that accommodation cannot be limited to redistributing formal influence. Recognition and symbolic inclusion also matter. Non-Western actors do not merely demand a larger share of institutional authority; they contest the historical narratives, classifications, and normative hierarchies embedded in the existing order (Loh et al., 2026). Reform that changes voting shares but leaves the underlying conception of legitimate order untouched may therefore prove insufficient.

The deepest implication is that contemporary order-building must manage three pressures simultaneously: geopolitical rivalry, domestic backlash, and ideational contestation. None can be reduced entirely to the others. Increased military power cannot by itself restore legitimacy; institutional redesign cannot eliminate geopolitical competition; and more inclusive language cannot remove conflicts of material interest. The evidence therefore supports a qualified but clear conclusion. Theories of International Relations agree that the world order is changing, but they explain this change through different causal logics and assign different meanings to the same developments. Realism views transformation as a predictable consequence of power redistribution, sovereignty, and the return of multipolar competition, with liberal internationalism becoming increasingly difficult to sustain as unipolarity fades (Waltz, 2008). Liberalism offers a more conditional assessment, arguing that order remains possible if institutions adapt and if liberal democracies reconstruct the domestic coalitions that once sustained openness and cooperation (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999).

Constructivism demonstrates that world order is also produced through legitimacy, identity, and ideational contestation, helping to explain why the liberal order confronts not only strategic opposition but also symbolic and normative resistance (Bettiza et al., 2023).

What follows from these perspectives is not the expectation that one fixed system will simply replace another. Contemporary world order is undergoing a layered transformation in which material power, institutional durability, domestic legitimacy, and political identity interact. The theories illuminate these dimensions separately, but none fully explains how they combine across global, regional, domestic, and functional settings. Their differences are therefore not merely obstacles to synthesis. They identify the principal elements that any broader interpretation of the changing world must take into account.

4.3 Beyond liberalism and realism: a surRealist understanding of world order

The preceding sections have shown that the liberal world order cannot be understood exclusively through the concepts and assumptions of liberal theory. Yet it would be equally misleading to interpret it simply as an illusion concealing traditional power politics. Liberalism, realism, and constructivism each identify an essential dimension of the order, but none of them alone provides a satisfactory explanation for its emergence, endurance, internal contradictions, or present transformation. A SurRealist synthesis begins precisely from this tension. The liberal world order is simultaneously a material configuration of power, an institutional system, a community of interests, a normative project, and a political narrative. Its institutions are real, its benefits are tangible, and its values are genuinely shared by many of its participants. At the same time, its universal claims have always been selective, its functioning has depended upon asymmetrical power, and its rules have never operated independently of the interests of those capable of defining and enforcing them.

Realism is correct to reject the assumption that the liberal world order could ever have been purely liberal. No major power has conducted a consistently liberal foreign policy, and even the European Union, whose external behavior comes closest to the liberal ideal, cannot escape the constraints of an anarchic international environment. The EU can promote rules, conditionality, cooperation, and normative standards, but it can do so effectively only where those ambitions are supported by sufficient political unity, economic leverage, or security power. Where these are absent, liberal foreign policy often becomes ambiguous or lacks the strength necessary to produce its intended consequences. The general realist premise therefore remains indispensable. International order is shaped by the relative distribution of material capabilities, particularly military and economic power. These capabilities define the strategic space within which institutions operate and within which the political choices of individual states become meaningful. The cyclical rise and decline of great powers identified by Paul Kennedy remains relevant because political orders cannot be separated permanently from the material bases that sustain them (Kennedy, 1989). Economic change is similarly not merely an external background condition. The long cycles of capitalist development described by Joseph Schumpeter demonstrate that changes in production, technology,

innovation, and economic organization can gradually alter the foundations of political influence and international hierarchy (Schumpeter, 2014).

Realism is also persuasive in arguing that the post-Cold War expansion of the liberal order was made possible by an exceptional distribution of power. Liberal institutions appeared unusually effective because their development coincided with the predominance of the United States and the absence of a systemic competitor capable of organizing an alternative. Institutions were not irrelevant, but their reach and authority depended upon the political, military, and economic environment in which they operated. The strength of the United States did not merely defend an existing order; it created the conditions under which liberal principles could be represented as increasingly universal. This does not mean, however, that liberal institutions were only a decorative façade for American power. Nor does it mean that realism and liberalism provide mutually exclusive explanations. The institutions of the liberal order reduced uncertainty, lowered transaction costs, facilitated cooperation, and allowed states to pursue their interests under more predictable conditions (R. Keohane, 1984). They also placed limits on the arbitrary exercise of power and gave weaker states access to forms of influence that would have been unavailable in a purely competitive system. The international order was therefore not simply imposed upon passive participants. It expanded partly because many states voluntarily sought membership and regarded participation as beneficial.

This is where the purely realist explanation becomes insufficient. States did not join Western institutions only because they were coerced or because they lacked alternatives. They also joined because access to markets, security guarantees, institutional protection, and political recognition served their interests. In many cases, domestic political actors genuinely identified with the norms and values represented by the order. The successive enlargement of the community of liberal democracies demonstrates that the order possessed an attraction that cannot be explained entirely through force. Southern Europe, Central Europe, the Western Balkans, and parts of Eastern Europe moved toward the institutions of the liberal order because membership promised security, modernization, prosperity, and political consolidation. Such behavior is not inconsistent with realism. Participation in institutions, acceptance of rules, and even partial transfers of sovereignty may serve the traditional goals of survival and power maximization. European integration illustrates this particularly clearly. Germany's postwar recovery of political influence and relative autonomy took place through

a framework that constrained national power while simultaneously enabling its economic projection. Integration did not abolish power politics; it reorganized the means through which power could be accumulated and exercised.

The distinction between coercion, interest, and identification is therefore crucial. Members of the liberal core comply with the order partly because its institutions provide benefits, partly because the costs of exclusion would be substantial, and partly because they genuinely share many of its foundational norms. Other states participate more instrumentally. They cooperate because interdependence narrows the range of practical alternatives, because predictable rules are preferable to uncontrolled competition, or because the advantages of participation outweigh the costs of challenging the system. In such cases there is no deep community of values, but this does not make cooperation insignificant or unreal. The United States has always operated within this ambiguity. It has defended liberal principles while cooperating strategically with states that cannot reasonably be described as liberal democracies, including Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and, in different historical periods and policy areas, China. The institutional structure commonly described as the liberal world order has never required all participants to be democratic. Strong political conditionality has applied primarily within the order's core, whereas its wider economic and diplomatic institutions have remained open to a much more diverse range of regimes.

The liberal world order is consequently better understood as a series of concentric circles than as a uniform community. Its core is constituted by states that accept not only practical cooperation but also stricter expectations regarding democratic government, the rule of law, and political loyalty. Beyond this core lies a wider institutional environment in which states participate selectively and for predominantly strategic or economic reasons. The boundaries between these circles are neither fixed nor impermeable, and the degree of normative identification differs from one state and one policy field to another.

Within the narrower community, however, membership involves more than the pursuit of immediate interests. It requires acceptance of collectively established rules, including decisions that may not correspond to the preferences of every member. The European Union is the clearest example of this arrangement. Its members have agreed to make important decisions jointly and to accept limitations upon their freedom of action in return for security, economic advantages, financial resources, legal predictability, and participation in a larger

political community. These benefits are tangible, but so are the expectations of conformity attached to them. The resulting tension between common rules and political diversity is one of the fundamental contradictions of liberal order. A community of values must possess some mechanism for identifying and sanctioning conduct that violates its principles. Yet the attempt to defend common norms can itself produce hierarchy and exclusion. Members remain formally equal, but the interpretation of shared values is frequently determined by majorities, institutional elites, or the most influential states. Liberal order therefore tolerates certain forms of free riding more easily than open balancing behavior directed against the community itself.

The same pattern can be observed, although less formally, in the relationship between the United States and its allies. The postwar Western order rested upon a hegemonic bargain that was asymmetrical without being fully imperial. The United States provided security guarantees, access to economic benefits, and leadership within international institutions, while its allies offered political loyalty, strategic reliability, and broad acceptance of American leadership (Ikenberry, 2020). The arrangement did not eliminate disagreements, but it established the boundaries within which those disagreements could be managed. Crises become visible when either side of this bargain is called into question. Allies may doubt the credibility of American protection, while the United States may question whether its partners are contributing sufficiently or remain politically reliable. The conflict surrounding Ukraine is especially important because it tests both dimensions at once. The inability of the order to respond effectively to a major war in Europe would weaken confidence in the sovereignty-based international system and in the credibility of the American security umbrella. At the same time, allied cohesion depends upon the willingness of individual members to act as participants in a common strategic enterprise rather than as entirely autonomous actors.

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO demonstrated that the credibility of the Western security framework remains significant. Yet the war also revealed the extent to which that credibility depends upon political cohesion, military capacity, and the continued willingness of the United States to devote resources to European security. Liberal commitments do not enforce themselves. They remain dependent upon power, but power itself becomes more effective when exercised through institutions that are regarded as legitimate.

This interaction among power, interest, and legitimacy represents the central insight of the SurRealist synthesis. Realism correctly observes that the liberal order is historically exceptional, that it depends disproportionately upon American strength, and that its institutions cannot escape the constraints of sovereignty and power competition (Mearsheimer, 2018). Liberalism is nevertheless correct that institutions can acquire durability, reshape state behavior, and create interests in their own continuation. Constructivism adds that neither material power nor institutional effectiveness is sufficient unless actors continue to believe in the meaning, legitimacy, and purpose of the order.

The future of the liberal order therefore depends not only upon the capabilities of the United States but also upon the confidence of its allies and the willingness of its societies to support the costs of maintaining it. Should American priorities move decisively in another direction, and should Washington invest fewer resources in the institutions it created, allied confidence will gradually decline. The result would not necessarily be an immediate collapse. More probably, the order would evolve into a looser and more multipolar structure in which competing blocs, regional arrangements, and selective forms of cooperation coexist. Its formal institutions might survive even as their political cohesion weakens. This corresponds partly to Kennedy's cyclical conception of power and to realist expectations concerning the gradual emergence of a post-American world (Kennedy, 1989). Yet SurRealism rejects the assumption that such a shift would produce a straightforward return to traditional multipolarity. The institutions, interdependencies, norms, and political expectations created during the postwar and post-Cold War periods cannot simply be removed. They constitute an inherited structure within which new forms of rivalry will develop. The emerging order will therefore combine old and new logics: renewed competition among major powers, persistent global institutions, fragmented communities of value, regionalized security structures, and selective economic interdependence.

Russia's war against Ukraine represents the most direct military challenge to this order, but it does not constitute a complete alternative to it. Russia can challenge rules, borders, and Western influence; it can exploit grievances and promote a narrative of sovereign or civilizational resistance. It cannot, however, presently offer an institutional and economic order capable of attracting a comparable number of voluntary participants. A Russian success could nevertheless create the appearance that an alternative exists by demonstrating that military

revisionism can overcome the rules and guarantees of the established system. Mearsheimer's argument that conflict between Russia and the West emerged from incompatible security logics therefore contains substantial explanatory power (Mearsheimer 2018). From a realist perspective, Russian leaders interpreted Western institutional expansion not as the neutral spread of liberal principles but as a geopolitical advance into areas considered vital to Russian security. The possibility of Russia's full integration into Western institutions was never politically plausible for either side. The resulting confrontation illustrates the limits of universal liberal expansion in an environment in which major powers retain conflicting conceptions of survival, status, and legitimate regional order.

Yet the crisis of the liberal order cannot be attributed solely to external challengers. Its internal contradictions may be even more consequential. During the post-Cold War period, the absence of a systemic alternative created the impression that liberal assumptions could expand into an ever-growing number of political and social fields. The liberal mainstream increasingly treated its values not as historically situated preferences but as universally applicable standards. This strengthened the normative coherence of the order while also narrowing the political space available for disagreement within it. At the same time, political elites in the United States and other liberal democracies became increasingly detached from parts of their own societies. They struggled to respond to economic insecurity, cultural anxiety, social fragmentation, and the continued importance of national identification. Progressive liberalism frequently interpreted these concerns as residues of an earlier political era rather than as enduring sources of political mobilization. It underestimated the motivational power of belonging and the resilience of nationalism, which had never disappeared either inside or outside the liberal order (Hazony, 2018).

Donald Trump did not create this crisis. He recognized, articulated, and exploited political developments that had already weakened the domestic foundations of liberal internationalism. His rise demonstrated that the order could not rely indefinitely upon elite consensus while substantial parts of society no longer believed that the existing political and economic arrangements served their interests. The political shock of 2016 was therefore not merely an external attack upon liberal order from a nationalist politician. It was evidence of a deeper fracture within the society that had played the principal role in constructing and maintaining that order. The subsequent period did not restore the previous

equilibrium. The American political system continues to confront pressure from progressive movements on the left, nationalist and neo-isolationist forces on the right, and accelerating changes in the external distribution of power. These domestic and international pressures reinforce one another. Political polarization reduces the capacity for consistent international leadership, while external crises deepen domestic disagreements concerning the costs and purpose of American engagement.

A SurRealist interpretation therefore accepts the realist proposition that liberal order cannot escape anarchy, power transition, or national interest. It also accepts the liberal proposition that institutions matter, cooperation can become durable, and rule-based arrangements can produce real benefits for both powerful and weaker states. Finally, it incorporates the constructivist insight that an international order survives only as long as sufficient numbers of political actors regard its institutions, values, and hierarchies as legitimate or at least tolerable.

The liberal world order is neither merely liberal nor merely an instrument of domination. It is a historically produced compromise among power, values, and interests. It is real because its institutions influence behavior, its norms shape expectations, and membership provides substantial advantages. It is surreal because its universal language frequently conceals selectivity, its formal equality coexists with hierarchy, its commitment to sovereignty is applied inconsistently, and its liberal identity depends upon the power of states that have never pursued purely liberal foreign policies. Its principal contradiction lies precisely here. Liberalism presents the order as a system capable of transcending power politics, while the survival of that system depends upon power. Realism reveals this dependence but often underestimates the independent effects of institutions, legitimacy, and shared political identity. Constructivism explains how the order becomes socially meaningful but may not fully capture the material limits within which meanings are translated into political outcomes.

SurRealism connects these dimensions without attempting to eliminate the contradictions among them. The liberal order persists because it serves interests, embodies values, reduces uncertainty, protects its members, and remains preferable to the currently available alternatives. It is contested because its benefits are uneven, its hierarchies are visible, its universalism is selective, and the power distribution that supported its expansion is changing. It is neither collapsing in a single moment nor continuing unchanged. Rather, it is becoming

less universal, less coherent, and more openly dependent upon negotiation among competing powers, regions, political communities, and conceptions of legitimacy.

The most plausible future is therefore not the complete disappearance of liberal order, but its transformation through profound compromises and fundamental reforms. Parts of the existing system will endure because states continue to need institutions, predictability, and cooperation. Other elements will weaken as power becomes more dispersed and as political communities resist universal standards they regard as intrusive or unequal. The emerging world order will be more plural, more regionalized, and more transactional, but it will continue to carry the institutional and normative inheritance of the liberal period.

The SurRealist conclusion of this chapter is thus that the world order is changing simultaneously at several levels. The distribution of power is becoming less favorable to Western predominance. The institutional structure remains durable but increasingly contested. The normative cohesion of the liberal community is weakening, while domestic political fragmentation reduces the willingness of its members to bear the costs of leadership. New challengers can undermine the order but have not yet created a comprehensive alternative.

The liberal world order will consequently survive only if it abandons the assumption that adaptation means the further universalization of its existing form. Its future depends upon recognizing the continued importance of sovereignty, power, national identity, regional diversity, and political legitimacy. Whether such recognition represents the renewal of liberal order or the beginning of a different order altogether may remain impossible to determine in advance. That uncertainty is not a weakness of the SurRealist interpretation. It is the defining characteristic of the world it seeks to explain.

4.4 A surRealist theoretical synthesis of world order

The foregoing was intentionally theoretical and philosophical, but it is worth calling on this philosophy and projecting it onto the international system. According to this “applied philosophy” as well, it is worth dealing with world order precisely because it examines the logic that—regardless of whether we assume the system to be anarchic or improbably anarchic—nevertheless imposes constraints even on the actors that create the order. The international order structures the interactions of the actors (Wendt, 2003), even though, in the absence of world government, the liberal order is not directed by a central actor independent of the others—and naturally not by some invisible background power popular among believers in conspiracy theories. The central global questions are concentrated here, and therefore the EU-US political agenda reflects these constraints well.

The formulation of the question anticipates the extraordinary complexity of the subject. It is no coincidence that, at the theoretical level, approaches are much more popular that examine either exclusively the order itself, adopting a macro-systemic approach, or its actors, adopting a micro- or individualistic approach. Likewise, clearer but by their nature more restrictive approaches are also more popular: those that seek to formulate propositions concerning international relations as a whole, that is, ontology, or those that support knowledge of the functioning of the system through methodological tools, that is, epistemology. At the same time, it also matters whether, for the purposes of our analysis, we take material variables into account—such as power, economy, size, and so on—or also allow space for variables that are not “tangible,” that is, are difficult to measure, such as ideas, norms, ideology, and nationalism. Broadening the foregoing line of reasoning slightly and moving it onto a more general theoretical plane, a fundamental question within the theory of international relations (Wendt, 2003) is where, why, and how the driving forces—interests and/or values—emerge that influence and shape the functioning of the actors of the international system and of the system itself. It is precisely along this question that theories and theoretical schools themselves are organized, depending on which component of the question they emphasize. In other words, when theoretical approaches are grouped, their comprehensibility and usability are assisted if we are aware of how a given “school” identifies the system itself, that is, the world order, and how it seeks to understand its functioning. On this basis, they differ in which of the driving forces mentioned above they place at the

center of analysis and which they consider more important, for example, in interpreting a foreign policy, in the present case that of the United States.

Considering that international relations has a methodology that is difficult to unify even within the social sciences, epistemological questions also depend on what the analyst, or the school followed by the analyst, actually accepts as “tangible,” that is, empirically perceptible. It is entirely clear that the state cannot be seen or experienced in a natural-scientific sense, but it can be perceived. Likewise, the international system itself cannot be experienced through the senses, and the schools differ in what they consider more influential. Neorealists, more precisely Kenneth Waltz, regarded the structure itself as influential, determining the distribution of measurable material goods. Neoliberals such as Keohane and Nye emphasized capabilities, institutions, and mutual interdependencies. Constructivists—assuming that one can speak of a unified school at all—regard ideas, thoughts, and established interpretations as “measurable” (Rada, 2007a).

The distinctive feature of international relations is that the influential power of norms and rules can be demonstrated if liberal microeconomics and politics within states are selected as the starting point of analysis; but the superiority of the “laws” of nation-state self-interest, self-help, and the pursuit of survival can likewise be demonstrated if, in a neorealist and to a lesser extent neoliberal analysis, the international system is placed at the center and treated as an independent variable. If we logically take this proposition into account, then we may conclude that the driving forces of the foreign policy of states appearing as autonomous actors in the international system may originate in the international system, but the manner in which self-interest develops necessarily derives from internal structure and domestic politics (Wendt, 2003).

It is inherent in theoretical approaches that they are dependent on the field of inquiry (Wendt, 2003), because it must be specified within which set we are conducting the examination—for example, only society within one country or the entire international system—which elements within the set are analytically meaningful—for example, states—and what influences the behavior of those elements—for example, their position relative to one another within the set or internally generated socializing elements such as national identity, the political system, or electoral cycles.

Mainstream rational theory—today primarily neorealism and neoliberalism—assumes a rational point of departure and accepts materialist and individualist

conclusions. In other words, within states it is easy to accept that there are physical constraints and that society, that is, the state, shapes the identity of its constituent elements, whereas in international relations the state is the basic unit, the individual, and in the absence of world government conducts its foreign policy relatively autonomously. The adjective “relative” is appropriate because, according to the mainstream, the system itself also exerts its own gravitational force on this autonomy, that is, it constrains it.

The difference between the two principal rationalist schools in this respect is that neorealists—especially Mearsheimer—do not believe in the genuine constraining force of liberal international institutions and rules, because these are undeniably the institutions and rules that exist today. When self-interest comes into conflict with the rules of the system, the course of foreign policy is determined by the strength of the power and material base behind the interest. The will of the United States is more easily enforced than that of Albania in the event of a conflict of interests.

The neoliberal school—within which Ikenberry has provided the most comprehensive description from this perspective since Keohane (Ikenberry, 2020; R. Keohane, 1984)—does, however, trust in the moderating power of institutions, even if they are incapable in every case of fully eliminating power-political considerations. The will of the United States also prevails in this approach, but that will is qualified by the fact that the objective of the United States is to maintain the international order—which it itself “designed”—that is, to ensure that the rules also apply to itself.

Wilsonian idealist institutionalism differs from present-day neoliberal emphases, but is similar in its view of the norm-creating and rule-following nature of international institutions. It starts from the assumption that international anarchy can be kept under control if universally accepted and well-functioning institutions exist that do not follow the dynamics of international relations dictated by balance-of-power logic. This may also be regarded as a constructivist theory, because it believed that jointly created institutions shape the interests and values of actors, rather than the reverse.

This could be true if the initial motivations—which are previously existing interests and values—coincide among the actors, or, and here we may identify a logical pitfall, if a “constructing” power enforces them. Neoliberal thinking about the liberal world order proceeds from precisely this point: there existed a power, the United States, which not only assisted at the birth of the order but

supervised the socialization of actors within the order during the Cold War, and then, having been freed from its ideological opposite, the Soviet Union, expanded this order globally and, where necessary, enforced it through instruments of power.

In the case of countries unable to shape the agenda of the order, neoliberals argue that participation is motivated by the complex system of global, primarily economic, interdependencies. Neorealists, by contrast, maintain that the order was secured by the desire for survival and the overwhelming power of the United States. In the latter sense, works discussing a post-American world become more readily interpretable, because in the former sense interdependence does not disappear with American decline; only the degree of dependence changes, that is, the ratio of vulnerability to sensitivity. The dilemma can also be translated into the question of whether the international system is inherently conflictual, or whether its actors are responsible for their inability to manage anarchy through cooperation (Wendt, 1992).

At first sight, constructivism offers a solution from a very similar perspective, because the generally accepted definition of constructivism—which is more difficult to define uniformly as a single set than the liberal or realist schools—is that human associations, the state and the international system, are created not by the distribution of material goods but rather by shared ideas and beliefs; and that the interests and identities of individual actors emerge precisely because of and along these commonly held and accepted ideas. For this reason, Alexander Wendt called constructivism a structural idealist approach (Wendt, 2003).

The analysis does not become constructivist merely because, from a logical perspective, it uses elements and methodologies from all mainstream theories. Nor does the acknowledgement of the socially constructed nature of interests mean that their material foundations can be neglected.

It must be acknowledged that the material foundation and “reality” are nevertheless decisive, because within states the political and economic systems and society are built on these material elements, and these determine the processes that, for example, provide opportunities for the state’s international movement, that is, its own resources. Practically every strategic analysis draws attention to the fact (Freedman, 2013) that a good strategy—meaning one that is feasible and sustainable—starts from the instruments available to the subject of the strategy and from what can be achieved with the help of those instruments.

Objectives are realistic only if they take into account changes in the external world and if the course of action defined on that basis also assigns instruments to the objectives. Thus, objectives necessarily originate internally, in domestic politics, and become realities through the interpretation of the international system, world order, and its agenda, while the course of action is influenced by which actors shape the agenda. The material foundation, what we think about that foundation, and the immediate and broader international environment are all decisive at the same time.

The SurRealist synthesis proceeds from this simultaneity. It does not seek to eliminate the differences between material and ideational explanations, between the systemic and individual levels, or between the constraining and constructed nature of international order. Instead, it assumes that these apparently contradictory interpretations describe different, simultaneously existing components of the same reality.

The international order remains a useful point of departure even if it is not interpreted exclusively within the restrictive frameworks of formal international law and international institutions. If interpreted narrowly, for example, the failure of the UN to halt aggression would be equivalent to the failure of the order. Russia has violated the rules of the institutional order in every respect, and this institutional order is unable to provide an answer. The UN Security Council could theoretically authorize coercive retaliation, but understandably this will not occur in the case of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Yet this does not mean the collapse of the order, because numerous mechanisms have demonstrated that unilaterally overturning the order entails serious consequences, even if those consequences are not immediate. This provides a narrative explaining why China, which has profited from the “liberal order” over recent decades, cannot rationally find it worthwhile to leave the order by riding a wave of national sentiment aimed at some form of global leadership. It should be added that this reduces the probability of a twentieth-century type of Cold War emerging, because China is connected to and dependent upon the “liberal order” through incomparably more ties than was the case with the Soviet Union.

From a neoliberal, or even idealist, perspective, the liberal world order is the pressure and framework whose boundaries may be tested but cannot be crossed without serious losses. Thus—according to both liberal and realist theories that endow states with anthropological characteristics—in a world

based on self-help, self-interest, and power maximization, states are sentenced within the order to a lifelong term of relative deprivation of liberty in a correctional institution. It is deprivation of liberty because their sovereignty is not unlimited in the international system, and because, whether owing to neoliberal dependencies or the neorealist instinct for survival, they cannot simply do anything.

Yet this is relative because the “liberal order” itself is based on Westphalian nation-state sovereignty, according to which the holy grail of the international system is the sovereign equality of actors and their complete sovereignty over domestic affairs (UN Charter). The international order therefore constrains sovereignty while simultaneously treating sovereignty as one of its constitutive principles. This contradiction is not an accidental defect of the order but one of the central characteristics of its functioning.

Considering the theoretical schools, it would be easy to say that, standing on the ground of constructivism, we seek to understand the operating logic of our world and, within it, relations between the United States and the EU, which affect the foreign-policy room for maneuver of our country and region and foreign policies in our region. However, the analysis does not become constructivist merely because, from a logical perspective, it uses elements and methodologies from all mainstream theories.

The present book approaches our country primarily from the perspective of the system, but with attention to nodes and filters. In other words, we agree that there is a distinctive regional condition (Buzan & Wæver, 2003) that influences the foreign policy of our country and region, and that the agenda developed and followed by the leaders of our alliance system has, unsurprisingly, a fundamental influence on it.

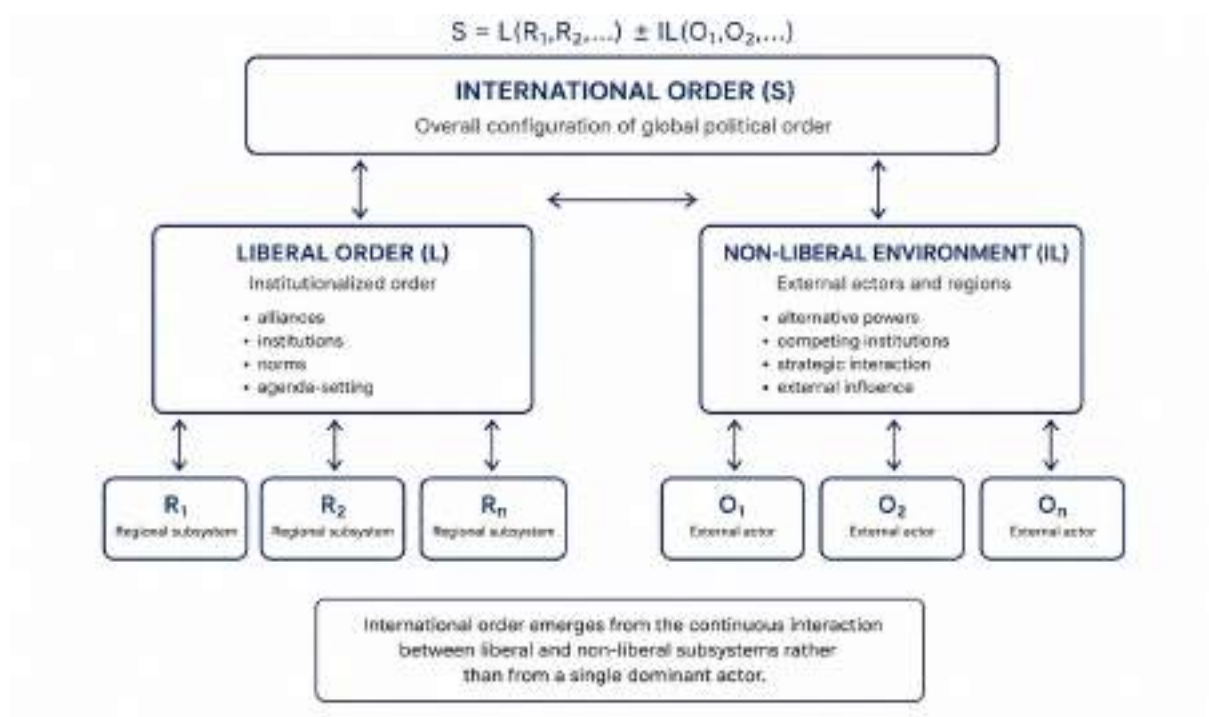
We also accept the assumption that the present world order is liberal and is influenced by the issues on the agenda of the liberal West—a neoliberal approach, but with strong neorealist elements if NATO is also included in the equation—and that the issues themselves reflect the order. The West is by no means unified, but we may accept the simplification that the United States and the EU are its decisive agenda-setting actors, and thus the bilateral relationship is particularly important.

On the other hand, however, it must be acknowledged that the constituent elements, namely states, also influence which questions are placed on the

agenda at the systemic level and, consequently, how the world order changes. To select a single example of this process: Hungary's foreign policy is influenced by the international order and international events, but its interests and values are determined by a longer and internally constructed process—an individualistic approach that is more classically realist or classically liberal.

That is, what we think about the challenges affecting us and Hungary's place in the international order, see the objective of becoming a middle power, first appears in our region, and if it receives validation from our partners within the regional issue-specific complex (Marton et al., 2015), it may also exert influence at the level of the liberal order, that is, the EU-US level.

This relationship can be expressed as illustrations seen in FIGURE 2.

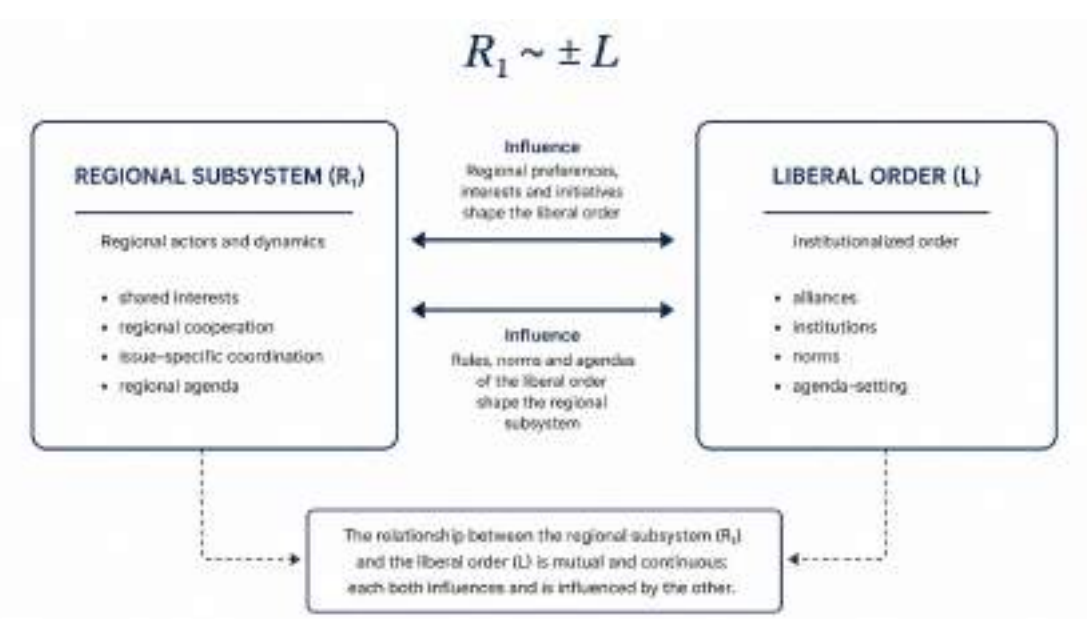


2. Figure: Architecture of the International Order. Source: Author's own compilation.

The purpose is not to provide a quantitative measurement of international order. It makes explicit the direction and interdependence of the relationships through which actors, regions, subsystems, and the broader order continuously influence one another.

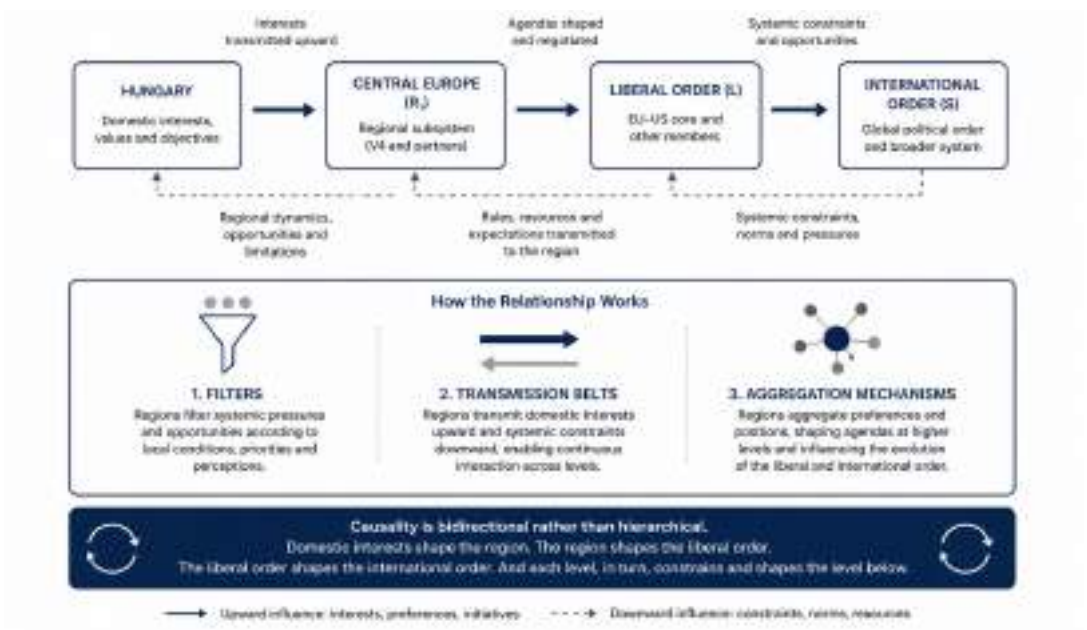
According to the present line of reasoning, therefore, Hungary's objectives originate internally and are "constructed" at home, but for these interests to become genuine and credible objectives, they must pass through two filters: the regional level and the level of the international liberal order. To formulate objectives entirely different from these in the belief that, during their pursuit,

Hungary will not encounter serious resistance making their achievement impossible is an idealistic fantasy.



3. Figure: Conceptual interpretation of regional influence. Source: Author's own compilation.

The material foundation, what we think about that foundation, and the immediate and broader international environment are all decisive at the same time. Reversing the direction: the agenda of the liberal order is influenced by the EU and the United States, which affects the regional situation, which in turn affects Hungary’s foreign-policy room for maneuver. Yet interests and values depend more strongly on Hungary, which affects the regional situation, which in turn affects the world order.



4. Figure: From domestic interests to international order and back. Source: Author's own compilation.

The causal relationship is therefore not unidirectional. The order constrains its actors, but it is also continuously reconstructed through the interests, identities, and behavior of those actors. Regional and issue-specific subsystems operate as intermediate spaces in this relationship. They transmit systemic constraints downward while aggregating and transmitting internally constructed interests upward.

As a summary of the theoretical introduction, the logical framework of the present book is described below, while the structure itself is justified by theory. As theoretical premises, we accept that:

1. the international system is state-centered, states pursue self-interest, and their interests derive from their internal characteristics—that is, interests and values are “constructed” internally within the state; pursuing an existing interest is rational, but its formation is not;
2. an international order exists that became institutionalized as a compromise among the self-interested behavior of states; this may be called norms or international values;
3. although the international order is anarchic, it affects its actors and “reconstructs” the network of interests, moving through institutional compromise in the direction of hierarchy or controlled anarchy;
4. subsystems exist within the international order in which, regionally or organized around particular issues, the “socializing” effect of the order, that is, hierarchy, appears more distinctly—as in Central Europe, Europe, or the West; interdependencies are stronger and may become institutionalized regionally (EU) or even globally;
5. certain actors within the international order may, while pursuing their own interests, be capable of shaping socialization; the United States is an example of this in its modern nation-state form, while the EU represents its postmodern form (Cooper, 2000);
6. the validity of the international order as a whole is not called into question if socialization does not affect all actors to the same degree.

These premises constitute the theoretical center of the SurRealist approach used here. They preserve the state-centered and interest-based foundations of mainstream theory, but do not assume that interests emerge independently of domestic political and social processes. They accept the material foundations

and anarchic characteristics of international politics, but do not conclude that institutions, norms, and socialization are therefore merely superficial. They acknowledge systemic constraints, but also preserve the possibility that actors operating through regional and issue-specific subsystems may alter the order that constrains them.

In accordance with all this, the present book examines the socializing character of the international order, taking into account that the order characteristic of our contemporary world is not accidentally referred to as the “liberal world order.” This liberal world order was created by the United States (point 5) and, operating primarily as a subsystem during the Cold War (point 4), provided the possibility for European integration, for example, to emerge and develop.

Having emerged as a subsystem, the EU reconstructed the network of interests of its members (point 3), and then, together with the United States and from a dominant position, strengthened the liberal world order in the 1990s as a compromise among the self-interests of the remaining actors (point 2). Differences may persist even within the narrowly defined subsystem or liberal democratic core, ultimately arising from differences among internally formed interests and values (point 1).

Yet neither this nor an actor that appears as a violent challenger to the liberal order, such as Russia today (point 6), destabilizes the order. The order itself also changes continuously, but the last example of a paradigm shift occurred in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and neither China nor Russia is capable of offering an alternative possessing the “socializing” capacities characteristic of the liberal world order, or that were, to a certain degree, also characteristic of the Soviet Union within the Soviet bloc, that is, the Second World, and to a lesser extent in the Third World.

The outcome of the above is that the international order cannot be permanently anarchic because it changes, and this change not only modifies, or results from, the material distribution of power among actors, but also reflects changes in the internal and external interests of the actors, that is, socialization. It is, for example, difficult to imagine—although according to some it is not an impossible scenario—that parallel to a decline in the power of the United States or the failure of the EU, France and Germany would begin to view each other through the returning logic of the security dilemma and balance of power.

The persistence of such reconstructed relationships demonstrates why a change in the material distribution of power does not automatically return the international system to an earlier condition. Socialization does not eliminate anarchy, but it alters how actors interpret one another, how interests are formulated, and which forms of conduct are regarded as possible or legitimate.

The international system is the “knowledge center” constituted by the compromise emerging from the aggregate of interests, from which patterns explaining the behavior of actors may be “downloaded”, while the actors themselves also continuously “upload” elements in accordance with their interests. In other words, world order is the “Wikipedia” of the international system, which in the present case contains a preponderance of liberal content.

Wikipedia itself does not collapse if it is expanded with new content that may differ radically from what existed previously. The same analogy also demonstrates that, depending on the nature of the issue, different groups of content may be downloaded for particular issue areas, and these may provide significantly different answers. This corresponds to the issue-specific security complex formulated by us earlier (Marton et al., 2015), or to the sectoral approach associated with Barry Buzan (Buzan et al., 1998).

The analogy captures the principal SurRealist proposition. World order is not a single unchanging structure imposed from above, but neither is it simply the sum of entirely autonomous state actions. It is accumulated knowledge, practice, institutions, expectations, interests, and interpretations. It exists independently enough to constrain the actors that created it, while remaining open to their continuous modification.

The agenda of relations between the United States and the EU, more precisely the management of the items appearing on that agenda, contributes to changes in the liberal world order. Yet Central European cooperation with its strong regional socializing effect, namely the V4 as a subsystem, also genuinely influences, for example, how Hungary’s interests develop. Interests, however, are created internally, and therefore Hungary shapes the Central European compromise of interests; Central European interests, especially when they diverge, influence the functioning of the EU; and when they reach the EU–US agenda, they influence the liberal world order itself.

The system is therefore simultaneously constraining and constructed, anarchic and socialized, material and ideational, hierarchical and based upon sovereign

equality. These characteristics cannot be resolved into a theoretically pure order without losing essential parts of the phenomenon. Their simultaneous presence is not merely a contradiction in the analysis. It is the SurRealism of the international order itself.

PART II

5 The Transatlantic relations as the institutional core

5.1 The Transatlantic relations: the EU and the United States

Assumptions that were widely regarded as settled (Clausen & Albrecht, 2021)—including the predominance of Western-founded institutions, the continued expansion of globalization, the supposedly universal appeal of liberal norms, and the relative absence of major interstate conflict in Europe—have increasingly come into question. The return of great-power competition, the fragmentation of global governance, renewed geopolitical rivalry, and the emergence of new centers of power challenge the foundations of the international order that shaped European security and prosperity after the collapse of communism. Actually, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 only exposed vulnerabilities in the Transatlantic and the European security architecture that had already become visible earlier (Hoeffler et al., 2024). The war reaffirmed the importance of the alliance, but it also demonstrated Europe's continued dependence on external security guarantees and revealed serious shortcomings in defense capabilities, military readiness, energy security, and technological resilience (Csernaton, 2022). At the same time, the intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China increasingly structures global politics, economics, and technological development.

Within the EU, strategic autonomy has consequently become one of the central concepts of contemporary strategic thinking. Initially associated mainly with defense capabilities, it has gradually developed into a broader framework encompassing military, economic, technological, political, and institutional dimensions. Strategic autonomy now seeks to answer a fundamental question: how can Europe strengthen its capacity for independent action under the conditions of the emerging world order (Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022)? At the global level, strategic competition between the United States and China increasingly displays characteristics associated with bipolarity (J. S. Nye, 2023). At the regional

level, however, actors such as the European Union, Russia, India, Türkiye, and Japan exercise considerable influence within their respective strategic environments. Perhaps even more significantly, patterns of power distribution differ across military, economic, technological, institutional, and normative dimensions (Edström & Westberg, 2020).

This book understands these parallel patterns through the layered character of international order. Bipolar tendencies may dominate some dimensions of global competition, while regional and functional forms of multipolarity characterize others. States and regional organizations therefore operate in a more complicated environment in which power, influence, and dependence vary according to the geographical level and functional domain under consideration. The fragmentation of the liberal international order (Costa, 2026) does not mean that all its institutions are disappearing at the same speed or that power is being redistributed uniformly across the system.

Within this framework, European strategic autonomy should not be interpreted primarily as separation from the United States or as an attempt to replace NATO. It is better understood as an adaptation to a world in which the reliability, distribution, and availability of power have become less predictable. Strategic autonomy is the mechanism through which the EU seeks to preserve agency, reduce key vulnerabilities, and strengthen its capacity to act when necessary while maintaining its principal alliances and partnerships.

This makes the relationship between the European Union and the United States particularly significant. The liberal world order is a political project whose institutional managers and leading political actors define its rules, priorities, and agenda. Their interests appear in strategies that translate shared values and perceived common interests into practical policies. From a liberal perspective, the United States, which assisted at the birth of the order, and the European Union, which developed within and through that order, occupy an exceptional position in setting this agenda. The two actors are not identical, and their interests do not always coincide. Yet they share a belief in the existence, usefulness, and continued relevance of an institutionalized international order. Realist reasoning has never been alien to American foreign policy either. Even liberal administrations, including the Biden administration, were prepared to follow policies based on power, competition, and national interest. Biden's idea of a "world of democracies" was a distinctly liberal project (Rada, 2024b), but it also acknowledged the existence of actors outside this political and normative

community. Instead of assuming the automatic global expansion of liberal democracy, it sought to consolidate cooperation within the democratic world while accepting that relations with external powers would continue to be shaped by strategic competition.

According to the traditional understanding, world orders may emerge for different reasons, but their formation usually follows the collapse of a previous order during a major international crisis. The present institutional order was also the product of a particular historical moment created by the destruction of the Second World War. It was not, however, global at the time of its creation. Its institutions initially developed within the Western sphere and remained constrained by the bipolar structure of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union opened the way for the expansion of the liberal world order beyond its original political boundaries. This expansion occurred without a direct great-power war. The American-led order did not have to be constructed anew; it survived the Cold War and expanded. In this process, the liberal order was transformed from an internal system of rules regulating relations among a limited group of states into a broader external regulatory framework (Ikenberry, 2020).

Similar to earlier periods of hegemonic stability, the 1990s were described as a “Pax Americana.” Neoliberal economic principles and liberal internationalist institutions, largely left without systemic competitors, shaped international relations through what became known as the “Washington Consensus.” NATO expanded eastward, the European Union deepened and enlarged, the WTO and NAFTA were created, APEC acquired growing importance, and the principal institutions of the Bretton Woods system, the IMF and the World Bank, became genuinely global, although their original purposes had already been substantially modified during the 1970s. The number of democracies also expanded rapidly (Rada, 2011). In the 1990s China was still too weak and Russia had already become too weak to challenge American predominance directly. Both eventually joined the WTO, which Washington interpreted as evidence of the attraction and success of neoliberal principles. The implicit expectation was that economic integration would produce political convergence and strengthen acceptance of the rules of the existing order.

The momentum of the 1990s was not sustainable. Cracks became visible once the initial euphoria faded and the liberal world order failed to produce all the benefits expected from it. During the following three decades, successive crises

shook the international system, culminating most recently in the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's aggression against Ukraine. It is therefore unsurprising that arguments emphasizing the conflictual character of international politics and the declining effectiveness of the liberal order gained credibility even among states located within that order. The simultaneous crises weakened the political foundations of the liberal world order, particularly the institutions through which it operated. The promise that globalization would generate broadly shared prosperity also became increasingly difficult to sustain. In some respects, the order overexpanded. Its geographical and institutional reach widened, but cooperation became more fragile and often remained shallow. Membership in institutions did not necessarily produce agreement about their underlying political purposes. Unfortunately, the original bargain could not be extended successfully to either Russia or China. Both gradually emerged as anti-system challengers, although neither initially offered a fully developed institutional alternative. They nevertheless became strong enough to generate renewed demand for Western political and security cooperation. NATO, which could plausibly be regarded as an institution searching for a purpose during parts of the 1990s, acquired new relevance. American military alliances in Asia similarly gained new content in response to increasingly visible external threats.

The liberal world order would be an isolated bubble and an inward-looking project if it were unaffected by developments outside its institutional boundaries. The Western order exists within a wider international system and is continuously influenced by actors, crises, and shifts in power that it does not fully control. The central question is therefore not whether a separate liberal institutional sphere exists, but how its internal rules and relationships are affected by changes in the surrounding system.

Within the liberal order, one accepted proposition, which also serves as a point of departure for the EU-American agenda, is that internal conflicts can be managed transparently and institutionally. Disagreements are not treated as evidence that the order has ceased to exist. They are expected to be recognized, negotiated, and addressed within a shared framework. When conflicts arise with actors outside the order, internal cohesion becomes even more significant. According to conflict-management theory (Zartman, 1995), one of the main conditions of successful conflict management is recognition that a conflict exists and an understanding of the other side's interests, or at least its stated position regarding those interests. This requires honest communication. The parties must

then establish some commonly accepted understanding of the nature of the disagreement. At minimum, they must agree on what the conflict is about. Once such recognition has been achieved, conflicts of interest may be addressed through several mechanisms: compromise based on mutual concessions; linkage involving the interdependent implementation of several agreements; side payments offering material or moral compensation; joint ownership of the object or benefits involved in the conflict; guarantees supplied by a third party; non-decision, when an acknowledged disagreement is temporarily postponed; unilateral concessions made in the interest of preserving the broader relationship; or the creation of an opportunity that allows both parties to achieve a more beneficial outcome than either originally expected.

EU-US relations offer a particularly useful setting in which to examine this logic. The relationship is characterized by deep institutionalization and extensive interdependence, but it has never been free of conflict. The existence of disputes over trade, security, technology, burden-sharing, regulation, and relations with third countries does not by itself undermine the transatlantic order. What matters is whether the parties continue to manage these disagreements within a framework they both regard as legitimate. The broader American-European structure of transatlantic cooperation, whose principal security institution is the NATO, illustrates this dynamic clearly. From the earliest years of the Cold War, and already during the Korean War, NATO's history was accompanied by disputes over burden-sharing. The United States expected its allies to contribute more substantially to their own defense, preferably through levels of spending comparable to the proportion of GDP devoted to defense by the United States (Oneal, 1990). The reasoning appeared straightforward. Counterbalancing the Soviet Union and, after 1955, the Warsaw Pact required cooperation among the Western states. Since a conventional offensive from the East would first have threatened European territory, Washington expected the European members of NATO to make a proportionate contribution to their own defense. The United States, protected by its geographical "ocean shield," faced a less immediate conventional threat, although it remained exposed to ballistic missiles and nuclear conflict. American military involvement in Europe resulted from a political commitment to defend its allies, reinforced by the permanent stationing of American forces on European territory. Maintaining these capabilities required the United States to devote resources to defense that could otherwise have been used for domestic purposes. European partners faced a similar trade-off, but

many were reluctant to reduce the social expenditures associated with the post-war welfare state in order to increase military budgets.

Researchers at the RAND Corporation later developed an explanation that remained influential in the literature for a long time (Marton et al., 2015). According to this argument, relatively small members of an alliance have an incentive to rely disproportionately on the capabilities of the largest member. This is particularly likely when smaller states cannot achieve the alliance's strategic objectives through independent action. Because credible deterrence can be maintained only together with the dominant ally, smaller states may gradually outsource a substantial part of their security guarantee to the patron. Once the major ally has assumed the largest share of the burden, smaller members may have an incentive to contribute less to the common effort. This produces a morally unfavorable interpretation of small-state behavior, often described as free-riding. Yet several counterarguments must be considered.

At various moments during the Cold War, European allies believed that the risk of confrontation with the Soviet Union was partly increased by American pressure on Moscow (Leffler, 1985). The geopolitical positions of Western states also differed significantly. Portugal, for example, had considerably less reason to fear a Soviet conventional attack than West Germany. Threat perceptions were therefore never uniform across the alliance. It is also misleading to assume that every part of American, British, or French defense expenditure was devoted to counterbalancing the Soviet threat in Europe. Throughout the Cold War, these states possessed substantial global interests and frequently deployed their armed forces outside Europe, including in the postcolonial world. Such operations sometimes contributed indirectly to European security, but often served wider national interests (Mastny, 2002). It was therefore not entirely fair to place the whole of these countries' defense expenditure on the common NATO account. The United States and the larger European powers were justified in raising concerns about unequal burden-sharing, but the precise degree of inequality could not be established objectively or consensually. Every NATO member possessed its own arguments, although the alliance repeatedly attempted to create shared standards for comparing national contributions.

This debate did not disappear after the Cold War. It became more complicated because the strategic environment and the purpose of the alliance were themselves changing. Over the past three decades, several developments functioned as turning points: the end of the Cold War in 1989, the terrorist

attacks of 2001, the global economic crisis of 2008–2009, the migration crisis that culminated in Europe in 2015, the election of Donald Trump in 2016, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Rada & Stepper, 2019).

Traditional and nontraditional security problems now coexist (Rada, 2026). Russian aggression against Ukraine, China's increasing pressure in the South China Sea, the Iranian nuclear issue, and North Korea represent familiar geopolitical challenges. State failure in the Middle East, the emergence of ISIS, migration, economic instability, cybersecurity, climate change, health crises, and energy insecurity follow different logics. Together, they call into question the effectiveness of an institutional architecture created under very different historical circumstances. The international security system increasingly appears outdated and often incapable of responding effectively to these overlapping challenges. This has produced repeated tensions within the transatlantic alliance. The Cold War ended in 1989, but even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 there was no single event forcing the institutions of the international system to undergo comprehensive reform. The Warsaw Pact disappeared, while NATO survived and searched for new tasks.

During the 1990s, it appeared that traditional interstate war was becoming less likely, particularly in Europe. Security institutions increasingly prepared for civil wars, state collapse, peacekeeping, crisis management, and humanitarian intervention, drawing lessons from Yugoslavia and conflicts in Africa. Security policy turned toward "new types of challenges" (Rada, 2019) while many assumed that the traditional problems of the twentieth century had receded. This is one of the paradoxes of the twenty-first century. It brought back the geopolitical challenges that the international security system had originally been designed to manage, yet Western institutions appeared unprepared for their return. This is what Kaplan (Kaplan, 2013) described as the revenge of geography. Before the Russian aggression of 2014, despite the warning provided by the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, many European governments continued to behave as though history had ended and major wars belonged to the past (Larsen, 2012). European powers proved unable to provide an adequate response to Russia's actions while simultaneously facing the consequences of the global economic crisis, the migration wave, and growing internal tensions within the EU.

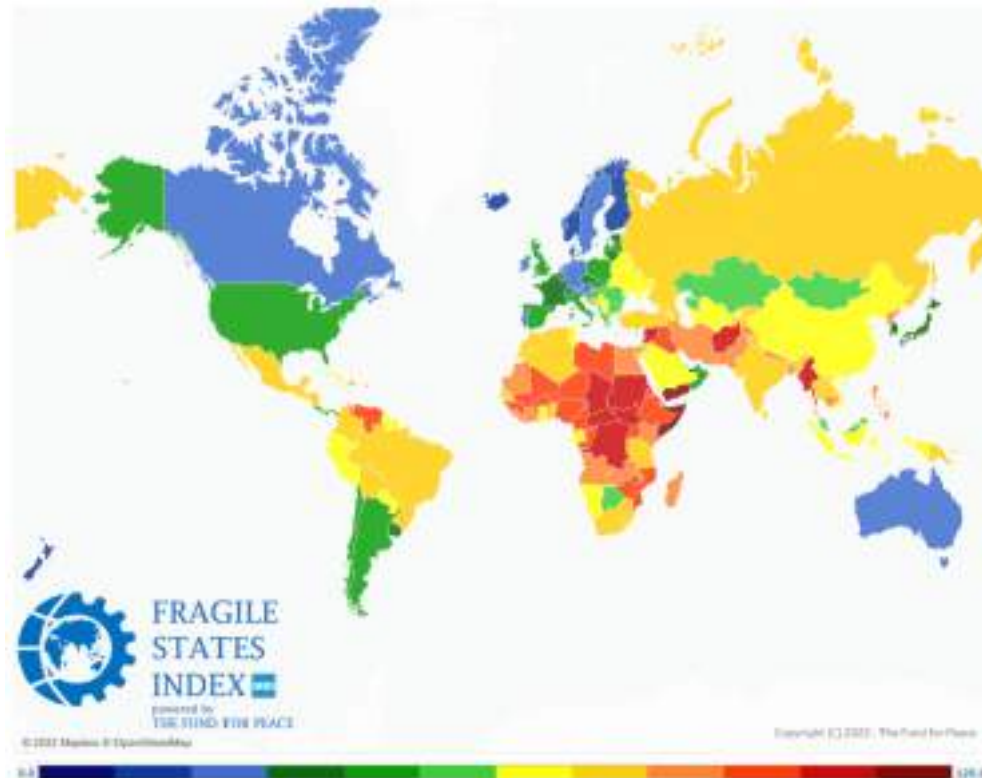
The Union confronted the withdrawal of one of its member states, continued instability in the euro area, institutional disputes, and political divisions regarding migration, sovereignty, and solidarity. These crises consumed political attention at the same time that external security conditions were deteriorating. After 1991, Russia appeared to return to international relations as a participant in the existing system. The relative peace of the 1990s, however, encouraged complacency in both Europe and the United States. “Hard” security challenges appeared to belong to the past, or at least to regions outside Europe. Western actors therefore concentrated increasingly on “new types” of challenges (Rada, 2007b) and, in Joseph Nye’s terminology, “soft” challenges (J. Nye, 2005). The EU benefited from the “peace dividend,” but it also allowed military capabilities and strategic readiness to decline while warning signs were already visible.

The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 did not bring traditional military problems back into existence. It demonstrated that they had never disappeared. In the volume *Biztonságpolitikai Corvinák* co-authored in 2008 (Rada, 2008), perhaps somewhat optimistically, we identified as the most significant security challenges those problems that could not be managed through traditional instruments and gave insufficient attention to conventional political-military conflict. It has since become clear that the “new” challenges—including terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, health-related threats, cybersecurity, and energy insecurity—remain central to contemporary security. Yet their rise did not mark the end of interstate rivalry or armed conflict. A new volume of *Biztonságpolitikai Corvinák* appeared in a similar format in 2019 (Rada, 2019). It acknowledged the return of geopolitical competition, but it could not foresee the consequences of Covid-19 or the transformation of the conflict in Ukraine into a full-scale war.

By 2020, it was already evident that rising powers were testing the established order (Grygiel & Mitchell, 2017). Russia had become central (as a challenge) in European security, Syria, and the post-Soviet space. China, however peaceful its official rhetoric appeared, continuously generated tensions with neighboring states in the South China Sea. The Iranian nuclear agreement appeared to offer a negotiated solution in 2015, yet the United States withdrew from it in 2018. These developments also exposed domestic political changes within the Western world. Many Europeans received the election of Donald Trump in 2016 with surprise (Edwards et al., 2017), although similar processes were visible across Europe. Political institutions and established parties appeared increasingly

detached from the everyday concerns of voters. Demands for disruption and political change were therefore present on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States, this dissatisfaction was captured by the Trumpian promise to “drain the swamp.”

The emergence of such movements does not mean that the European or Western political system has ceased to be valid. It does, however, require a reconsideration of claims concerning its universal applicability. Since 2005, the Fund for Peace has published an annual index assessing state fragility. Over time, the list of poorly performing states expanded, raising an uncomfortable question: did state capacity deteriorate across much of the world, or were the criteria being used to evaluate statehood built too closely around Western institutional expectations? Maps (see Figure 5) based on such indicators often suggested that Europe and North America were among the few regions capable of consistently satisfying the standards of effective statehood. From a Western perspective, this may appear flattering. Analytically, however, it raises doubts about whether the criteria describe the world as it is or merely measure the extent to which other societies resemble Western political and institutional models.



5. Figure: Fragile states index. Source: The Fund for Peace 2026

It had already become clear more than a decade ago that the security architecture created after the Second World War could not manage many challenges of the twenty-first century. Today, the need for revision is even more difficult to dispute. Debates frequently become centered on terminology—whether the system should be described as liberal, Western, rules-based, or American-led—but the underlying problem remains unchanged. The existing order no longer responds adequately to the full range of challenges confronting it. Questions about the future role of the United States had already appeared by the end of the first decade of the century. “America First” did not emerge from nothing. During Barack Obama’s presidency, there was already substantial domestic pressure for the United States to reduce its international commitments and concentrate on economic and social problems at home. Many interpreted this as the end of the post-Cold War unilateral moment and the return of a more competitive international system.

China was not yet strong enough to replace the United States, while Russia possessed sufficient capabilities to disrupt regional and international politics without being able to construct an alternative global order. Russia’s decision to invade Ukraine in 2022 reflected, in part, its determination to convert its remaining military and geopolitical capabilities into political influence. China may eventually become a more comprehensive challenger, but this does not mean that American power will disappear in the foreseeable future. Donald Trump’s foreign-policy objectives indicated that Washington had grown dissatisfied with the costs of acting as the principal security provider of the Western order (Richter, 2021). The United States did not wish to bear the main burden of confronting terrorism while European governments struggled to control migration. It was even less willing to respond to renewed military threats while NATO allies remained reluctant to increase defense spending. The shortcomings of the assumptions underlying this burden-sharing debate have already been discussed, but the political force of the argument cannot be ignored.

The broader pattern crosses party-political boundaries. During the 2000s, the United States overextended itself and became increasingly exhausted by prolonged military commitments. After the intervention in Iraq in 2003, Washington often had more critics than supporters. Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden (and Trump) all faced the same underlying question: how could the United States remain the leading actor in world politics without continuing to bear a disproportionate share of the financial, political, and military costs? From this

perspective, Trump did not create the underlying demand for retrenchment. He expressed it in a more direct and transactional form. A substantial section of American society had grown dissatisfied with paying what it perceived as the costs of maintaining a Western liberal order in an increasingly hostile world. Trump's argument was that the order imposed financial and strategic constraints on the United States without producing proportionate benefits. This did not result in a complete American withdrawal (Mitchell, 2026). The United States maintains a global military presence and remained involved in almost every strategically significant region. Yet American leaders increasingly demanded that allies contribute more and that regional actors assume greater responsibility for their own security. Trump's attempts to establish more direct relations with adversaries did not reflect trust. They followed a realist approach that placed narrowly defined American interests and available resources at the center of foreign policy.

Another trend of the past decade has been the remilitarization of international relations. Traditional conflicts returned while the international community remained unable to manage either them or the newer security problems developing alongside them. The migration crisis of 2015 demonstrated the connection between conflict, state failure, economic inequality, and political instability. It also revealed the EU's difficulty in producing a comprehensive response to crises that combine internal and external dimensions (Rada, 2024a). In 2009, American foreign policy increasingly suggested that the era of large-scale democracy promotion and state-building was ending, that governments would have to assume greater responsibility for their own security, and that the American presence abroad would gradually decline. The Arab Spring disrupted these expectations. The United States no longer wished to remain present everywhere to the same degree, but it proved unable to withdraw completely. The reduction of American engagement nevertheless created opportunities for regional challengers to expand their influence (Grygiel & Mitchell, 2017). Barack Obama already sought to involve allies more extensively in the costs of sustaining the international order and placed pressure on partners to assume a greater share of responsibility. The multilateral agreements of this period, including the Paris climate agreement and the agreement on Iran's nuclear program, reflected an effort to distribute burdens through institutional cooperation. The Trump administration later withdrew from both arrangements, arguing that multilateral commitments imposed disproportionate restrictions on American policy. At the same time, Trump sought bilateral agreements with

adversaries, as illustrated by his meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Europe's position is particularly difficult within this evolving system (González Levaggi et al., 2025). The EU has experienced successive internal crises since 2009, while the transatlantic alliance has been required to reinterpret its mission. International law and the existing security architecture have repeatedly proved incapable of managing emerging conflicts or of providing a reliable framework through which Western actors could maintain order. The character of conflict has also changed. Traditional military threats coexist with hybrid operations, cyber warfare, economic coercion, disinformation, technological competition, and pressure against critical infrastructure. The distinction between security and economics has consequently become less clear. Supply chains, energy dependence, technological standards, investment controls, and industrial capabilities are now matters of strategic power. The international business environment and multinational corporations have continued to expand despite recurring political crises. Their development is not a precise measure of political stability, but investment patterns provide an indication of the distribution of future economic and technological power. Current trends suggest an increasing concentration of capabilities in the United States and China, while Europe risks falling behind in investment, innovation, and strategic industries.

In this context, "America First" is understandable as a response to American domestic and strategic pressures, but the transformation of the international system may be more dangerous for Europe. The United States possesses the military, technological, financial, and political resources required to pursue a more selective international role. Europe remains dependent on external capabilities in several of these areas while also facing internal difficulties that limit collective action.

China, by contrast, has been able to follow longer strategic cycles and to use divisions within the Western world to strengthen its relative position. Chinese strategy is less constrained by electoral cycles and can connect economic policy, technological development, infrastructure, and foreign relations within longer-term planning. This does not make Chinese power unlimited, but it increases the pressure on both the United States and the EU to define the purposes and limits of their cooperation.

The institutional core of the liberal order should therefore be understood as transatlantic, but not because the United States and Europe form a completely

unified political actor. It is a core precisely because the relationship contains the principal political, economic, military, and normative mechanisms through which the order is maintained, contested, and adjusted. NATO provides the main framework of collective defense, while the EU and the United States together retain considerable influence over global finance, trade, regulation, technology, and institutional standards. The future of this core will depend on how the two sides manage their internal disagreements while responding to pressure from outside the order. Europe's pursuit of greater autonomy and the American demand for more equal burden-sharing do not have to be mutually exclusive. Both may form part of the same adjustment: a stronger European capacity could reduce asymmetries within the alliance while allowing the United States to share responsibilities more evenly.

The relationship nevertheless contains a persistent tension. The United States seeks to retain leadership without carrying all the costs of the order, while the EU seeks greater agency without losing the security and political benefits of American engagement. Understanding this tension is necessary because the durability of the institutional core depends less on the absence of conflict between its members than on their continuing ability to recognize, negotiate, and manage that conflict within a common framework. The main structural change is that the section now ends directly with the analytical tension that the following subchapters can examine: American leadership without unlimited responsibility, and European autonomy without transatlantic separation.

5.2 Europe inside the Liberal World Order

5.2.1 Strategic autonomy reconsidered

Few concepts have gained as much prominence in recent European debates as strategic autonomy (Fiott, 2018). The concept emerged from a simple reality: Europe's security has long depended on the United States. During the Cold War, this dependence was largely unquestioned. NATO provided the principal security guarantee, while European integration focused primarily on economic reconstruction, political cooperation, and the gradual institutionalization of relations among European states. The division of labor appeared clear. The United States provided the central military capabilities required to deter the Soviet Union, while Western Europe developed the economic and political foundations of what would later become the European Union.

The post-Cold War period initially appeared to confirm that this arrangement could continue indefinitely. American military predominance remained unchallenged, NATO survived the disappearance of the threat against which it had originally been created, and European integration deepened and expanded. The development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy suggested that Europe could gradually acquire a more visible international role without fundamentally altering the transatlantic balance. Several developments increasingly challenged this assumption. The Balkan conflicts exposed Europe's limited ability to manage crises in its own neighborhood. European governments possessed diplomatic influence and economic resources, but they lacked the necessary military capabilities, institutional coordination, and political unity required to end the conflicts without decisive American involvement. Later operations in Afghanistan and Libya revealed persistent capability gaps and demonstrated the limits of European military action even when several member states were politically willing to intervene. More importantly, the global financial crisis, Russia's annexation of Crimea, Brexit, and growing uncertainty surrounding American foreign policy forced European leaders to reconsider Europe's strategic position. The debate intensified after 2016, and again today, as concerns about the future of transatlantic relations became increasingly visible in the volatile and sometimes openly confrontational statements coming from the Trump administration. These concerns were not limited to questions of tone or diplomatic style. They raised a more fundamental issue: whether Europe

could continue to assume that American commitments, priorities, and strategic preferences would always remain aligned with European interests.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine eventually accelerated this trend. The war reaffirmed NATO's central role and the indispensability of American military support. Without the United States, Europe would have faced far greater difficulties in supplying Ukraine, strengthening NATO's eastern flank, providing intelligence, and maintaining credible deterrence. At the same time, the conflict exposed European vulnerabilities in defense production, energy security, critical technologies, logistics, and supply chains. The war therefore produced an apparent paradox. It strengthened the transatlantic alliance while simultaneously making the pursuit of greater European autonomy more urgent. It demonstrated that Europe continued to depend on the United States, but also that this dependence could itself become a strategic vulnerability. Strategic autonomy is best understood as an attempt to address this paradox rather than to resolve it by choosing between dependence and separation.

The discussion of strategic autonomy is often shaped more by political perceptions (Varma, 2024) than by analytical clarity. As a result, the concept is frequently misunderstood. It is sometimes presented as a proposal for European neutrality, military independence from NATO, protectionism, or political distancing from Washington. These interpretations obscure the practical purpose of autonomy.

In our understanding, strategic autonomy does not mean isolation. In a highly interconnected world, complete independence is neither realistic nor desirable. European prosperity, security, innovation, and political influence all depend on international cooperation. The objective is not to eliminate interdependence but to reduce excessive vulnerabilities and avoid situations in which external actors can exert disproportionate influence over European decisions. Such influence may come from adversaries and competitors, but under certain conditions it can also come from the United States (Walt, 2026). This latter observation does not make strategic autonomy an anti-American project. The United States remains Europe's most important security partner, and NATO continues to be the cornerstone of European defense. European countries are unlikely to reproduce the full range of American military, technological, intelligence, financial, and logistical capabilities in the foreseeable future. Nor would it necessarily be efficient for them to do so. Strategic autonomy should therefore not be

understood as the complete replication of American power at the European level.

The central question is instead whether Europe can possess sufficient capabilities to make meaningful political choices of its own. Dependence becomes strategically problematic when it removes the possibility of choice. An actor is not autonomous when it can act only if another actor provides the necessary resources, information, technology, authorization, or political support. This distinction is particularly important in Central Europe, where American engagement remains indispensable for security (Nyilas, 2025a). States located closer to Russia tend to regard American military presence not as an obstacle to European autonomy but as its necessary foundation. From this perspective, greater European capabilities should reinforce the transatlantic alliance rather than weaken it. Autonomy means being able to contribute more effectively to collective security and to act when American support is limited, delayed, or directed elsewhere.

Strategic autonomy should also not be confused with sovereignty. Sovereignty concerns formal independence, political authority, and the legal right to make decisions. Strategic autonomy focuses on something more practical: whether an actor possesses the capabilities required to implement those decisions without excessive external constraints. A state or political organization may be formally sovereign while remaining highly dependent on other actors for energy, finance, security, technology, or industrial production. At its core, strategic autonomy is therefore about preserving political agency. It is the ability to formulate preferences, make decisions, and pursue objectives. Autonomy does not require complete freedom from external influence, which no actor possesses. It requires sufficient freedom of action to prevent dependence from becoming subordination.

Autonomy has several interconnected dimensions. The first is political autonomy: the ability to define strategic priorities independently and resist excessive external pressure. Political autonomy does not imply that decisions should be made without consultation with partners. It means that cooperation should result from political choice rather than from the absence of alternatives. The second dimension is military autonomy. This concerns the possession of sufficient capabilities, industrial capacity, readiness, command structures, and logistical resources to contribute credibly to defense and crisis management. Military autonomy does not necessarily mean that Europe must be able to

conduct every type of operation without the United States. It means that Europe should be able to defend its interests, support its partners, and respond to crises at a level proportionate to its economic weight and security responsibilities. The third dimension is economic autonomy. Trade, sanctions, currencies, payment systems, supply chains, investment, and market access have increasingly become instruments of geopolitical competition. Economic resilience is therefore no longer merely a question of prosperity or efficiency; it has become a strategic asset. Excessive dependence on a single market, supplier, currency, transport route, or source of critical raw materials can constrain political action. The fourth dimension is technological autonomy. Competition over semiconductors, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, telecommunications, space capabilities, cloud infrastructure, and digital platforms demonstrates that technological leadership has become a critical source of power. Technological dependence can create military, economic, and political vulnerabilities at the same time. An actor unable to control or influence the technologies on which its society and economy depend may possess formal sovereignty but limited practical autonomy. The fifth dimension is institutional autonomy. In a fragmented international environment, the ability to shape rules, standards, procedures, and governance frameworks remains an important source of influence. This is one of the areas in which the EU continues to possess considerable strength. Through the size of its market and the regulatory power of its institutions, the Union has been able to influence global standards in areas ranging from competition policy and environmental regulation to consumer protection and data governance.

These dimensions are closely connected. Military strength depends on industrial and technological capacity. Economic resilience influences political choice. Institutional influence requires market power, resources, legitimacy, and internal cohesion. Technological development depends on investment, energy, education, infrastructure, and access to raw materials. Strategic autonomy therefore cannot be reduced to one sector. It is an integrated capability.

This is why narrow debates over whether Europe possesses a “European army” or whether member states spend a particular percentage of GDP on defense capture only part of the problem. Defense expenditure is important, but additional resources do not automatically create strategic autonomy. Expenditure must be translated into interoperable forces, industrial production, ammunition stocks, logistical capabilities, technological development, and political willingness to act. Similarly, economic power alone does not guarantee

autonomy. Europe may possess one of the largest markets in the world but remain vulnerable if key technologies, energy supplies, digital platforms, or financial instruments are controlled elsewhere. Regulatory influence is significant, but regulation cannot indefinitely substitute for innovation, production, and investment. In a world where power is distributed across multiple levels and functional domains, vulnerabilities in one area can rapidly affect performance in another. Energy dependence can constrain foreign policy. Technological dependence can weaken military capabilities. Financial dependence can limit the effectiveness of sanctions. Political fragmentation can undermine institutional influence. The layered distribution of power therefore produces layered forms of dependence.

For Europe, this creates a specific dilemma. The EU has long been regarded as an economic giant and a regulatory superpower with significant diplomatic influence, while at the same time being described as a military dwarf. This description is simplified, but it captures a genuine imbalance. The Union possesses substantial economic resources, institutional influence, and rule-making capacity, yet it remains dependent on external security guarantees and faces vulnerabilities in critical technologies, defense production, energy, and supply chains. The EU is therefore simultaneously powerful and dependent. It is powerful in some functional layers of the international system and comparatively weak in others. Its ability to shape international order varies according to the domain being examined. In trade and regulation, Europe may act as one of the principal poles of the system. In territorial defense, strategic intelligence, nuclear deterrence, and certain advanced technologies, it remains heavily dependent on the United States.

From this perspective, strategic autonomy is the European response to layered polarity. It is not a rejection of alliances or interdependence. It is an effort to manage them from a position of greater strength, resilience, and agency. The objective is not to transform Europe into a self-contained great power but to reduce the gap between its economic and institutional influence and its capacity for strategic action.

Strategic autonomy also reflects Europe's changing position inside the liberal world order. The EU was one of the principal beneficiaries of the order, but it was not its original military guarantor. European integration developed under American protection and within an international environment structured by American power. This allowed Europe to concentrate on internal integration,

economic development, legal institutionalization, and the expansion of the welfare state.

The success of this arrangement created a particular form of European power. The EU became influential not by reproducing the attributes of a traditional great power but by transforming economic interdependence, legal regulation, conditionality, enlargement, and institutional membership into instruments of external influence. It projected power primarily through rules, incentives, access, and attraction (Pace, 2007). This model was particularly effective in an international environment in which the expansion of liberal institutions appeared likely to continue and major military competition seemed to be declining. It is less clearly suited to a world characterized by sanctions, coercive interdependence, territorial revisionism, military threats, and technological rivalry. Strategic autonomy is therefore also an attempt to adapt the European model of power to an environment that has become less permissive.

5.2.2 Foreign policy behind the Liberal World Order

To understand the importance of the concluding dilemma of the previous chapter, it is necessary to examine more deeply the foreign-policy traditions and characteristics of the two principal actors of the transatlantic core, treating the EU for analytical purposes as a single entity. Their relations cannot be understood solely through the distribution of capabilities. It is also shaped by different historical experiences, political institutions, strategic cultures, and assumptions about the use of power. One of the best-known and most frequently cited observations is that of Robert Kagan, the influential neoconservative thinker associated with the administration of George W. Bush. Kagan argued that, regardless of Washington's attempts to win over its European allies and deepen its strategic relationship with the EU, fundamental obstacles limited the extent of strategic convergence. As he famously put it, "Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus" (Kagan, 2004).

Although the phrase and analogy were widely criticized, many adopted the basic argument and concluded that EU–United States strategic relations faced inherent limits because of fundamentally different worldviews. The United States was portrayed as more willing to use military force, more skeptical of institutional limitations, and more comfortable with traditional power politics. Europe, by contrast, was presented as more dependent on law, diplomacy, economic

instruments, and multilateral institutions. The immediate background to this debate was the United States' Iraq policy and the invasion of 2003, which produced one of the most visible transatlantic divisions of the post-Cold War period. Yet this division did not emerge simply between the EU and the United States. Several EU member states supported American policy in the Middle East, while others opposed it. The conflict therefore also revealed divisions within Europe itself.

The more enduring contradiction was—and remains—the lack of mutual understanding concerning the traditions from which American and European foreign policy emerge. Such understanding cannot be complete without knowledge of the historical and institutional experiences that shape decision-making. The influence of traditions should not be overstated, but neither should it be neglected. Particularly during complex and difficult-to-interpret events, foreign-policy traditions provide the mental compass toward which decision-makers consciously, or simply out of habit, orient themselves (Marton, 2013).

The American foreign-policy tradition developed within the political experience of a sovereign federal state possessing significant military, economic, and technological capabilities. Although American foreign policy has always included both liberal and realist elements, it has generally assumed that political objectives must ultimately be supported by material power. Even when Washington acts through institutions and alliances, it tends to understand those institutions partly as instruments through which American leadership can be organized and legitimized.

The European Union emerged from a very different historical process. It developed through the deliberate limitation and pooling of national sovereignty, the institutionalization of compromise, and the replacement of power politics among its members with rules and negotiated procedures. The European experience therefore created a political culture in which institutionalized cooperation is not merely an instrument of policy but part of the Union's own identity. In the traditional foreign-policy sense, the EU is not a coherent great power. Based on the literature, it could more accurately be described as a "soft superpower", a normative power, a civilian power, or a regulatory power (Pace, 2007). Each concept highlights a different aspect of European influence, but all point toward the same basic characteristic: the EU exercises power primarily through economic resources, institutions, regulations, negotiations,

enlargement, development assistance, and conditionality rather than through centralized military force.

The EU Global Strategy (EU, 2016) identifies multidimensional challenges as threats to which multisectoral institutional responses must be provided. Using the “Venus–Mars” analogy, one could say that the EU interprets the world primarily through a constructivist and institutionalist lens, whereas the United States more readily combines liberal objectives with realist instruments. This distinction should not be treated as absolute. The United States has been one of the principal creators of international institutions, and European states have repeatedly used military force. Nevertheless, the two sides differ in how they define legitimate power, how they organize decision-making, and how easily they can connect political objectives to coercive instruments.

European constructivism is most clearly manifested in the fact that EU foreign policy cannot be separated from the foreign policies of its member states. The Union does not possess a unified political center comparable to the federal executive of the United States. Its foreign policy emerges through interaction among European institutions and national governments, each of which possesses its own historical experiences, geopolitical interests, and domestic political constraints. Consequently, at the EU level, those issues are most likely to become dominant in foreign policy that are regarded as important by a sufficiently broad group of member states. These issues must be translated into commonly accepted priorities despite the different and sometimes conflicting interests found in national foreign policies. In security terms, they must be constructed as shared or overlapping issue-specific security complexes (Marton et al., 2015). This is an important observation because EU foreign policy lacks supranational and traditionally understood “hard power” instruments comparable to those of a state. Military capabilities remain predominantly national. Decisions concerning their use depend on national governments, and strategic priorities are not always aligned. The Union may formulate common positions but often has difficulty translating them into rapid and unified action.

At the same time, the EU unquestionably satisfies many of the criteria associated with normative power. By virtue of its existence, institutional development, and economic success, it presents itself as a political model. Its foreign policy is articulated through values that also justify the existence of the Union itself: democracy, the rule of law, human rights, multilateralism, peaceful conflict resolution, and economic interdependence (Simms, 2012). Normative power is

not simply rhetorical. It can produce material and political effects when the EU controls access to benefits desired by other actors. The prospect of membership, access to the single market, financial assistance, visa liberalization, trade preferences, and institutional cooperation can all influence the behavior of neighboring states.

This influence has been most visible in the EU's immediate neighborhood. Enlargement transformed the political and economic structures of Central and Eastern Europe. Conditionality encouraged institutional reform, legal adaptation, and economic restructuring. The EU's power was strongest where external actors wished to become part of the European institutional space. Since 1992, the EU has developed a visible Common Foreign and Security Policy. Such a policy was still largely absent during the Balkan wars, when the gap between European political ambitions and practical capabilities became particularly obvious. Over the following decades, however, the EU became visibly involved in political and economic transition processes throughout its neighborhood and was able to influence those developments significantly in the direction of EU values (Rynning, 2011). The development of the Common Security and Defence Policy, the establishment of the European External Action Service, the creation of the position of High Representative, and the adoption of successive security strategies gave European foreign policy greater institutional visibility. Civilian and military missions also demonstrated that the EU could act internationally, particularly in crisis management, institution-building, training, monitoring, and post-conflict stabilization.

Greater debate surrounds the extent to which the foreign policies of the member states have converged and whether it is possible to speak of a genuinely common European strategic culture (Krotz & Maher, 2011). Member states continue to interpret threats differently. Geography, history, military capability, colonial experience, economic interests, energy dependence, and relations with the United States all shape national preferences.

For countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Russia has traditionally represented the most immediate security concern. Southern European states have often placed greater emphasis on instability, migration, and conflict in the Mediterranean and North Africa. France has maintained a stronger preference for strategic autonomy and an independent European role, while Atlanticist states have tended to emphasize NATO and American engagement. These differences do not prevent cooperation, but they limit the speed and depth of

integration in foreign and security policy. European strategic culture is therefore not a fully unified set of assumptions. It is better understood as an emerging framework formed through negotiation among different national strategic cultures.

This framework cannot be separated from transatlantic cooperation. European security institutions, military planning, technological standards, intelligence relations, and defense policies developed in close connection with NATO and the United States. It is therefore no coincidence that European and transatlantic foreign- and security-policy institutions are both similar and deeply interconnected. Strategic autonomy must operate within this institutional reality. Europe cannot simply detach its emerging strategic culture from the alliance structures through which European defense has been organized for more than seven decades. Nor can it ignore the different threat perceptions of its own member states. Any viable European autonomy must reconcile greater capacity for action with the continued importance of NATO.

Regarding the EU, there is still considerable debate over whether its foreign policy can be interpreted as unified (González Levaggi et al., 2025). Consequently, the literature is less consolidated than that devoted to the analysis of American foreign policy. The traditional point of departure for understanding both the development of the EU's common foreign policy and the norms it follows remains the set of values enshrined in the EU treaties.

These treaty-based values are significant because they provide the formal language through which national interests must be translated into common European positions. Even when member states pursue interests that are geopolitical or economic in nature, EU decisions are usually justified through a vocabulary of democracy, law, human rights, multilateralism, stability, and cooperation.

This does not mean that European policy is free of material interests or power calculations. The EU is not merely a normative actor, and its values cannot be separated entirely from its institutional and economic interests. Enlargement, trade agreements, sanctions, regulatory policy, development cooperation, and neighborhood policy all combine normative objectives with strategic calculations.

The distinction from the United States is therefore one of emphasis rather than complete opposition. The United States also uses institutions, norms, and economic incentives, while the EU increasingly employs sanctions, border

instruments, defense cooperation, and economic security policies. Nevertheless, the EU remains more dependent on internal consensus and institutional legitimacy, whereas the United States possesses a greater ability to formulate and implement policy through centralized executive authority.

This difference shapes the position of Europe inside the liberal world order. The United States has traditionally functioned as the principal provider of security and the leading geopolitical actor of the order. The EU has functioned as its most developed institutional expression. The American contribution is associated more directly with military power, deterrence, alliance leadership, and global strategic presence. The European contribution is associated with regulation, institutionalization, economic integration, and the transformation of relations among states through common rules.

The two roles are complementary, but they also generate recurring tensions. American policymakers frequently criticize Europe for lacking military capabilities, avoiding geopolitical responsibility, and relying too heavily on American protection. European policymakers often criticize the United States for unilateralism, excessive reliance on coercive instruments, and insufficient respect for institutional constraints.

The debate over strategic autonomy brings these tensions together. From an American perspective, autonomy may appear as an attempt to duplicate NATO, exclude American companies, or weaken transatlantic solidarity. From a European perspective, resistance to autonomy may appear as an attempt to preserve European dependence and American political influence. Neither interpretation fully captures the structural problem. The EU cannot develop genuine strategic agency without increasing its capabilities. The United States cannot indefinitely demand greater European responsibility while opposing every form of European capacity that might reduce American control. A more balanced relationship requires accepting that a stronger Europe will sometimes pursue preferences that do not completely coincide with those of Washington.

The practical question is therefore not whether Europe should choose between autonomy and alliance. It is how autonomy can be developed within the alliance without becoming either empty rhetoric or strategic separation. European autonomy will remain limited if it is not supported by capabilities, resources, and political cohesion. Transatlantic cooperation will remain unstable if it depends on permanent asymmetry and the assumption that European preferences must ultimately adjust to American decisions.

Europe's place inside the institutional core is consequently defined by a dual condition. The EU is one of the principal creators, beneficiaries, and defenders of the liberal order, but it has never possessed the same degree of strategic independence as the United States. It shapes many of the rules of the order while depending on American power for the defense of the political space in which those rules operate.

Strategic autonomy is an attempt to reduce this imbalance. It seeks to preserve the transatlantic core by making it less dependent on one-sided capability distribution. A Europe capable of acting more effectively would not necessarily weaken the liberal order. It could strengthen its institutional core by making cooperation more reciprocal, distributing burdens more evenly, and increasing the capacity of the transatlantic partners to respond to different challenges simultaneously. The success of this effort will depend on whether Europe can transform its economic and regulatory weight into broader strategic capacity without abandoning the institutional and normative characteristics that constitute its distinctive form of power. It will also depend on whether the United States is prepared to accept a more capable Europe not only as a contributor to American priorities but as an actor possessing preferences and interests of its own.

The central dilemma is therefore not whether Europe belongs inside the liberal world order. Its institutions, political identity, and international influence are inseparable from that order. The real question is what kind of actor Europe can become within its institutional core: a primarily civilian and regulatory power protected by the United States, or a more autonomous strategic actor that remains allied with Washington while acquiring a greater ability to define and defend its own priorities.

5.3 The United States in the core

5.3.1 American primacy and the Liberal World Order

Since the Second World War, the United States has been the world's leading great power, and it further consolidated this position after the end of the Cold War. This leadership role has generated numerous contradictions in how the United States is perceived, yet maintaining primacy has remained an explicit objective of successive American leaders (Walt, 2011). Although the methods, rhetoric, and preferred instruments of American administrations have differed considerably, none has willingly accepted the emergence of an international system in which the United States would become merely one great power among several equals.

This leading position has provided clear advantages for the United States. It has allowed Washington to shape the rules, institutions, and political agenda of the international order in ways broadly consistent with American interests. It has also enabled the United States to present those interests as serving a wider international community, whether in the form of the "free world," the "international community," the "rules-based international order," or Biden's envisioned "world of democracies."

Neither predictions of the collapse of the American "empire" (Zakaria, 2011) nor visions of a new Cold War with China (Brands & Gaddis, 2021) diminish the fact that American military and economic power, together with its international political, technological, financial, and cultural influence, continues to enable Washington to shape global developments according to its own priorities. The relative position of the United States may be changing, particularly in relation to China, but relative decline is not the same as the disappearance of power. Even in a more competitive and increasingly layered international system, the United States remains the only actor capable of projecting substantial influence across all major functional domains and geographical regions.

This position distinguishes the United States from both the EU and the emerging powers challenging the current order. The EU possesses significant economic, regulatory, and institutional influence but lacks comparable military and political unity. China has become a global economic and technological competitor but does not yet possess the same combination of alliances, military reach, financial centrality, institutional influence, and political legitimacy. Russia retains

considerable disruptive and military capabilities but lacks the wider economic foundations of comprehensive global power.

The American position within the institutional core is therefore different from that of Europe. The EU became one of the most developed political and institutional products of the liberal order. The United States, by contrast, served as its principal organizer, military guarantor, and strategic leader. Although European states participated in the establishment and development of the post-war order, the United States possessed the resources and political authority required to connect its institutions to a wider geopolitical structure. In the case of the United States, interests are also closely intertwined with the values embraced and represented by the country. These values are rooted in political, economic, and social traditions extending across American history. The relationship between values and interests is not incidental. American leaders have repeatedly defined the promotion of democracy, open markets, individual liberty, and constitutional government not merely as moral objectives but as conditions favorable to American security and prosperity.

This connection has allowed American foreign policy to combine material power with ideological purpose. Washington has often pursued traditional geopolitical objectives while describing them through the language of freedom, democracy, and international order. This does not necessarily mean that such values are insincere. Rather, it means that the United States has often understood its own interests and its preferred form of international order as mutually reinforcing.

5.3.2 The historical foundations of American power

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the United States was able to develop largely apart from the central conflicts of world politics. From the arrival of European settlers in the early seventeenth century, the colonies that later formed the United States benefited from geographical distance from the major centers of European power. Although it is commonly believed that the first settlers were those who founded the Virginia or Plymouth colonies, or those who arrived on the Mayflower, Spanish settlers and explorers had already reached the shores of present-day Florida in 1513, nearly a century earlier. Nevertheless, it was the British colonial experience that played the decisive role in the country's political development and eventual independence.

The Atlantic and Pacific Oceans provided an unusual degree of strategic protection. The United States could expand across the continent without facing the same balance-of-power constraints that shaped the development of European states. Its principal security threats were either geographically distant or located within the continent itself. This allowed the country to consolidate internally, acquire territory, develop its economy, and gradually eliminate competing European influence from North America. Largely independent of and less disturbed by other great powers than European states, the United States first became a regional hegemon and, by the twentieth century, a decisive actor in global politics. Its geographical position was central to this transformation. It possessed a continental resource base, access to two oceans, a large internal market, and no neighboring great power capable of threatening its survival.

This characteristic also helps explain the difficulty faced by China in becoming a comparable global power in the twenty-first century without generating major strategic conflict (Economy, 2021). China is located within a densely populated and geopolitically contested region containing several significant powers and American allies. Unlike the United States during its rise, China cannot consolidate regional primacy without directly affecting the security interests of Japan, India, Russia, South Korea, Australia, Southeast Asian states, and the United States itself. The United States' path to global leadership was therefore historically exceptional. It first acquired overwhelming influence within its own region and only later expanded its role globally. The Monroe Doctrine symbolized the effort to limit external great-power interference in the Western Hemisphere, while westward expansion and economic development transformed the country into a continental power.

Despite the strong central institutions established under the Constitution, the new country was by no means unified. The nineteenth century was characterized simultaneously by westward expansion and by the search for solutions to deep internal political, economic, racial, and social conflicts. The Civil War demonstrated the fragility of national unity, but Reconstruction and industrialization subsequently accelerated the consolidation of the United States as a modern great power. By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States had become one of the world's leading industrial economies. It caught up with Great Britain before the First World War and emerged from the war as the world's leading economic and potentially military power. During the First World

War, the United States already sought to influence the principles according to which the international system would be reconstructed.

Although the interwar period is traditionally described as one of American isolationism (Noggle & Murray, 1970), the United States remained connected to the rest of the world economically, financially, and diplomatically. The global consequences of the financial crisis originating in New York in 1929 clearly demonstrated the centrality of the American economy. The United States did not withdraw from international affairs in any complete sense; rather, it remained reluctant to accept permanent military and institutional commitments comparable to those it assumed after 1945.

During the Second World War, the United States participated with the clear intention of shaping the post-war world according to its own values and interests (Kennan, 2020). American leaders had learned from the consequences of the First World War, the weakness of the League of Nations, and the instability created by economic nationalism and competing blocs. It is therefore unsurprising that the United States remained an active international actor after 1945.

American engagement became institutionalized through the United Nations, the Bretton Woods system, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, NATO, and a wider system of bilateral and regional alliances. The post-war international order was not simply imposed by the United States, but it could not have been established or maintained without American resources and leadership. During the Cold War, this engagement was organized primarily around competition with the Soviet Union. Following the logic of containment, the United States mobilized enormous military, economic, diplomatic, and ideological resources to prevent the spread of Soviet influence and communist ideology. Military force was regarded as an acceptable instrument when political leaders believed that the credibility of containment or the wider balance of power was at stake.

The Cold War also transformed American leadership from an episodic response to external threats into a permanent global role. The United States established military bases, maintained standing alliances, financed reconstruction, supported friendly governments, and built institutions intended to organize cooperation among Western and allied states. The defense of the American homeland became inseparable from the stability of distant regions.

Following the end of the Cold War, the United States, as the sole remaining superpower, further expanded its political and especially economic influence. The administrations of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton both contributed to a more unified Europe and a more institutionalized global economy. NATO and the EU expanded, globalization accelerated, and American-led institutions became increasingly universal in their reach.

At the same time, latent security challenges emerged that the international system created by sovereign states and traditional intergovernmental institutions proved incapable of managing adequately. State failure, terrorism, civil war, ethnic conflict, and transnational criminal networks did not fit easily within the institutional architecture created to manage relations among established states. The most shocking manifestation of this vulnerability was the terrorist attack against the United States in 2001. The attacks awakened the world's leading military power from what may be described as a period of "strategic slumber" and placed the use of force once again at the center of American foreign policy in Afghanistan and Iraq.

This does not mean that the United States had avoided military force during the previous decade. Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo all involved American military action. However, these interventions were presented mainly as humanitarian, peace-enforcement, or crisis-management operations (Fukuyama & Durch, 1997). In the new millennium, national security, counterterrorism, and prevention became the principal strategic motivations. The Gulf War represented a partial exception, although it also constituted a transition between Cold War strategies and those of the emerging post-Cold War era. The Soviet Union still existed, and the operation was justified through the defense of the territorial status quo and a broad international coalition.

Under the George W. Bush administration, the "global war on terror," together with the active though selective promotion of democratic liberal values and institutions, became the central theme of American foreign policy (Carothers, 2009). Military action, regime change, prevention, and democracy promotion were integrated within a strategy that assumed American power could transform hostile political environments.

By the end of the first decade of the new millennium, however, the United States had become economically exhausted and visibly overextended. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq proved far more costly and politically complex than initially expected. The global financial crisis further weakened confidence in the

economic foundations of American leadership. Among the Obama administration's principal priorities were the resolution of domestic economic problems and the redefinition of America's role in the world. This included the expectation that allies, particularly the EU and European NATO members, would assume a more effective role in managing regional and international challenges (Zakaria, 2008).

The objective was not American withdrawal but a more selective and sustainable form of leadership. The United States sought to preserve its primacy while relying more extensively on partners, institutions, economic instruments, and technological advantages. This underlying objective remained visible under subsequent administrations, even when their rhetoric and preferred methods differed.

5.3.3 Traditions of American foreign policy

Concerning American foreign-policy traditions, the generally accepted typology developed by Walter Russell Mead distinguishes four principal traditions: Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian, Jacksonian, and Wilsonian (Mead, 2002). These traditions do not function as exclusive categories. They are recurring orientations that emphasize different elements of American identity, interests, power, and international responsibility.

The Hamiltonian tradition is reflected in the effort to preserve and expand the success of the American "enterprise." It is based on the belief that an open, commercially integrated, and economically developing world fundamentally benefits the United States and should therefore be promoted. Hamiltonian thinking places particular importance on trade, finance, industry, technological development, naval power, and a stable international environment favorable to American economic interests. It also assigns special importance to the relationship with Great Britain and, more broadly, Europe. The Atlantic world is regarded as the principal institutional and economic foundation of American power. From this perspective, alliances and international institutions are valuable because they support a stable order within which American commerce and influence can expand.

The Jeffersonian tradition is perhaps the least clearly expressed motif in modern American foreign policy. It is rooted in the preservation of American republican values and exceptionalism. Its simplest strategic recommendation is that the

United States should avoid unnecessary involvement in questionable foreign-policy adventures, particularly wars that may threaten domestic liberty, constitutional government, and economic stability. Jeffersonian thinking does not necessarily imply complete isolation. It favors the projection of influence through example, economic exchange, commerce, and diplomacy rather than through extensive military commitments. Its primary concern is that empire abroad may corrupt republican government at home.

Populist emphasis on American exceptionalism is equally characteristic of the Jacksonian tradition. Jacksonian thinking places the defense of the American nation, its honor, security, and interests at the center of foreign policy. It is skeptical of prolonged humanitarian missions, legalistic internationalism, and limited warfare, but it supports the overwhelming use of force when the United States is attacked or its vital interests are threatened. The Jacksonian tradition considers almost every instrument acceptable in defense of American interests and values and places particular emphasis on military strength. It also tends to display limited tolerance and cultural sensitivity toward political systems and values that differ from those of the United States. It divides the international environment sharply between friends, enemies, and actors whose loyalty remains uncertain.

Finally, the Wilsonian tradition, perhaps the best known internationally, commits itself to spreading the founding values of the United States. The worldwide promotion of democracy, freedom, open markets, and international law is understood as a fundamental American interest. Democracies are expected to become more reliable partners of the United States, while American economic and security interests are believed to be best served in a democratically organized world. Wilsonian thinking therefore connects morality and strategy. The transformation of other political systems is not regarded merely as altruism. It is expected to produce a more peaceful, predictable, and American-friendly international environment. International institutions are valuable insofar as they codify liberal principles and organize cooperation around them.

The separation of these traditions is necessarily artificial, and none appears in a pure form in the legacy of any president. Elements of several traditions are usually present simultaneously. Administrations may also move from one orientation to another in response to external events, domestic pressures, and political constraints. Illustrative examples can nevertheless be offered. Hamiltonian elements may be identified in George Washington, George H. W.

Bush, and Bill Clinton, all of whom emphasized economic development, institutional stability, and the relationship between American prosperity and international order. The Jeffersonian tradition does not clearly characterize any recent president in its pure form but regularly appears among libertarian presidential candidates and critics of American military overextension. Elements of it were also visible in Barack Obama's caution concerning large-scale military intervention and in broader demands for restraint. Jacksonian elements appeared in the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, particularly in their willingness to define adversaries in moral terms and employ force decisively. Certain aspects can also be identified in Trump's transactional approach, nationalist rhetoric, skepticism toward multilateral constraints, and emphasis on strength, loyalty, and reciprocity. As for a genuinely Wilsonian president, apart from Woodrow Wilson himself, perhaps Jimmy Carter provides the clearest modern example through his emphasis on human rights and moral responsibility. Biden, even if not explicitly placing himself within this tradition, pursued similar ambitions through the concept of a "world of democracies" and the framing of international politics as a competition between democracies and authoritarian regimes.

The four traditions help explain why American foreign policy can appear inconsistent from the outside. It may promote international institutions while rejecting constraints imposed by them. It may call for restraint while maintaining a global military presence. It may promote democracy in one case while cooperating with authoritarian partners in another. These apparent contradictions often reflect the coexistence of different traditions rather than the absence of strategic logic.

5.3.4 American exceptionalism and national identity

American national identity has always been a central element of United States history (Holsti, 2011). Exceptionalism and isolation are both closely associated with the development of the country and largely stem from the fact that the United States evolved as a continental political community distinct from Europe. The American political system was founded through a revolution justified in universal language but carried out within a particular historical and geographical setting. It rejected monarchical authority and hereditary privilege while establishing a constitutional republic based on popular sovereignty, individual rights, and the separation of powers. This founding experience became a

permanent reference point for American political identity. The United States continuously expanded throughout its history while maintaining the belief that its political development differed fundamentally from that of Europe. This profoundly influenced American national identity, which has never been completely fixed and continues to evolve. An extensive literature has examined the meaning of “Americanness” from political, social, racial, cultural, and historical perspectives. Already Alexis de Tocqueville, notably as a European observer, sought to explain what made American culture and government exceptional and why the American system appeared worthy of emulation. Since then, the meaning and consequences of exceptionalism have remained central to the interpretation of American politics (Flavin, 2015).

Ultimately, it is the sense of exceptionalism and its changing definition that determines American identity. In many other respects, the American character may not differ as substantially from European identities as earlier observers claimed. Nevertheless, the belief in difference remains politically significant even when the objective differences are less pronounced. The idea and theory of American exceptionalism have also become the subject of increasing criticism (Hofstadter, 1989). Critics argue that exceptionalism can obscure inequality, violence, exclusion, imperial behavior, and contradictions between professed values and political practice. It may also encourage Americans to interpret their country’s interests as naturally universal and morally superior.

The sense of exceptionalism, belonging, and unity is reinforced by values, social norms, and institutions that permeate public life in the United States. Democracy, freedom, individual equality, and opportunity are presented as foundational values that organize American political life. They also function as enduring principles within American foreign-policy thinking. This does not mean that all Americans interpret these values identically or agree on how they should be implemented. American politics is characterized by deep conflict over the meaning of liberty, equality, citizenship, government, and opportunity. Yet even competing political groups generally justify their positions through reference to the same foundational vocabulary. An identity striving for hegemony clearly shapes the American self-image and consequently influences foreign-policy behavior (Magyarics, 2008). Leadership is often interpreted not only as a strategic advantage but as a responsibility and even a moral obligation. The United States does not merely consider itself capable of leadership; it often assumes that a stable and legitimate international order requires American

leadership. The idea of exceptionalism is also founded on the belief that the United States was established on liberal ideological foundations, making it fundamentally different from the historical development of other states. Interestingly, this is not entirely without parallel if one considers the European Union, although in the EU's case the founding ideology also contained strong Christian-democratic and conservative elements.

Both the United States and the EU understand their political institutions partly as embodiments of universal principles. This contributes to their central role within the liberal order. Yet there is an important difference. The EU's normative identity emerged through the rejection of European power politics and the institutional pooling of sovereignty. American exceptionalism emerged through the creation of a sovereign republic that gradually acquired continental and global power.

A state structure understood as being based on liberal and republican principles endowed Americans with a sense of superiority when confronting opponents on the international stage. Adversaries were consequently often demonized and portrayed as morally inferior, rather than treated simply as actors pursuing competing interests. This tendency remains visible in rhetoric that reduces international politics to a confrontation between democracies and authoritarian regimes. Such framing can clarify the ideological differences among political systems, but it can also simplify the motivations of other actors and reduce the space for strategic compromise. This type of Manichean thinking has repeatedly characterized American foreign policy. One obvious example was the depiction of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," but the same rhetorical device appeared in the Bush Doctrine and the "axis of evil." International conflicts were interpreted as struggles between fundamentally different moral and political systems rather than merely as disputes over territory, influence, or security.

The ideological foundations of foreign policy simultaneously became a force shaping national identity. American identity was repeatedly defined through differentiation from challengers and adversaries. External conflict strengthened internal cohesion by clarifying what the United States believed it represented and what it opposed. This pattern can be observed in the "frontier" ideology, which also legitimized the appropriation of Indigenous lands; in the Monroe Doctrine, which portrayed the Western Hemisphere as an American sphere of influence against European colonial powers; in the wars against Germany and Japan; and in the ideological duty of containing communism (Magyarics, 2012).

The dominant role of ideology and identity contributed to the United States presenting itself in the twentieth century as the principal defender of the “free world.” This role was later extended to the global promotion of Western liberal-democratic principles and institutions. It is therefore unsurprising that the “ideological fundamentalism” characteristic of American foreign policy (Magyarics, 2000) often excludes doctrines differing substantially from American political thinking and defines American identity in opposition to them.

Closely accompanying the image of defender of freedom is a belief in moral superiority (Lipset, 1996). This is connected to the sense of chosenness according to which the American people, drawing partly on the Puritan tradition, constitute a “shining city upon a hill,” capable of offering an alternative to the political and moral failures of the rest of the world. Numerous myths are associated with this sense of chosenness. Although oversimplified, they remain deeply embedded in the thinking underlying American foreign policy. National narratives emphasize perseverance, innovation, individualism, technological superiority, and victory over adversity. The frontier occupies a particularly important place in this mythology. American perseverance and technological superiority were believed to have ensured survival and victory during the country’s formative period. In the spirit of the frontier, the United States was destined for leadership and success at the meeting point of civilizations.

This belief has had contradictory consequences. It has supported innovation, confidence, international engagement, and a willingness to assume responsibility. At the same time, it has sometimes encouraged overconfidence, cultural insensitivity, and the assumption that political models successful in the United States can be transferred elsewhere without sufficient regard for local conditions.

5.3.5 Doctrines, strategies, and the tension between values and interests

The United States cannot be accused of lacking declared doctrines and strategies. The difficulty is rather that there are many, with several concepts often existing simultaneously. This leads outside observers to question the coherence of American foreign policy. It is sufficient to mention some of the most important examples: Washington’s Farewell Address, the Monroe Doctrine and its later extensions, the Open Door principle, Wilson’s Fourteen Points,

Roosevelt's Second World War speeches, containment, détente, the Clinton and Bush Doctrines, Obama's principle of "leading from behind," and "America First."

These doctrines reflect changing historical contexts, but they also express recurring dilemmas within American foreign policy. How deeply should the United States become involved in the affairs of other regions? Should it act through institutions or preserve maximum freedom of action? Should it promote democracy or cooperate pragmatically with authoritarian governments? Should it seek military dominance or reduce the costs of global leadership?

American foreign policy is frequently described as being divided between isolation and global leadership. Scholars also debate whether it is fundamentally realist or idealist. The reality is more complex. No American leader has ever pursued a purely isolationist policy or focused exclusively on directing the world. Warren Harding, for example, campaigned on a policy of "return to normalcy" and is frequently presented as a representative isolationist. Yet it was during his presidency that the Washington Naval Treaties of 1922 were concluded, placing the American fleet on equal footing with the British fleet. Conversely, presidents remembered for active international engagement also devoted considerable attention to domestic affairs (Graubard, 2007).

Likewise, no president can be described as pursuing either an exclusively idealist or exclusively realist foreign policy (Rada, 2012a). American foreign policy is shaped simultaneously by values and interests, and the two cannot be separated easily. Values help define what Americans understand as legitimate interests, while strategic interests influence which values are promoted, where, and through which instruments. The tension between values and interests is therefore not an accidental inconsistency. It is a permanent feature of American foreign policy. The United States may support democracy as a general principle while cooperating with authoritarian governments considered strategically important. It may defend national sovereignty while intervening in other states. It may promote free trade while using tariffs, sanctions, and export controls to protect strategic sectors.

These contradictions are particularly visible because the United States presents its foreign policy in universal terms. Great powers traditionally pursue interests, but the United States has often claimed that its leadership serves a broader moral and institutional purpose. When American actions appear inconsistent with declared principles, the legitimacy of its leadership is therefore more vulnerable. At the same time, values have frequently strengthened American

power. Alliances with democratic states are not maintained solely through coercion or material exchange. They are also supported by political identification, institutional trust, and a shared understanding of legitimate order. American cultural influence, universities, technological companies, civil society, and political ideals have contributed to the attraction of the United States.

The liberal order itself reflects this combination of power and legitimacy. It was supported by American military and economic predominance, but it was not maintained by coercion alone. Its durability also depended on the willingness of other states to participate because they regarded its institutions as beneficial, legitimate, or preferable to available alternatives. Overall, the United States, as the world's leading power, could afford the luxury of defining its interests through the values it professed. Its material superiority reduced the need to choose consistently between strategic advantage and ideological aspiration. In many cases, American leaders could assume that the expansion of liberal institutions, open markets, and democratic government would simultaneously advance American power and promote a more legitimate international order.

That assumption has become more difficult to sustain in a more competitive international environment. The rise of China, the return of Russian revisionism, the fragmentation of global governance, domestic polarization, and the growing costs of international commitments have forced Washington to make more explicit choices between values, interests, resources, and priorities. This change does not eliminate the liberal and ideological dimensions of American foreign policy. It makes their application more selective. The United States continues to describe international competition through the language of democracy, freedom, sovereignty, and rules. At the same time, it increasingly uses tariffs, sanctions, industrial policy, technological restrictions, military deterrence, and alliance pressure in ways associated with traditional power politics.

The resulting foreign policy is neither purely liberal nor purely realist. It combines liberal objectives with realist instruments and a growing emphasis on domestic economic and political resilience. The liberal order is defended not only because it embodies American values but because its institutions, alliances, currencies, standards, and economic structures continue to support American primacy. This helps explain why American criticism of the international order does not necessarily imply a desire to abandon it. Even administrations skeptical of multilateral institutions generally seek to preserve the strategic advantages produced by the order. They object primarily to those rules, costs, and

constraints that appear to limit American freedom of action or distribute benefits disproportionately.

The position of the United States inside the institutional core is consequently characterized also by a central contradiction. Washington is both the principal defender of the liberal order and the actor most capable of acting outside its institutional constraints. It created and supports institutions that limit unilateral power, yet its own military and economic capabilities allow it to disregard those institutions when political leaders believe vital American interests are at stake. This asymmetry has always generated tensions with Europe. The EU tends to regard international institutions and legal procedures as constitutive elements of legitimate action. The United States is more likely to regard them as valuable but ultimately instrumental frameworks. Washington prefers institutions that organize cooperation without eliminating American strategic flexibility.

At the same time, the United States has a strong interest in preserving Europe as part of the institutional core (Lundestad, 2003). Europe provides diplomatic legitimacy, economic weight, military partners, advanced technological capabilities, and a broad network of states committed to many of the same political principles. The transatlantic relationship multiplies American influence and reduces the appearance that the liberal order is simply an instrument of unilateral American dominance.

The EU and its member states also help transform American power into institutional leadership. Without European participation, NATO would lose its central political purpose, economic sanctions would become less effective, and claims concerning a wider democratic or rules-based order would become more difficult to sustain. Europe is therefore not only a beneficiary of American leadership. It is one of the principal sources of its legitimacy and effectiveness. The United States can act alone in many circumstances, but its ability to shape an enduring international order depends heavily on cooperation with Europe.

This creates the American side of the dilemma identified in the previous section. The United States seeks allies that are more capable, spend more on defense, and assume greater international responsibility. Yet a more capable Europe will also expect a greater role in defining common priorities. It may not always follow American preferences, particularly in trade, technology, relations with China, regulation, and the use of military force.

Washington must therefore decide whether it primarily wants stronger European partners or more compliant ones. These objectives overlap but are not identical. A Europe capable of genuine strategic action will be able to support the United States more effectively, but it will also possess a greater ability to refuse, negotiate, or pursue alternative policies.

The future of the institutional core consequently depends not only on Europe's capacity to become more autonomous but also on the willingness of the United States to accommodate a more reciprocal form of leadership. American primacy cannot be maintained indefinitely through unilateral control or unequal burden-sharing. It increasingly requires the coordination of differentiated capabilities among allies. The United States remains the most powerful actor within the institutional core and the wider liberal order. Its military reach, economic scale, technological strength, financial centrality, alliance system, and ideological influence continue to distinguish it from every other power. Yet its leadership is no longer exercised under the permissive conditions of the immediate post-Cold War period.

American power must now operate in a system characterized by stronger competitors, more fragmented institutions, functional interdependence, and domestic pressure to reduce the costs of international engagement. The strategic challenge is therefore not simply how to preserve primacy. It is how to adapt American leadership to a layered order without destroying the alliances and institutions through which that leadership remains effective.

The United States occupies the core not only because of its power but because it connects military capability, economic influence, institutional leadership, and ideological purpose. Its capacity to maintain that position will depend on whether it can continue to combine these dimensions while managing the contradiction between universal values and national interests. The central question is therefore not whether the United States will remain powerful. It is what form American leadership will assume. Washington may continue to act as the principal organizer of the liberal institutional core, or it may increasingly treat the order as a transactional framework from which advantages should be extracted. The distinction will shape not only the future of American power but also the character and durability of the transatlantic core itself.

5.4 From liberal hegemony to a rebalanced Transatlantic partnership

The United States has occupied a special place in the international system since the end of the Cold War, a proposition on which essentially every theoretical school agrees despite their different explanations of American power and international order. Robert Kagan argues that American dominance constituted a historical exception (Kagan, 2018). In the anarchic international system recognized by both realist and liberal mainstreams, American interests temporarily coincided with the construction and preservation of a liberal order. The United States became sufficiently powerful, and sufficiently free from a peer challenger, to pursue a foreign policy whose objectives included expanding liberal democracy, strengthening the institutions of international governance, promoting open markets, and extending an order derived partly from American domestic values. The underlying assumption was that a world shaped increasingly in the American image would be safer for the United States, more predictable for its allies, and more conducive to international development.

The resulting liberal hegemony rested on more than material predominance. American leadership was supported by military capabilities, economic influence and technological advantages, but also by alliance networks, institutions, norms and models of political and economic organization that other actors were willing to follow. Liberal ideas therefore did not simply restrain American power; they also legitimized and reproduced it. The order offered benefits to actors that did not necessarily share all the domestic values of the United States, including states such as China, whose economic development was facilitated by access to global markets and institutions. American leadership was consequently sustained by a combination of power, consent, institutionalization and the expectation that participation in the order would remain preferable to opposition from outside it.

The neorealist mainstream nevertheless warned that a foreign policy departing for too long from the logic of power politics could not remain successful indefinitely. From this perspective, the expansion of liberal institutions and values was possible because of the exceptional distribution of power after 1991, not because the anarchic character of international politics had disappeared (Mearsheimer, 2018). As relative capabilities changed, resistance, balancing and geopolitical competition were likely to re-emerge. The rise of China, Russia's

revisionist policies, technological competition and economic fragmentation all strengthened this critique. Yet these developments did not automatically invalidate the liberal interpretation. The persistence of international institutions, economic interdependence and alliance cooperation demonstrated that power politics had returned without eliminating the structures through which the liberal order continued to operate.

Numerous crises have therefore revived debates about a post-American, post-Western, postliberal or more genuinely multilateral world order (Zakaria, 2011). Nevertheless, no decisive evidence has yet established that the American-led order has been replaced by a coherent systemic alternative. John Ikenberry's defense of the resilience of the liberal order may at times resemble systematic and credible wishful thinking, but it draws attention to an important distinction: the United States may stumble, reassess its identity, and experience relative decline without losing its central position altogether (Ikenberry, 2022).

International orders rarely disappear through a single event. They more often evolve through successive adaptations as distributions of power, domestic political coalitions, technologies and external challenges change. Institutions may survive even when the political assumptions behind them become less stable.

The credibility of American leadership is particularly important in this respect. American predominance is based not only on instruments of power but also on norms, institutionalized interests, policy expectations and patterns of behavior that other actors regard as relatively predictable. Challengers become stronger not only when their own material capabilities increase but also when the legitimacy and reliability of American leadership decline. This credibility depends substantially on whether the American political elite continues to believe that maintaining the liberal order serves the interests of the United States, whether American values and strategic interests are regarded as mutually reinforcing, and whether the costs of leadership remain domestically acceptable.

The American political elite cannot, however, be treated as completely homogeneous. Its foreign-policy self-definition changes according to the political composition of the presidency, Congress, the federal bureaucracy and the wider policy establishment. This composition is shaped by the system of checks and balances established in the American Constitution and by the outcomes of federal elections. Even midterm elections, although they do not directly replace the president, alter the domestic balance of power and consequently the room

for maneuver of the executive branch. Foreign policy is therefore never entirely insulated from domestic political competition (Rada & Stepper, 2023).

The executive branch naturally seeks to represent what it defines as the national interest, but it must also ensure that the political direction it embodies remains electorally sustainable. It responds to the attitudes, beliefs and priorities of voters and to the broader domestic political trends derived from them. This inward-looking dimension is projected onto foreign-policy behavior. American foreign policy must therefore be interpreted with close attention to domestic politics because the leadership in Washington depends on elections, while that leadership determines how the country navigates an international structure that changes far more slowly than electoral coalitions.

SurRealism can be identified precisely in this relationship. The international actor with the greatest capacity to influence world order—one that shapes the structure from a neorealist perspective and drives institutionalized interdependence from a neoliberal perspective—selects its political leadership through elections in which foreign policy usually plays only a secondary role. Campaigns are rarely structured primarily around international affairs. Voters often decide according to economic conditions, social questions, identity, political polarization or the perceived competence of domestic leaders, yet the outcome influences the direction of the state most capable of altering the expectations and behavior of the international system (Rada & Stepper, 2023).

This does not mean that American elections directly remake international order. Campaign promises remain constrained by external realities, accumulated commitments, bureaucratic interests, alliances and the existing distribution of power. Every administration must eventually adapt to the logic of the international structure. Nevertheless, meaningful differences persist regarding which systemic questions receive priority. One administration may emphasize geopolitical rivalry and relations with Russia or China; another may place greater weight on economic interdependence, climate change or pandemics; while a third may focus on the intrinsic value of cooperation among liberal democracies within what could be described as a “liberal bubble.” Domestic political change does not abolish structural continuity, but it can significantly alter the methods, rhetoric and perceived reliability of American leadership.

More than three decades since the end of the Cold War have produced repeated turning points that encouraged the academic community to proclaim the arrival of a “new world order” (Rada, 2019). What distinguishes the present period is not

the existence of crises as such, but their frequency, simultaneity and cumulative effects. The global war on terror, the financial crisis, the rise of China, Russia's intervention in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, Brexit, the migration crisis, the election of Donald Trump, the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine all questioned different assumptions underlying the post-Cold War order.

The early 2010s were characterized by particularly pessimistic expectations. The United States appeared overextended by the global war on terror, weakened by the financial crisis, and challenged by a rapidly strengthening China (Zakaria, 2011). Russia simultaneously attempted to reassert itself as a major power. Yet the anticipated collapse of American leadership did not occur. China strengthened globally and especially regionally, while Russia demonstrated a willingness to challenge the European security order, but neither produced a comprehensive and generally attractive alternative to the existing system. The United States remained the world's leading great power, and the liberal order that it helped create after 1945 and directed with exceptional predominance after 1991 continued to function.

This persistence does not mean that the order remained unchallenged. Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014 and the annexation of Crimea returned geopolitical great-power thinking to Europe. Political movements within the Western world itself increasingly questioned the legitimacy, effectiveness or distributive consequences of the system. Brexit represented the clearest institutional manifestation of this internal challenge (Vara, 2021), while Donald Trump's election was interpreted by many liberal American experts as a comparable rejection of the assumptions of liberal internationalism. The global migration crisis similarly exposed the limits of solidarity within Europe and revealed the difficulty of reconciling common commitments with divergent domestic political interests. European actors failed to formulate a comprehensive solution because the issue became embedded in ideological disagreements, electoral competition and conflicting interpretations of sovereignty, solidarity and social security.

The Covid-19 pandemic further demonstrated why the emerging order could not be interpreted through a single theoretical lens. On the one hand, intensified competition between the United States and China, including vaccine technology, supply capacity and political narratives surrounding crisis management, appeared to confirm the growing relevance of a bipolar coordinate system.

Technological achievement, production capacity and the ability to provide international assistance became measures of leadership. On the other hand, disrupted supply chains, shortages and the difficulties of restarting national economies demonstrated the depth of global interdependence emphasized by neoliberal approaches. The crisis revealed both geopolitical competition and the impossibility of reducing the world economy to isolated national systems.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine constituted another major turning point, but it should not obscure the cumulative nature of earlier transformations. The aggression represented an awakening for mainstream liberal internationalism because it demonstrated that war, territorial revisionism and coercive power had not disappeared from Europe. The assumption that economic interdependence and institutional integration would steadily marginalize traditional geopolitics proved overly optimistic. Realist concerns—particularly those associated with offensive realism and the continuing relevance of anarchy and power competition—could no longer be dismissed as outdated (Mearsheimer, 2021).

At the same time, it would be equally reductionist to treat every contemporary conflict as the mechanical product of systemic pressure. Russia's aggression cannot be explained only as a defensive reaction to the geographical expansion of the liberal West. Decisions, miscalculations, elite perceptions and Putin's personal ambitions also mattered. Nor can unexpected global events such as the Covid-19 pandemic be interpreted satisfactorily only through power position and balance-of-power logic. The changing world order continues to combine geopolitical rivalry, economic interdependence, domestic political transformation, institutional resilience and leadership choices. Its SurRealism lies partly in the coexistence of these apparently contradictory logics.

The active role of the United States in preserving the liberal order was expressed particularly visibly in Joe Biden's concept of a "world of democracies" (Rada, 2024b). This idea represented a hybrid response to both domestic political change and transformations in the international environment. It affirmed the objective of maintaining the liberal order while acknowledging that not every actor within the global system would necessarily share all its values. It was therefore possible to exist outside the world of democracies as long as an actor did not directly challenge the functioning of the broader international order—or, viewed from Washington, as long as its behavior remained compatible with essential American objectives.

Within the democratic community, however, the logic was less tolerant. Its members were expected to remain sufficiently united and internally coherent to prevent the return of the “Kagania jungle” (Kagan, 2018). This expectation created tension because American leadership increasingly connected strategic solidarity to the acceptance of political and normative principles shaped partly by American domestic debates. The boundaries between values, interests and ideological preferences consequently became blurred.

The world of democracies can therefore be interpreted as realist toward the external environment and liberal, or even disciplinarian, toward the internal community. Outside the liberal bubble, Washington may cooperate pragmatically with actors that do not share American domestic values as long as they do not directly undermine the rules and interests underpinning the order. Within the bubble, however, allies may be expected to conform simultaneously to a broader package of liberal principles, including open trade, progressively expanding human-rights protections, democratic governance and peaceful foreign-policy behavior. The resulting inconsistency is not accidental. It reflects the difficulty of reconciling a global order open to diverse political systems with a political community whose cohesion is increasingly justified through shared democratic identity.

This tension also helps explain the difference between the Trump and Biden administrations. From a domestic political perspective, Trump raised a legitimate and electorally credible question: why should American citizens continue to finance an exceptionally costly global engagement while international institutions constrain independent action and close allies frequently fail to assume what Washington regards as their fair share of collective security? Why should the United States bear disproportionate responsibility for global counterterrorism or European security while being accused of imperialism by adversaries and criticized by allies that remain divided over how to manage migration, defense and external threats?

Trump’s neo-isolationism – not even during the first term – was never genuine isolationism in practice. His administration remained deeply engaged in global politics and frequently used American economic, military and diplomatic power. Nevertheless, its transactional language communicated that the preservation of the liberal order was no longer automatically understood as an American interest. International institutions were judged according to immediate returns, alliances according to burden sharing, and partnerships according to visible

reciprocity. This approach weakened the order not necessarily because the United States withdrew from the world, but because allies and competitors became less certain about the continuity and conditions of American commitments.

Biden attempted to restore the balance by reaffirming that maintaining the order remained in the strategic interest of the United States even if Washington continued to bear a disproportionate share of its costs. The reason was not that another actor would readily replace American leadership, but that no other state appeared capable of producing and operating an equally comprehensive and functional agenda for international order. The SurRealism of the liberal order lies precisely in this paradox: the apparently idealist objective of preserving a liberal system is also a realist interest of the United States. The order extends American influence, reduces the costs of coercion, embeds American preferences in institutions and prevents the emergence of a hostile balance of power.

Even relatively limited changes in American domestic politics therefore matter internationally. They affect the balance between liberal and realist interpretations of American interests and alter expectations concerning the durability of institutions, alliances and commitments. The structure of the international system constrains every administration, but the political meaning attributed to those constraints remains open to domestic contestation.

The “offensive liberalism” that characterized important elements of American foreign policy after the Cold War emerged from the conviction that the expansion of liberal-democratic institutions would strengthen both international peace and American security. Its ideological origins can be traced to Wilsonian internationalism, although the more interventionist form became particularly visible during the global war against terrorism and the neoconservative policies of George W. Bush. Nation-building, democracy promotion and military action against dictatorships were based partly on the assumption that an international order populated by states resembling the United States internally would be more stable and cooperative. The logical conclusion was that the domestic transformation of other actors could become a legitimate instrument of international security.

Biden’s world of democracies retained important elements of this liberal tradition. It was realist insofar as it acknowledged that actors would continue to exist outside the democratic community, but idealist insofar as it sought greater uniformity within it. The resulting contradictions are central to understanding the

contemporary liberal order. The United States seeks to preserve a global system whose rules extend beyond the democratic world, while simultaneously defining its most trusted strategic community through increasingly demanding democratic and ideological criteria.

The international environment in 2026 reflects the profound evolution of global politics from post-Cold War optimism to renewed great-power rivalry. Under Donald Trump's second term, U.S. foreign policy is marked by significant shifts that both revive traditional power politics and simultaneously challenge established paradigms of international cooperation. The rhetoric of American exceptionalism has given way to more pragmatic, transactional statecraft, reflecting the perceived limits of liberal internationalism and the emergence of multipolar dynamics. After decades of American reliance on liberal internationalism and multilateral frameworks, Trump's foreign policy reflects a return to strategic dealmaking and unilateralism. This shift is largely a reaction to the rise of formidable rivals such as China and Russia, whose assertive regional policies and military modernization have made great-power conflict conceivable once again. Washington has rediscovered diplomacy not as an instrument of idealistic norm promotion but as a hard-nosed tool to manage rivals, avoid overextension, and maintain a global balance of power (Mitchell, 2025). Trump's strategy emphasizes engaging adversaries to buy time, reduce military burdens, and pressure allies for greater reciprocity. However, this does not represent a coherent grand strategy of great-power competition. Trump has pivoted from competition to what may be described as "great-power collusion" (Goddard, 2025). Trump envisions a world where strongmen in Washington, Moscow, and Beijing cooperate to stabilize international affairs through tacit recognition of spheres of influence. This concert-like approach seeks to avoid ideological crusades in favor of pragmatic arrangements that grant major powers leeway in their respective domains. Nevertheless, this worldview is not universally accepted nor free from contradictions (Beckley, 2025). While the U.S. retains unparalleled economic and military capabilities, Trump leverages this power through protectionism, coercive diplomacy, and a transactional ethos that strains alliances. Some even warn (Beckley, 2025; Goddard, 2025) that Trump's willingness to tear down the liberal order while pursuing self-interest risks not only alienating allies but also encouraging revisionist powers like China and Russia to press their territorial ambitions further. In particular, Trump's emphasis on transactional gains and disregard for normative leadership undermines the foundations of post-World War II American grand strategy, which relied heavily on alliance management and

liberal norms. Trump's foreign policy in his second term represents an uneasy blend of realism, unilateralism, and selective great-power accommodation. On the one hand, Trump pursues strategic diplomacy to avoid two-front confrontations and recalibrate alliances. On the other hand, his emphasis on transactionalism and rejection of traditional liberal values challenge the very foundations of the U.S.-led global order. Whether this approach leads to pragmatic stability or accelerates global fragmentation remains to be seen. What is evident, however, is that American foreign policy under Trump has decisively shifted from defending a universal rules-based order to prioritizing national interests, bilateral deals, and a selective, sometimes opportunistic, form of global engagement.

These contradictions become especially significant in relations with Europe. The European Union is not simply another ally of the United States. It is simultaneously a political project, a regulatory power, a major economic actor and a community that defines itself partly through liberal-democratic values. EU-US relations are therefore shaped not only by security interests but also by disagreements over sovereignty, economic policy, social regulation, democracy, technological governance and the meaning of Western political identity. The transatlantic relationship remains indispensable, but the terms on which it functions are increasingly contested by both sides.

Whenever an American administration changes, the question rightly arises as to how much attention the new president will devote to foreign policy and which regions will occupy prominent positions among American priorities. Europe and the European Union retain an exceptional allied role, but shifts of emphasis in the transatlantic relationship are both natural and unavoidable. These shifts depend on the development of European integration, changes in American foreign policy, and transformations within the broader international order.

The evolution of EU-US relations should therefore not be interpreted primarily as a succession of crises and recoveries. Alliances that endure for decades necessarily change. The postwar relationship was constructed in a Europe weakened by war, divided by the Cold War and dependent on American security guarantees. The contemporary European Union is economically stronger, politically more integrated, institutionally more developed and increasingly conscious of its own interests. At the same time, the United States confronts global responsibilities extending far beyond Europe, especially in Asia. A changing transatlantic relationship is consequently not an anomaly. It is the

natural result of the success and maturation of the partnership itself, as well as the transformation of the environment in which it operates.

Analyzing such a complex relationship requires more than a conventional foreign-policy perspective. The political traditions of both entities must be considered, as must the values and interests expressed in their external policies, the relationship between those interests, and the ways in which decisions on one side influence calculations on the other. The United States is a sovereign state with a unified constitutional framework, while the European Union is a more complex political entity in which national and supranational competences coexist. This difference affects the speed, coherence and legitimacy of foreign-policy decision-making and frequently produces different expectations concerning leadership, sovereignty and compromise.

It is also essential to distinguish EU-US relations from European-American relations. The former constitute part of the latter but are not identical to them. European-American relations describe a broader transatlantic framework based partly on geography and include European allies outside the European Union. The distinction was particularly visible during earlier phases of European integration, but it remains important today. The British-American special relationship existed before the United Kingdom joined the European Communities in 1973 and continues after Brexit. The United States also maintains strategically important relationships with non-EU European allies, including Turkey within NATO. Russia, Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans similarly occupy important places in American policy toward the wider European space, even though developments in these regions also profoundly influence EU policy.

The present analysis therefore concentrates primarily on relations between the United States and the European Union while situating them within the broader transatlantic context. Its principal timeframe begins with the creation of the European Union through the Maastricht Treaty, although earlier developments during the Cold War remain indispensable for understanding the foundations of the relationship. The transformation from a largely American-led Western alliance into a more complex partnership between the United States, the EU and individual European states created both new opportunities and new sources of ambiguity.

Every American administration must define its relationship with the European Union, which remains one of the United States' most important political and

economic partners. This definition matters not only to Washington and Brussels but also to other major actors. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union had a vital interest in preventing the smooth development of transatlantic unity. China today similarly assesses EU-US relations through the lens of its own strategic position. A stronger American concentration on Europe might appear beneficial to Beijing if it diverted attention and resources from Asia and allowed China to consolidate regional predominance as a Pacific power (Economy, 2021). This remains an imagined best-case scenario from the Chinese perspective rather than a likely division of global responsibilities, but it illustrates that transatlantic relations influence strategic calculations well beyond the Atlantic region.

In practice, American priorities have increasingly shifted toward Asia. The United States had been actively present there since the articulation of the Open Door principle in 1899, while its permanent strategic engagement in Europe after the Second World War resulted principally from the realities of the Cold War. The end of bipolar confrontation repeatedly raised the question of whether American resources and political attention should be reallocated. The Obama-Clinton pivot toward Asia announced in 2011 represented the most visible expression of this reassessment and was criticized by analysts who feared that Europe would be strategically neglected (Mitchell, 2014).

The pivot did not imply that Europe had ceased to matter. Rather, it reflected the expectation that a stable, prosperous and increasingly integrated Europe would assume greater responsibility for its own security while the United States devoted more attention to China and the Indo-Pacific. From Washington's perspective, this was a logical adaptation to changing global power relations. From the European perspective, however, it raised questions about the reliability of American engagement and the capacity of the EU to develop a more autonomous strategic role.

Joe Biden's presidency therefore generated uncertainty as well as optimism. As Barack Obama's former vice president, he might have been expected to continue the reorientation toward Asia. Alternatively, he might have treated the EU primarily as an economic competitor, as Trump frequently did and does. Yet Biden's early foreign-policy rhetoric clearly emphasized the renewal of relations with Europe within a broader "world of democracies" (Rada, 2024b). Russia's subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine made it even clearer that a strong and relatively united European Union served the strategic interests of the United States. The difference between 2014 and 2022 was significant: the annexation of

Crimea still allowed many Western actors to treat Russian revisionism as containable, whereas the full-scale invasion demonstrated that the European security order itself was under direct attack.

Leading EU politicians and much of the Western European political elite viewed the Trump administration as an aberration because of its transactional criticism of the Union and Trump's frequently expressed contempt toward European integration. It was therefore unsurprising that they welcomed Biden's election with considerable expectation (Baer, 2021). Nevertheless, Europe had not remained passive during the Trump years. The deterioration of political trust, disputes over NATO burden sharing, trade conflicts, sanctions, digital regulation and American unilateralism encouraged European leaders to reconsider the Union's position within the transatlantic relationship.

Even before Biden's inauguration, the EU formulated an ambitious agenda for renewed cooperation. The proposals expressed fundamentally positive expectations but also signaled that Europe did not intend simply to return to the pre-Trump status quo or accommodate every American preference. The EU placed particular emphasis on jointly assumed responsibility in confronting global challenges, including climate change, Covid-19 and future pandemics, reform of world trade and the WTO, and digitalization (European Commission, 2020a). The emphasis on joint responsibility was important. It implied that renewed partnership required greater consultation and reciprocity rather than a simple restoration of American leadership and European alignment.

Biden declared that "America is back" and gave particular emphasis to the country's return to Europe. He reaffirmed this position at the Munich Security Conference and, under radically different circumstances, in Warsaw after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (White House, 2022a). These statements were welcomed because they restored the language of alliance and consultation. Yet the triumphalist tone of the early declarations did not fully acknowledge how much the European debate had changed. Europeans had spent the previous years reconsidering their role in the transatlantic relationship and their position in a changing international order.

China's growing power was central to this reconsideration. The EU viewed China simultaneously as a partner, economic competitor and systemic rival, but its economic exposure and geographical position produced a different strategic calculation from that of the United States. At the end of 2020, despite objections from the incoming American administration, the European Commission reached

an agreement with China on a new framework for investment relations. The Comprehensive Agreement on Investment was subsequently stalled and its ratification became politically unlikely, but the act of concluding it remained significant. It demonstrated that the EU was prepared to pursue its own interests even when Washington requested delay or coordination (European Commission, 2020b).

The agreement also gave practical meaning to the European language of strategic autonomy. Strategic autonomy did not necessarily imply separation from the United States or the construction of an equidistant European position between Washington and Beijing. It expressed the ambition to preserve the capacity for independent decisions when American and European interests did not fully coincide. In this sense, it held up a mirror to “America First” and suggested the possibility, however limited, of a corresponding “Europe First.”

The changing relationship was therefore not simply a reaction to Trump. It reflected deeper structural developments. The United States was increasingly focused on China and the Indo-Pacific, while the EU was seeking greater regulatory, economic and strategic agency. Both actors remained committed to cooperation, but neither was prepared to define cooperation as automatic subordination to the preferences of the other. The natural and unavoidable maturation of the relationship thus produced more frequent disagreement precisely because the European Union had become a more consequential actor.

From the beginning of Biden’s term, the return toward Europe also served the objective of strengthening the Western front against Russia. The invasion of Ukraine subsequently deepened transatlantic strategic cooperation and expanded it beyond traditional defense policy. Energy trade, sanctions, industrial production, critical raw materials, supply-chain security and the financing of Ukraine all became central to the relationship. American liquefied natural gas helped reduce European dependence on Russian energy, while the war revealed the extent to which defense policy, industrial capacity and economic resilience had become interconnected.

Biden defined the United States as the leader of a world of democracies (White House, 2021). In this respect, he assumed a fundamental convergence between European and American interests. The EU and the United States shared commitments to democracy, human rights, multilateral institutions and opposition to Russian aggression. Nevertheless, translating these broad principles into a coherent global strategy proved difficult.

The framing of international politics as a contest between democracies and autocracies did not always correspond to European interests. The EU had strong reasons to preserve relations with China and, before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with Russia. European states also differed significantly in their economic exposure, strategic cultures and assessments of external threats. A global ideological confrontation risked reducing the Union's room for maneuver while requiring it to adopt American priorities in regions where European interests were not identical.

The use of double or multiple standards has rarely strengthened the credibility of a value-based foreign policy. The United States faced a genuine dilemma: whether the unity of the European Union should take precedence over the public differentiation of member states according to domestic political criteria, or whether the defense of democracy required direct pressure even when such pressure deepened internal European divisions. Democracy as a value remained exceptionally important, but the problem arose from reductionism—the assumption that a leading power could define a single acceptable institutional model and treat even limited deviation from it as strategically disqualifying.

The concept of democracy itself remained insufficiently defined. Liberal democracy can refer to competitive elections, constitutional checks and balances, judicial independence, media pluralism, minority protections, civil liberties or a wider progressive political agenda (Schmitter & Karl, 1991). These elements are related but not identical. When they are treated as a single indivisible package, foreign policy may become vulnerable to inconsistency and selective application. Strategic partners outside Europe may be judged according to one standard, while formal allies within the democratic community are subjected to a more demanding one.

This asymmetry reflects the internal logic of the liberal bubble discussed above. The United States can cooperate pragmatically with non-democratic actors outside the Western community when geopolitical interests require it, while demanding more extensive political conformity from allies inside that community. The result is a tension between geopolitical inclusion and ideological discipline. For the EU, whose unity depends on reconciling substantial political diversity among its member states, this tension is especially consequential.

The reconsideration of European–American relations under Biden therefore produced neither a simple return to the pre-Trump order nor a complete transformation of the alliance. Biden restored consultation, reaffirmed NATO,

strengthened coordination against Russia and revitalized the language of democratic partnership. At the same time, disagreements persisted over China, trade, industrial subsidies, digital regulation, strategic autonomy and the political boundaries of the democratic community. European leaders welcomed America's return but were less willing to abandon the ambitions and lessons that had developed during the preceding years.

The changing nature of EU-US relations should therefore be understood as natural, necessary and unavoidable. It is natural because no alliance can remain unchanged while the capabilities, priorities and political identities of its participants evolve. It is necessary because both the United States and the European Union must adapt to the rise of China, the return of Russian revisionism, technological transformation, economic insecurity and growing domestic polarization. It is unavoidable because the relationship now connects two political and economic actors with overlapping but not identical interests.

The United States remains the most powerful actor within the liberal international order and the indispensable security partner of Europe. The European Union, however, is no longer merely the object of American strategy or a passive beneficiary of American leadership. It increasingly seeks to define its own economic, regulatory and strategic interests. The central question is therefore not whether the transatlantic relationship is weakening or recovering, but how its internal balance is being renegotiated.

This broader transformation provides the framework for examining the specific dimensions of EU-US relations. Security, trade, energy, technology, China, democratic values and global governance each reveal different combinations of cooperation, dependence, competition and disagreement. These detailed areas should not be treated as isolated policy disputes. Together, they demonstrate how a historically exceptional partnership is adapting to a world in which American leadership remains indispensable but is no longer uncontested, and in which European support remains essential but can no longer be assumed to be automatic.

The return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2025 fundamentally altered the debate surrounding the future of the transatlantic relationship. Whereas Trump's first administration was frequently interpreted in Europe as an exceptional interruption of the post-Cold War consensus (Riddervold & Newsome, 2018), his electoral victory for a second, non-consecutive term suggested that transactional approaches to foreign policy and skepticism toward

liberal internationalism had become a durable component of American domestic politics rather than a temporary political anomaly. For European decision-makers, this realization was arguably more significant than any individual policy measure. It reinforced the perception that changes in American foreign policy could no longer be regarded simply as deviations that would inevitably be corrected by subsequent administrations. Instead, the reliability of American leadership itself became subject to domestic political cycles, thereby strengthening European arguments in favor of greater strategic autonomy and resilience.

Trump's second presidency also revived discussions concerning the nature of American hegemony. Traditional theories of hegemonic stability assume that the leading power is willing to bear disproportionate costs in exchange for preserving an international order from which it ultimately derives long-term strategic benefits. Increasingly, however, observers have argued that the United States has begun to behave less as a provider of international public goods and more as what has been described as a predatory hegemon (Walt, 2026). From this perspective, Washington continues to expect political loyalty, military support and privileged market access from its allies, while simultaneously employing tariffs, sanctions, secondary sanctions, investment restrictions and the threat of withdrawing security guarantees as instruments for maximizing immediate American advantage. Leadership thus becomes increasingly conditional upon bilateral reciprocity rather than the maintenance of a collectively beneficial liberal order. This represents not the abandonment of hegemony but a transformation in the manner through which hegemonic power is exercised.

For the European Union, this evolution presents a strategic dilemma rather than a simple geopolitical choice. The United States remains Europe's indispensable security partner, particularly following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, while no realistic alternative to NATO currently exists. At the same time, the growing transactional character of American foreign policy encourages the European Union to reduce excessive strategic dependence in selected sectors, including defense industrial capacity, critical technologies, energy security and supply chains. Consequently, recent debates over European strategic autonomy should not be interpreted primarily as efforts to distance Europe from the United States. Rather, they represent an attempt to preserve the transatlantic partnership under conditions in which American leadership itself has become more

conditional, more interest-driven and less predictably anchored in the traditional assumptions of the post-war liberal order. The future of EU-US relations therefore depends less on whether the alliance survives—which remains highly probable—than on how both partners adapt to an international environment in which even hegemonic leadership is increasingly transactional.

The interpretation of the United States as a predatory hegemon nevertheless illustrates the central argument of SurRealism rather than contradicting it. At first sight, the increasingly transactional character of American foreign policy appears to signal the abandonment of the liberal order in favor of narrowly defined national interests. From the perspective of SurRealism, however, this development reflects the permanent interaction between realist and liberal logics rather than the victory of one over the other. The United States may seek to renegotiate the costs of leadership, employ economic and political coercion more openly, or expect greater reciprocity from its allies, yet it continues to operate within—and ultimately benefits from—the very liberal international order that it helped construct. Even a more transactional America therefore has a structural interest in preserving an international system that secures open markets, institutional influence, technological leadership and alliance networks. The apparent contradiction between the pursuit of immediate national advantage and the maintenance of the liberal order is thus not evidence of inconsistency but an illustration of the SurRealist nature of contemporary international politics: realist instruments increasingly serve the preservation of a fundamentally liberal international order, while liberal institutions continue to reinforce American power even when Washington questions their costs or immediate utility.

5.5 The EU-US relations in historical perspective

The United States became involved in European affairs as a reluctant great power during the First World War, then, following a brief period of renewed isolationism, remained in Europe after the Second World War as one of the leaders of the bipolar world that emerged from the ruins of the global conflict. Since its founding, the United States has possessed a remarkably strong tradition of isolationism, which determined how—and for the most part whether—it became involved in European affairs. One need only think of George Washington's isolationist Farewell Address or the "America for the Americans" doctrine associated with the fifth president, James Monroe.

Belief in American exceptionalism simultaneously provided justification for turning away from Europe and proclaiming ideological superiority. The United States was "forced" to pursue unilateral actions in its foreign policy if it wished to preserve its independence. In other words, the objective was not isolation but independence. (In this spirit, the United States declared war on Great Britain in 1812 after Britain restricted American trade and forcibly conscripted American sailors into its navy. At the same time, however, the Monroe Doctrine was not intended to grant Americans a free hand on the continent, nor was its objective to promote the Latin American revolutions. Rather, the United States primarily sought to prevent the European powers from reappearing and strengthening themselves on its frontier. It should be remembered that in 1823 the western borders of the United States had not yet reached the Pacific Ocean (Magyarics, 2000). This became connected to the idea of expansion, since the best way to prevent the British, French, Russians, or Spaniards from appearing in Oregon or the southwestern territories was for the United States itself to occupy these lands. At the same time, the establishment of the American system, republicanism, democratic institutions, and the spread of the capitalist economy also provided ideological justification for the correctness of American expansion.

Once American development and expansion reached the point at which remaining outside world politics was no longer possible, it was self-evident that Washington would assume a more active role in international relations, which inevitably generated more conflicts. Progressive imperialism served demands that sought to strengthen American commercial positions not only on the American continent but also in Asia and even Europe through naval expansion. The United States also became involved in major interstate conflicts. In 1898, by

defeating Spain, the United States acquired colonies, and in 1905 it played a role in resolving both the Moroccan Crisis and the Russo-Japanese War (Graubard, 2007). Wilsonianism expanded this involvement to the global level and made it the moral duty of the United States to make the world safer for democracies. This, of course, is precisely what can also be identified in the case of Biden.

Although American activity in Europe did not cease after the First World War, it unquestionably receded into the background, and “isolationism” dominated American foreign policy until the Second World War. After the Second World War, as the unquestionably strongest power in the world, the United States had to prepare for a long struggle (Kennan, 2020) against the Soviet Union. This required the activism embodied in the policy of containment, according to which the United States globally monitored Soviet expansion and, in an unprecedented manner, was willing to intervene anywhere, including militarily, to prevent it. With the end of the Cold War, a unique moment emerged in which the United States remained the leader of the world without a visible enemy. This forms the basis of the principle of “global meliorism,” according to which the world can be improved through human effort and economic development can be beneficial for everyone. The mission of the United States was to lead this process of development. This development sought to transform the causes of poverty and underdevelopment, which was accompanied by the spread of American liberal institutions and the establishment of corresponding norms.

A strong and united Europe against the Soviet Union constituted an unquestionable foundation—initially an objective—of American foreign policy after 1945, while the continuous American presence in Europe was also welcomed as a new phenomenon. In other words, Europe’s security was inseparable from the protective umbrella provided by the United States. The Americans accepted the invitation (“hegemony by invitation,” a frequently used concept in neorealist foreign policy theory) (Rada, 2016) and actively—naturally on the basis of their own foreign policy and economic interests—shaped European integration. They did so beginning with the reorientation of American foreign policy through Truman’s speech of March 12, 1947, continuing with the reconstruction of the European economy through the Marshall Plan, and extending to the establishment of political institutions such as NATO or the support of initiatives such as the 1950 Schuman Plan and the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951.

Thus, the institutionalization of European integration was also a declared American interest, because a stable European economic—and ultimately political and economic—bloc constituted an effective ally in containing the Soviet Union. It should be added that a strengthened Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany) generated fears in certain Washington circles both then and continues to do so today. Excessive success of European integration and the construction and strengthening of an economic—and possibly political—challenger has never been an American objective. Beyond this clear objective, however, the manner of implementation and the form of integration preferred from the American perspective were not obvious. The ECSC certainly represented an effective institutional instrument for rebuilding Europe and managing Germany's position in some form, but it was not clear how this related to the special Anglo-American relationship. It is no coincidence that Great Britain also moved closer to the successful ECSC, and it was by no means self-evident that it would remain outside the European Economic Community. Certain developments in world politics, such as decolonization and the Suez Crisis, temporarily prevented the Six founding members of the ECSC from expanding to include Great Britain. Ultimately, in 1957, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg signed the two Treaties of Rome.

At the same time, the United States maintained relations both with the EEC and with the EFTA established by the British. By the 1960s, however, the latter no longer satisfied American interests, and Washington also placed pressure on London to reconsider its position regarding the EEC. Although the process took longer than the Americans had expected because of France—or, more precisely, President Charles de Gaulle—the EEC expanded in 1973 with three new members, including Great Britain. In other words, the special relationship became absorbed into European integration. It is no coincidence that after this so many people quoted Henry Kissinger's legendary question, posed while serving as Secretary of State in the Nixon administration: "Who do I call if I want to speak to Europe?" (Kissinger himself stated that he had never actually uttered these words, but considered them appropriate and therefore never denied them.) Clearly, Great Britain remained important, but so too did the Federal Republic of Germany, later reunified Germany, and, in certain respects, Brussels as the pan-European center.

Our contemporary world is exceptionally complex, and the three decades since 1992 and the Maastricht Treaty establishing the EU have been characterized by

parallel challenges that have increased the importance of the European Union. If we wish to characterize the international environment and changing political geometry within which both the United States and the EU have necessarily had to navigate, it is essential to examine more closely the trends that have shaped international relations over the past three decades. This is clearly important not only because of the transformation of the bipolar world order, but also because of the political strengthening of the EU. It is insufficient simply to state that our bipolar world became unipolar and that the role and position of the United States, which had effectively attained a monopoly of power, subsequently came into question. Such an interpretation would be an excessive simplification, because among the defining events of our era numerous processes unfolded that fundamentally determined the framework within which the EU has been able to pursue its foreign policy objectives. Second, the trends mentioned above must also be examined more deeply within their European context, and the significance of the EU within the broader international framework must be understood. In other words, we are examining a period in which the events regarded as decisive historical turning points were primarily connected to American foreign policy, while within these periods the EU itself was also compelled to make profound political decisions.

So far, this observation does not represent any significant novelty. The real problem begins with the fact that mutually interacting and interconnected events and processes influenced EU–American relations. Consequently, the real difficulty in understanding our world lies in describing everything simultaneously before excessive simplification or generalization occurs—a mistake made by numerous analyses examining relations between the EU and the United States.

An unavoidable characteristic of today's world is the interdependence of international actors, the overlap between processes, and the simultaneous presence of countless international developments. However attractive simplification may be, and however tempting it is to claim that certain events—perhaps a war—override everything else, it nevertheless cannot be argued that any single event can be detached from the complexity of international interconnections. Individual actors, processes, and events cannot be separated from one another; they must be understood and managed simultaneously. Today, this can be illustrated through a relatively simple example demonstrating that by placing the same problem into a different context—a regional and/or issue-specific environment—we may arrive at entirely different, yet equally valid,

answers. One such issue, undoubtedly a serious one, concerns how we should relate to Russia. From an issue-specific perspective, we may ask whether Russian military aggression should be condemned. The answer is clearly yes. Similarly, the question immediately arises regarding how Russia should participate in the future European order. Here the answer is no longer entirely straightforward, because if we consider energy dependence, even within the EU there are substantial regional differences in dependence on Russian energy resources. Central Europe, for example, cannot be compared with Southwestern Europe in this respect. The dilemma also clearly emerges when comparing the EU and the United States.

Thus, in addition to changes in the international order itself, particular attention should be paid to how these changes affected both actors—not only the United States, even if Washington undeniably influenced these developments most directly, but also the European Union. It would not be accurate to claim that the EU has been unified over the past thirty years, especially considering that since 1992 the integration has expanded from twelve to twenty-eight members (and, following Brexit, has remained at twenty-seven). Internal, primarily political, disagreements have at times been genuinely fundamental. Yet it is equally misleading and ultimately incorrect to extrapolate from these disagreements and conclude that the EU as a political entity has no relevance in relations with the United States.

Both the expression “new world order” and its deeper interpretation have been popular subjects within the international relations literature over the past three decades (Rada, 2007b). However, the popularity of a topic does not mean that it no longer deserves attention, particularly given the large number of developments since 1992 that experts have regarded as defining historical turning points and that have influenced EU–American relations.

Even before the Russian invasion of 2022, we had already experienced turbulent years. During 2020 and 2021, both the EU and the United States were confronted simultaneously with numerous multidimensional challenges. These challenges—the growing global role of China, inadequately managed Brexit, Europe’s energy security, illegal migration, and, naturally, the Covid-19 pandemic—remain with us despite the fact that the Russian–Ukrainian war now clearly dominates the European political agenda.

The global challenges of the past three decades, which have naturally also been reflected within the EU, have made it clear that the international institutions—

and indeed the international order itself—created by the victorious great powers based on the realities of the Second World War are incapable of responding satisfactorily and flexibly to every threat characterizing today's world. This does not mean that the existing security architecture is invalid, but rather that there is a need for carefully considered reform that takes regional differences into account. Certain “over-securitized” issues must not obscure the multidimensional nature of our world. We must recognize that alongside the war in Ukraine, other challenges have not disappeared, and not every question can be answered identically when interpreted from Washington or from Brussels.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, our world experienced the era of a neoliberal world order dominated by the Washington Consensus, and, in Fukuyama's sense, “history truly seemed to have ended” within a unipolar American world order. This became the generally accepted view despite the fact that the EU had to confront its own foreign and security policy impotence during the Balkan wars following the breakup of Yugoslavia. It was no coincidence that the Maastricht Treaty established the Common Foreign and Security Policy as its second pillar, at least on paper. However, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York and Washington inaugurated a new era, characterized by what researchers described as the activation of American military power awakened from its “strategic slumber.” History resumed and, according to an increasingly accepted interpretation, did so along the lines of Huntington's clash of civilizations (Huntington, 1996). History had so clearly not ended that in 2008 the world was struck once again, unexpectedly from a direction that had appeared even more controlled than politics itself in light of the global economic euphoria of the 1990s. The global financial crisis of 2008–2009, followed by the broader economic crisis—the Great Recession—shifted the world's attention away from military and security issues back toward economics and trade. The United States also recognized the need to maintain transformed forms of cooperation in an increasingly multipolar world. This was reflected, for example, in the policy of resetting relations with Russia, reassuring China, and the strategic pivot toward Asia. By 2014, however, the problems associated with the economic crisis had by no means been resolved within the EU, where they had developed into a severe identity crisis, while the United States also wished to concentrate on fundamental domestic problems. Yet Russia's annexation of Crimea returned power politics to international relations to such an extent that some authors (Mearsheimer, 2021) envisioned a “new Cold War” associated with China's rise by the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

As already noted, these historical turning points have appeared increasingly rapidly and simultaneously. One need only think of the Arab Spring, initially regarded as a regional issue but ultimately becoming a global one, or of the illegal migration crisis that emerged in Europe in 2015 partly as its consequence. The year 2020 and the expansion of Covid-19 into a global pandemic, together with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have brought about—or are bringing about—a paradigm shift and require the reconsideration of the world order.

The conclusion of every decade and the beginning of a new one—that is, our own era—encourages both the scholarly community and researchers to evaluate the state of international relations and formulate forecasts regarding the “new world order.” It must be acknowledged that, unlike the 1990s, the 2000s did not begin positively, the 2010s generated distinctly pessimistic predictions, and the 2020s have developed even more negatively than anyone anticipated. Both the Covid-19 pandemic and Russian aggression are testing the existing international order: the former as a distinctly twenty-first-century challenge, the latter as a forgotten twentieth-century one. It should be added that in the case of the pandemic it is perhaps unsurprising that the institutional system established after the Second World War proved inadequate. The Russian invasion, however, gravely violates precisely the international legal order that was created to prevent such wars.

The situation becomes even more serious if we add that, independently of these turning points, the world itself is constantly changing, while today’s Facebookized and Twitterized public sphere only complicates matters further. The problem is not the increased political participation of citizens around the world, but rather the politically influential presence of the misleading “expertise” of countless self-appointed opinion leaders—whether in public health, climate policy, or, more recently, foreign policy. Thus, the changing international environment continuously reshapes EU–American relations, within which both sides must navigate. Interdependence is beyond dispute; what is far less clear is how it is interpreted in Washington and in Brussels.

The history of European–American relations reaches back a remarkably long way. One need only consider the fact that the United States itself was created by European settlers, and that its relationship with Europe—initially distinctly conflictual—constituted a central element of American foreign policy. This was clearly expressed, for example, in the tradition of American isolationism and in

principles defined by Washington's Farewell Address or the Monroe Doctrine. Having become a reluctant great power by the twentieth century, the United States remained in Europe after the Second World War and actively participated in the reconstruction of Europe and in the establishment of the new security institutional system. By the dawn of the Cold War, a united Europe was no longer an objective dictated solely by economic interests for Washington. The creation of European unity also provided a guarantee for containing Soviet territorial expansion and the spread of communist ideology. Unsurprisingly, the United States established formal diplomatic relations with the ECSC, the predecessor of the EU, as early as 1953 and, in the spirit of its special relationship with Britain, "encouraged" its closest European ally to participate in European integration. Although the Americans established a representative office in Brussels only in 1961, bilateral relations remained intensive and close. In response to the end of the Cold War, even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Transatlantic Declaration was adopted in 1990 (EU, 1990), with the objective of initiating closer cooperation in economic and commercial affairs, science, and education. Then, under the new international circumstances, the considerably more ambitious New Transatlantic Agenda was adopted in 1995 (EU, 1995). The document, which the previously mentioned plans of 2020 sought to renew, formulated 150 detailed objectives for close and institutionalized cooperation within the transforming global political and economic environment. Among the most important jointly formulated objectives were the development of Europe's economy and the integration of the former socialist countries into the transatlantic alliance system, renewed relations with Russia and Ukraine, the strengthening of human rights protection in the European neighborhood, and the expansion of the zone of democracies across the entire European continent. In the period since then, several additional strategic documents have been adopted with the objective of continuing the institutional deepening of relations, including through regular EU-United States summits.

With the development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the EU became a "more useful" partner for the United States (EU, 2006). Consequently, global security challenges that had to be addressed jointly appeared with increasing frequency on the cooperation agenda: the creation of peace and stability, action against international terrorism, and the prevention of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Unsurprisingly, however, the principal focus remained on economic and commercial issues. This was well illustrated by the American foreign policy approach of the 1990s and, with regard

to declared concerns about an excessively autonomous EU defense policy, by the position expressed by United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright at the 1998 NATO summit: “no decoupling, no discrimination and no duplication” (NATO, 1998).

Within the framework of the transatlantic agenda, the parties also adopted a new framework for developing economic relations in London in 1998, entitled the Transatlantic Economic Partnership (EU, 1998b). This was followed by the 2005 joint declaration on transatlantic economic integration and growth (EU & US Department of State, 2005), as well as the 2021 joint green economic initiative (EU, 2021). The objective of economic cooperation is to remove obstacles that stand in the way of the development of trade. The objective has always been ambitious, but because of numerous fundamental conflicting interests, the even more ambitious plan for a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership could not be realized (EU, 2022c). Such obstacles, regarding which bilateral agreements were concluded, included the coordination of air trade and transportation, the harmonization of satellite navigation systems (Galileo), and the mutual consideration of business interests through the Transatlantic Business Dialogue at international forums, such as the negotiating rounds of the World Trade Organization.

Transatlantic relations are not limited to the institutional relationship between the EU and the United States. They encompass broader, but necessarily interconnected, fields, including NATO as the framework for security and defense cooperation and bilateral relations with all European countries, not only EU members. It is no coincidence that, in the interest of “simplification”—naturally without this being an explicitly declared objective—the United States supported the continuous enlargement of both NATO and the EU, and the membership of the various forms of cooperation has by now become more or less identical. The close relationship between the EU and the United States generates nearly six trillion dollars in value annually, and the cooperation alone directly creates ten million jobs (CRS, 2022).

On the basis of the shared values described above, since the beginning of the 1990s the EU—or more accurately, the Europeans—have been the closest allies of the United States in reforming and maintaining the world order, from creating stability in the Western Balkans and addressing challenges in Africa to managing the current Russian invasion. Political, economic, and security cooperation also extends to institutionalized intelligence relations, which could no longer be

replaced today and therefore also bind the allies closely together. Moreover, and even more importantly for Washington, this cooperation restrains the growth of genuine Russian or Chinese influence. The American side reacts negatively even to the smallest Russian or Chinese presence, as demonstrated by the continuous criticism directed at our country, although precisely for this reason such influence does not represent a realistic strategic threat in the near future. At the same time, relations have continuously been characterized by the frustration of one side or the other and, occasionally, by openly expressed criticism.

The criticism most frequently voiced by the American side concerns European burden-sharing and the fact that European allies collected the peace dividend following the end of the Cold War. This situation “improved,” to no small extent because of the increasingly aggressive Russian policy experienced since 2014, and following the Russian invasion of 2022, Germany—the country most frequently criticized—announced its largest defense development plan since the Second World War. Furthermore, throughout the seven decades of institutional relations, American decision-makers have repeatedly faced the difficulty that despite the existence of the EU single market, administrative obstacles have remained that require Washington to coordinate not only with Brussels but also individually with the governments of the member states. This is especially true regarding issues with foreign policy “content,” such as the development of digital infrastructure and related regulations, including the presence of Huawei, or matters concerning energy security.

Europeans, meanwhile, have frequently been dissatisfied with unilateral American actions that often disregard jointly established international institutional frameworks or international law when immediate American foreign policy interests so dictate. On numerous occasions, these cases deepened divisions between the EU and the United States and also divided the EU itself because of the differing policies of its member states, as in the case of the 2003 Iraq War. Another European concern is that the United States does not in reality cooperate before making strategic decisions. This was well demonstrated by the Biden administration’s decision—not that of Trump, who was frequently accused of ignoring the EU—to withdraw unilaterally from Afghanistan.

The British special relationship deserves more detailed discussion here within the framework of the study. Because of the changed situation resulting from Brexit (Vara, 2021), several scenarios appear to be emerging: a renewed strengthening of British–American relations, the EU replacing Britain in the

special relationship, or—possibly together with the previous scenario—a reassessment of Germany's role in American foreign policy, a development encouraged by the 100-billion defense investment.

Brexit unquestionably disrupted American-European relations, and the United States had no interest in a British withdrawal with unpredictable consequences. This was clearly demonstrated by Barack Obama's surprisingly active and openly critical position toward Brexit. According to some views, this criticism instead strengthened the supporters of withdrawal (Rees, 2017). The American position was reinforced by Secretary of State John Kerry's speech at the Munich Security Conference (Bunde, 2021). Unintentionally, sharp American views concerning the consequences of British withdrawal and the prospect of declining European defense capabilities strengthened the perception that the Americans did not regard the EU, without Britain, as an equal partner in security cooperation. They also highlighted an American dilemma that had never produced a clearly declared position on whether the EU was a security and defense partner or rather a problem to be managed. At the rhetorical level, the claim that the EU was a genuine partner never changed. Yet the excessively emphasized fears created the impression that Washington truly regarded the British as a "Trojan horse" through which EU decision-making could be influenced. Similar ideas are expressed in the collection of studies by the American ambassador accredited to the EU during the Obama administration, which also functions as a biography (A. Gardner, 2020). Trump went even further, welcoming the decision of British voters and emphasizing the long-term opportunities inherent in a renewed special relationship. All this called into question the genuine usefulness of transatlantic relations in general, which since the Second World War had been built on an institutional system that allowed militarily weaker European partners to develop safely under the American protective umbrella. It also gave greater space to those voices that had long argued that institutionalized European strategic autonomy would generate conflict between the two sides of the Atlantic. In other words, from the American perspective, the EU creates a headache both because of its military weakness, which British membership counterbalanced, and because of the prospect of a strengthened Common Security and Defense Policy. The future is unclear, but the delicately maintained balance has unquestionably been disrupted. While Great Britain was generally skeptical about common defense, particularly if it could not control it, as illustrated by Saint-Malo (EU, 1998a), and sought to maintain a balance that would ensure that American leadership within the framework of transatlantic

cooperation would not be challenged even in the long term, the long-term thinking of the German–French axis always included the objective of developing EU capabilities even without Britain. France, as demonstrated by Macron, provides the political vision for this objective, while Germany provides its material and economic foundations. From the American perspective, an EU common army would constitute even more bitter icing on the cake. Although this is not a realistic prospect, following Brexit it was formulated as a genuine objective both at the EU level and within the German–French tandem in 2016.

At the rhetorical level, the United States supported Atlantic multilateralism, meaning that the most important issues should be decided jointly with European partners in common forums and that NATO and the EU should complement one another. In reality, Washington never hesitated to reach bilateral agreements earlier with individual European partners, bypassing multilateral forums when its interests required it. Great Britain was the most important partner in this bilateral “special path,” but following its withdrawal from the EU, the question arises whether the United States will continue to need “special” relationships in the future. The answer is yes. This partner could be the EU itself and the European Commission, but because of the complexity and slowness of EU decision-making, as well as the continuing requirement for member-state unanimity in exceptionally important areas, a leading member state is still necessary. This could be France. However, considering the history of ambivalent American–French relations and Macron’s foreign policy, which sees opportunities in expanding EU room for maneuver vis-à-vis the Americans, a strengthening of German–American relations cannot be excluded. Donald Trump’s presidency significantly damaged German–American relations, since Trump frequently characterized Germany as a free rider within NATO (Thiel, 2017).

Biden attempted to move closer, but the exceptionally complicated new German domestic political constellation did not make the situation easy. The governmental actors of Germany’s “traffic-light coalition” did not hold a unified position regarding the future of relations with the United States. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that today’s German political institutional system is a product of the American presence in Europe and is cited in the American literature as an example of successful state-building (Dobbins, 2007). As a consequence of the Marshall Plan, the Federal Republic of Germany was able to become the economic engine of European integration and, with American guarantees behind it, regain its foreign policy sovereignty during the 1950s

through membership in the ECSC, EEC, NATO, and the Western European Union. Germany, reluctant to assume political leadership, nevertheless became increasingly autonomous after the Cold War. By 2008, when avoiding economic collapse within the EU was due in no small part to German economic policy, Germany had also become an unavoidable actor in terms of political vision. In 2014, Germany assumed a leading role in the Minsk process aimed at addressing Russian aggression. Following the Russian invasion of 2022, Berlin announced an exceptionally significant defense development program that would necessarily strengthen its political position. Germany in fact took advantage of the situation, because although Trump criticized the inadequacy of the German defense budget, the emergence of a militarily strong and consequently autonomous German power had never genuinely been an American interest. According to the plans, within a few years Germany will possess the world's third-largest defense budget after the United States and China.

From an economic perspective, Germany was already unavoidable for the United States. It is by no means irrelevant how German–Chinese economic relations develop over the long term: whether Germany remains one of the flagships of the transatlantic economic space or becomes a stable European bastion of China's Belt and Road Initiative. In the short term, the Russian invasion also highlighted Germany's unavoidable role in energy security. Although Berlin halted the Nord Stream 2 project, sanctions against Russian gas deliveries encountered greater difficulty in Germany. This is a clear American interest, and without Germany it would be easier to impose sanctions on the EU by playing smaller member states against one another.

The argument above rather demonstrates that Germany is far from being as "reliable" as Great Britain and that German "predominance" conflicts with American interests. British membership counterbalanced both this predominance and the German–French axis whenever this was necessary for the Americans. At least this is how the situation appears from an American perspective. Yet it should also not be forgotten that Great Britain and London's consistently Euroskeptic policy continuously distanced the country from bureaucratic processes in Brussels, where German and French influence—despite the principle that member-state interests should not prevail, for example within the European Commission—was already obvious during the decade preceding Brexit. From this perspective, France also lost through Brexit, since it no longer even has the option of turning to London to counterbalance

bureaucratic German “overpower.” On strategic issues, when the United States wished to know the position of the Commission, it frequently consulted Berlin in advance even before Brexit.

5.6 The evolving strategic agenda of EU–United States relations

The historical evolution of the transatlantic relationship and the transformation of the liberal international order outlined in the previous sections provide the broader context for understanding the current EU–United States agenda. Rather than representing isolated policy disputes, the issues discussed by Washington and Brussels reflect deeper structural changes in the international system, shifts in the distribution of power, and the evolving balance between shared values and national interests. While successive administrations naturally introduce different priorities and political styles, the fundamental agenda of transatlantic relations has become increasingly comprehensive, extending well beyond traditionally understood foreign and security policy.

Security remains the cornerstone of the relationship. NATO continues to provide the institutional framework of transatlantic defense cooperation, not merely because of the continued American security guarantee for Europe, but also because it embodies the jointly defined strategic vision of the Alliance. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept identifies Russia as the most significant and direct threat to Allied security, while also recognizing the systemic challenge posed by China's growing influence. At the same time, it retains longstanding priorities such as counterterrorism, cyber defense, resilience, emerging technologies and the protection of critical infrastructure (NATO, 2022). The Russian invasion of Ukraine has reinforced the centrality of collective defense while simultaneously strengthening debates concerning European defense capabilities, burden-sharing and strategic autonomy.

Beyond security, the agenda has expanded considerably. The European Union and the United States cooperate closely in addressing global challenges, including climate change, pandemic preparedness, energy security, critical supply chains, digital governance and the regulation of emerging technologies. Economic relations have likewise acquired a stronger geopolitical character. The establishment of the EU–US Trade and Technology Council illustrates the growing recognition that competitiveness, innovation, industrial policy and technological standards have become strategic issues rather than purely commercial ones (European Commission, 2021). At the same time, sensitive political questions continue to shape the relationship, including differing approaches to democracy promotion, the rule of law, sanctions, industrial

subsidies and the pursuit of European strategic autonomy. Brexit has further complicated the transatlantic landscape by introducing new questions concerning EU–UK relations, the future of the Good Friday Agreement, and the role of the United Kingdom within the broader transatlantic community.

The breadth of the transatlantic agenda makes it impossible to examine every policy area with equal depth. Although EU–United States relations encompass numerous political, economic, cultural, scientific and educational interactions, three interconnected dimensions have consistently formed the strategic core of the partnership. First, the security dimension, centered on NATO, European defense, geopolitical competition and crisis management; second, the economic dimension, including trade, investment, technology, industrial policy and economic resilience; and third, the global governance dimension, covering climate policy, health security, democracy promotion and other transnational challenges. These three dimensions have historically constituted the foundations of the transatlantic relationship, and they continue to provide the principal framework through which its contemporary transformation can be understood. The following sections therefore examine each of these dimensions separately while emphasizing their growing interdependence in an increasingly competitive international environment.

5.6.1 The security dimension of EU–United States relations

When the security dimension is mentioned, it is beyond dispute that NATO is the first institution that comes to mind within transatlantic relations. The focus of the present study is EU–United States relations, and therefore relations within NATO and the NATO–EU relationship do not constitute its central subject. This subsection reviews those issues that extend beyond the NATO framework and appear directly within EU–United States relations. Naturally, NATO and military and defense cooperation cannot be completely separated from the discussion, and there is overlap between the topics addressed here and NATO issues. NATO–EU relations, and the development of NATO more generally, possess a rich literature that also provides guidance concerning these questions (H. Gardner, 2017).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine constitutes one of the most serious violations of international law since the Second World War, perhaps giving disproportionate priority to the role of the security dimension. It was already clear in 2014 that

Russian aggression should not receive a military response, but demonstrating the unity of security cooperation was exceptionally important. This is even more true with regard to preserving the unity—and therefore effectiveness—of sanctions, for which the EU is an indispensable partner. The measures of 2014 did not break Moscow, at least not to the same extent as the joint sanctions package compelled Iran to accept an agreement in 2015. The package of 2022 was considerably more coordinated and severe, but its genuine effects remain a matter of speculation. In the long term, Russia will be economically crippled, but this is not the objective—or at least should not be. The objective is the immediate termination of the war, not the exclusion of Russia from the international political and economic system, which would also be exceptionally painful for the EU. Expressed numerically, EU–Russian economic and commercial relations are ten times greater than comparable American–Russian relations.

With regard to sanctions, however, excessive American demands may be counterproductive. Sanctioning European companies that cooperate in any form with Russian companies—for example through joint consortia or joint ventures—would also affect the energy supply that constitutes the lifeblood of the European economy. This is without even mentioning that unilateral American foreign policy that fails to listen to European fears and reservations generates suspicion in certain EU member states, which, grounded in reality, do not in any case approach sanctions uniformly. This remains true even though none of the EU's twenty-seven member states vetoed the legitimacy of the sanctions. The Hungarian (Orbán) government has repeatedly been publicly criticized in Washington because of its perceived pro-Russian position, while other EU member states were hardly enthusiastic about sanctions either. In 2014, Greece effectively questioned the sanctions, Slovakia and the Czech Republic were likewise not exemplary students in American eyes, and Germany maintained the Nord Stream projects for a while. In 2022, the Hungarian position regarding sanctions on trade in energy resources again appeared disproportionately frequently in the press, while the genuine restraining force was Germany, and France also preferred to remain more neutral in this field (Vinocur, 2022). It is also certain that, as in 2014, the EU—and its individual member states to differing degrees—is affected much more severely. The view that the allies do not share the cost of sanctions equally, but that the EU bears a disproportionate burden, is therefore not unfounded.

A significant development in the security dimension, however, is that unlike in 2014, both the EU and the United States have supplied weapons to Ukraine. Trump was the first to decide on a significant increase in military assistance in 2018, and in 2022 the EU also authorized arms deliveries after it became clear that the policy of reconciliation based on the Minsk agreements—which Putin himself had repudiated—had failed.

Although it receives less attention today, preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons has been, or was, an important pillar of American–European security cooperation. As a result of cooperation and coordinated sanctions policy, the Iranian nuclear agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, was signed in 2015 (Robinson, 2022). It was, however, the United States itself that violated the agreement when Trump unilaterally terminated American participation in 2018. Although Biden treated the return of the United States to negotiations as a prominent issue even during the campaign, their future is unpredictable, given that Russia was also a participant.

Energy security is unquestionably a central element of the security dimension, even though, like sanctions policy, it also has a highly significant economic impact. In the long term, reducing dependence on Russian gas has always been an objective within the EU. In accordance with the European Green Deal (EU, 2019), this also involves transforming the structure of the European economy through the gradual transition to renewable energy. This is, for example, a prominent element of post-Covid-19 recovery plans. At the same time, efforts have also emerged to identify sources independent of Russia, including through the more effective use of the opportunities provided by LNG. Nevertheless, however much Washington emphasizes this option, LNG deliveries can replace only a fraction of Russian gas. Even if the numerous unresolved infrastructure issues are disregarded, it remains uncertain when a genuine American presence in European gas deliveries might become a reality. It is also frequently forgotten that increased LNG traffic would endanger several green emission objectives. Thus, the fact that the United States became self-sufficient and a net exporter by 2017—after previously facing legal obstacles—does not in itself resolve the issue.

Energy security is not a new element of EU–United States cooperation. Following the first oil crisis, it was precisely within this framework that the Paris-based International Energy Agency was established as part of the OECD. With regard to natural gas, however, little progress was made, and the infrastructure remained fixed. The situation is naturally exceptionally serious. Russia has repeatedly used

the energy weapon to divide the EU and cut off gas deliveries to Ukraine during the coldest months in 2006, 2009, and 2013–2014. These crises made the degree of exposure clear to the EU and encouraged certain member states to support projects designed to bypass Ukraine, such as the Nord Stream projects (CRS, 2022). They also compelled other member states to sign additional long-term agreements, thereby restricting these countries' general foreign policy room for maneuver toward Russia. Nuclear energy could represent a kind of alternative, as reflected in Hungarian plans. Yet here too, the demand to sanction the Russian presence appears simultaneously with the lack of a genuine European replacement proposal even without sanctions. In the case of Paks 2 (Hungarian nuclear plan development project), European partners cannot offer a substitute that would not be disproportionately more expensive.

Understood more broadly, energy security was already an important objective of American–European cooperation during the Cold War and has remained so to the present day. Although the United States is self-sufficient in energy, it cannot permit complete withdrawal from, for example, the Middle East because of its European allies. The absence of European energy security would lead to political and economic threats and imbalances within Europe and, indirectly, to economic difficulties within the United States. Political instability could very easily drive a wedge between the members of NATO and the EU. Precisely for this reason, considerably more restrained American pressure on the EU regarding sanctions against Russian gas would be advisable. At the institutional level, the EU–United States Energy Council (EU, 2022b) considers both the political and commercial dimensions of energy security. All parties are heard at its meetings, but the perspectives and opinions developed there do not always filter into high-level political and strategic decisions. The broader framework is provided by the previously mentioned Transatlantic Economic Cooperation.

A prominent element of EU–United States security cooperation is the fight against terrorism, particularly at the EU level in the fields of law-enforcement cooperation and the sharing of intelligence and criminal enforcement information. This is unsurprising in light of the inadequately managed illegal migration crisis of 2015, during which numerous individuals entered the EU who were unknown to the authorities. Through American cooperation, however, the EU could have possessed information about them, including through the sharing of American terrorist databases in exchange for European border-control data, assuming such data existed at all. For example, it was later proven that six of the

nine perpetrators of the 2015 Paris attacks had fought in the ranks of the Islamic State and had returned to the EU undetected by exploiting the chaotic conditions. In their case, the French authorities did possess information, but the other countries through which they traveled did not. Although current figures do not reach the tragic peak of 2015–2016, fifty-seven terrorist attacks still occurred in 2020, even though Great Britain was no longer included in EU statistics (Europol, 2021). At the same time, the number of arrests now significantly exceeds the number of attacks actually carried out, which is due, among other factors, to more effective law-enforcement cooperation with the United States.

Cooperation is also exceptionally important for the security of the United States, and inadequate law-enforcement cooperation could very easily result in changes to visa regulations. At present, EU citizens can travel to the United States under visa-waiver arrangements. However, if the EU cannot possess sufficiently reliable data about potential terrorists who are themselves EU citizens, or is unwilling to share those data with the United States, the visa-waiver program will not continue for long. It is also a problem within the EU that terrorists can exploit the opportunities provided by the Schengen Area and, as citizens, travel freely to any country within the zone. From an American perspective, it is not always reassuring that although the authorities of EU member states identify individuals as potential terrorists, they nevertheless fail to prevent attacks. One example is the perpetrator of the 2016 Berlin Christmas market attack, who was known to be preparing a terrorist act. The solution would be to share the Schengen Information System with American authorities. This, however, encounters not only practical obstacles but is also closely connected to the different data-protection regulations of the EU and the United States.

Although EU law-enforcement effectiveness in preventing terrorist acts still leaves room for improvement, it should be added that the EU has achieved significant development in the field of law enforcement over the past three decades. Since the establishment of Europol in 1994, the fight against terrorism has also become a central element at the EU level. Since 1999, Europol has coordinated in every case involving serious crime, while Eurojust was established in 2002 to coordinate not only law enforcement but also judicial cooperation. Naturally, the terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001 also justified the intensification of both EU-level and European–American cooperation in this field. Following those attacks, for example, the EU created its own list of terrorist organizations and adopted a common definition of terrorism. In response to the

illegal migration crisis and the terrorist attacks that followed, the European Commission adopted common legislation on combating terrorism in 2017 (EU, 2017). In 2018, the range of fields examined was expanded further to include online communication.

In European–American cooperation, the principal source of disagreement was not the definition of objectives but their implementation. Among these disputes, the handling of passenger name record data, more precisely their sharing between the EU and the United States, stands out. The importance of collecting such data was reinforced by the EU's 2014 Stockholm Programme (Peers, 2014), whose objective was to prevent and combat terrorism, serious crime, and organized crime effectively. The EU adopted additional packages in 2017 and 2018, primarily to make it more difficult for terrorists to move within the EU and to map such movements. These measures included all online activity and electronic communication. American criticism that the EU did not seek to do everything possible in this field was therefore not necessarily justified.

Nevertheless, considering that before the Covid-19 pandemic seventy million passengers traveled annually on transatlantic flights, the issue was genuinely crucial. By comparison, the United States had used PNR data collection in the fight against terrorism since 1992, yet it still failed to uncover the 2001 terrorist attacks because data held in Europe about the perpetrators were unavailable to American authorities. As noted above, the objective itself does not differ. The EU, however, treats the mass collection of personal data with reservations, primarily because of the potential for abuse. A PNR agreement has existed between the EU and the United States since 2012 (EU, 2012), but it was not necessarily effective in practice. Finally, in 2016, the EU decided to share passenger information related to international flights with its partners. In the American relationship, Hungary was at the forefront of this process in order to manage the refugee crisis that unfolded in 2015.

Unsurprisingly, the unprecedented wave of refugees and illegal migration crisis beginning in 2015 gave the issue renewed urgency. The United States rightly criticized its European partners for their inability to protect the EU's external borders adequately. This criticism was somewhat hypocritical, because the Obama administration did nothing to acknowledge publicly the security risks that the refugee crisis posed to the United States. In other words, the Obama administration did not act to shape the exceptionally negative public discourse, including that concerning Hungary, and thus, counterproductively, remained

more preoccupied with the domestic politics of its allies even during this grave situation. The mainstream American media did not help either, following sensationalism and turning American public opinion against those EU countries under the greatest pressure. Many have already analyzed the 2015 crisis, and the purpose here is not to explore the causes that resulted in 1.2 million foreign citizens—most of them illegally—arriving in the EU in 2015 alone. The illegal migration crisis affected the EU more severely than the global economic crisis of 2008, because it drove a wedge between member states on ideological and emotional grounds and thereby also made American–European cooperation in this field more difficult.

Terrorists and criminals inevitably entered the EU together with the migration wave, which the United States observed with concern. A significant proportion of these individuals, including returning foreign fighters, could easily travel to the United States as EU citizens under the Visa Waiver Program. In the longer term, it also appeared problematic that terrorists and criminals arriving as refugees without EU documents could eventually become citizens. Although public opinion associates the travel ban with Donald Trump, the American Congress had already tightened the rules in 2016 and denied visa-free entry to EU citizens who had traveled since 2011 to Syria, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Yemen, or Somalia (Thrush, 2017). This restriction alone is ineffective, however, if Europeans do not record or share the identities of these citizens.

This was supplemented by the demand that all “refugees” arriving in Europe be thoroughly screened at the external borders and that fingerprints necessarily be taken and shared automatically with American authorities, such as the National Counterterrorism Center, which could compare the data in real time with American terrorist databases. This sounds logical, but in most EU member states such data are classified as personal and therefore protected information, which could not be stored or shared without sufficient cause and justification. In 2020, the EU accepted that it could store the data of foreign citizens in a central database, and in 2021 it introduced a system under which the data of all visa-exempt arrivals would also be stored (A. Gardner, 2020). Yet from the American perspective, it must be acknowledged that this still does not fully resolve the situation, because the question remains as to what happens to the data of EU citizens.

The recording and sharing of data concerning financial transactions also belongs to cooperation in combating terrorism and organized crime. Cooperation is

closer and more institutionalized in this field because economic cooperation is the most dynamic area of transatlantic relations. The most important legal framework is the Terrorist Finance Tracking Program. The agreements extend to monitoring financial transactions, including those connected to terrorist activities. The smooth functioning of the SWIFT system already required cooperation in this field, and consequently, for example, the prosecution of money laundering functions particularly effectively in EU–United States relations. It should be added that Brexit also caused disruptions and raised questions in this area because Great Britain is an exceptionally important actor in the regulation of European financial transactions.

Although, as noted above, NATO provides the principal institutional framework for transatlantic defense cooperation, the field also deserves some discussion at the EU–United States level. In defense policy, the EU is particularly useful for the United States in geographical regions where the American military is “less active,” such as Africa. Most civilian and military peacekeeping operations conducted within the framework of the EU’s Common Security and Defense Policy take place in Africa. According to the American assessment, these operations make a fundamental contribution to maintaining security and stability on the continent. Without the EU, the region would become destabilized, leading to increased terrorism, the spread of pandemics, economic instability, and potentially humanitarian disasters. The EU, or more precisely its member states—with Brexit again creating problems—possesses a longer tradition of presence in Africa.

From the American perspective, the EU’s presence in the Western Balkans and the countries of the Eastern Partnership is also particularly important. The success of EU activity in the latter region has been seriously called into question by Russian aggression since 2014, while the invasion of 2022 makes analysis according to the original objective—the expansion of a zone of peace and stability—meaningless. The EU operation in Bosnia is indispensable from the perspective of American policy as well. Similarly, EU activity in Kosovo complements the NATO or American presence.

With regard to peacekeeping activities, the harmony of interests can generally be observed and was institutionalized by the 2011 agreement (Iniguez, 2020). Under this agreement, the American side also participates, for example, in EU operations in Africa, while it also provided a new framework for cooperation in Kosovo. Doubts nevertheless exist on the American side regarding the further

deepening of cooperation. Some argue that a more autonomous EU defense policy, possibly in the form of European strategic autonomy, would certainly create friction between the EU and the United States and raise new questions within NATO as well. Naturally, the most convenient arrangement for Washington would be for the EU simply to follow the United States in defense policy and serve the achievement of objectives defined according to American interests. This position is interesting because before the Lisbon Treaty the American side was more concerned that the EU was unable to coordinate the positions of the member states in defense policy and that the common policy was slow and cumbersome (Eizenstat, 2010). Closely connected to this, although more centrally discussed within NATO, is the inadequate level of defense spending by individual member states, which the United States has always criticized. As noted above, the Russian invasion brought change in this respect.

After 2014, the EU began to examine more actively how the new frameworks provided by the Lisbon Treaty could be used effectively in defense policy. In 2017, the EU member states—with the exception of Great Britain, Denmark, and Malta—decided through Permanent Structured Cooperation, or PESCO, to enable participating states to develop their capabilities jointly in order to improve EU defense capabilities. This cooperation provides a broader framework than the previously existing institution of battlegroups. The Trump administration was critical of PESCO because it regarded it as the duplication that the United States had always sought to avoid (Brattberg, 2020). In reality, the principal reason for American criticism was the fear that Europeans would later make less use of the American defense industry and that European procurement from the United States would decline. In other words, Trump feared that Europeans would follow American practice in defense policy and, building on the American “Buy American First” procurement logic, shift toward a kind of “Buy European First” policy that discriminated against American companies. To present the full picture, it should also be noted that the practical success of PESCO is seriously called into question by aggressive American bilateral lobbying in favor of the procurement of American weapons.

The transatlantic security relationship entered a new phase after 2023. While Russia’s war against Ukraine reinforced NATO’s centrality, it also accelerated debates concerning the long-term sustainability of the American security guarantee and the future balance of responsibilities within the Alliance. The return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2025 intensified these

discussions. Although the United States reaffirmed its commitment to NATO's collective defense, the administration placed considerably greater emphasis on burden-sharing, reciprocity and the direct contribution of European allies to their own security. Security cooperation therefore became increasingly linked to broader political and economic negotiations, reflecting a more transactional understanding of alliance management than had characterized previous administrations.

The evolution of NATO itself illustrates this changing relationship. Following years of discussion concerning the Alliance's objective that members spend at least two percent of GDP on defense, the debate shifted toward substantially higher levels of military investment. At the 2025 NATO Summit, allies agreed to work toward allocating 5 percent of GDP to defense and broader security-related expenditures over the coming decade, with 3.5 percent devoted to core defense capabilities and a further 1.5 percent to investments in resilience, infrastructure, innovation and industrial preparedness. Although implementation will differ across member states, the agreement represents a fundamental transformation of European defense policy. The issue is no longer whether Europe should strengthen its military capabilities but rather how rapidly these capabilities can be developed and how responsibilities should be shared between European allies and the United States.

These developments have also reshaped the debate on European strategic autonomy. Originally interpreted by many American policymakers as a potential challenge to NATO, strategic autonomy has increasingly evolved into a discussion of strengthening the European pillar of the Alliance rather than replacing it. Russia's aggression, uncertainty surrounding future American engagement, and growing global competition have encouraged the European Union to expand common defense initiatives, reinforce the European Defence Fund, improve military mobility, increase joint procurement and strengthen the European defense technological and industrial base. At the same time, tensions remain inevitable. European efforts to reduce strategic dependencies may conflict with American commercial interests, particularly in defense procurement, while Washington continues to encourage higher European defense spending but also seeks to preserve the competitiveness of the American defense industry. Consequently, the principal challenge in contemporary EU–United States security relations is no longer the existence of divergent strategic objectives, but rather

reconciling greater European responsibility with continued American leadership within a transformed transatlantic security architecture.

Trump's second administration has further blurred the traditional distinction between security and economic policy. Although the detailed implications of the renewed transatlantic trade disputes are examined in the following chapter, their security consequences are already evident. The administration increasingly treated tariffs, investment restrictions and industrial policy not merely as economic instruments but also as tools for renegotiating alliance relationships. European governments consequently faced a paradoxical situation in which the United States remained the indispensable guarantor of European security while simultaneously applying economic pressure against its closest allies. This development reinforced the perception within the European Union that security, technological sovereignty, industrial competitiveness and economic resilience can no longer be addressed separately. The growing interdependence between military security and economic statecraft has therefore become one of the defining characteristics of contemporary transatlantic relations.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of Trump's second presidency has been the renewed debate concerning the credibility and predictability of American security commitments (Walt, 2026). Credibility has always constituted one of the principal foundations of deterrence, resting not only on military capabilities but also on the expectation that political commitments will remain stable over time. Frequent changes in American policy priorities, uncertainty surrounding military assistance to Ukraine, the transactional approach toward alliances and the repeated suggestion that security guarantees should be linked more directly to allies' financial contributions have inevitably raised questions within Europe regarding the long-term reliability of the United States.

Importantly, these concerns do not imply that the United States is withdrawing from Europe or abandoning NATO. Rather, they have encouraged European governments to prepare for a wider range of strategic contingencies than at any point since the end of the Cold War. The result has been a stronger political consensus in favor of increasing defense expenditure, expanding European defense capabilities, reducing selected strategic dependencies and strengthening the European pillar within NATO. In this sense, strategic autonomy has become less an alternative to the transatlantic alliance than a response to the possibility that American leadership, while remaining indispensable, may also become increasingly conditional and unpredictable.

5.6.2 The global dimension of EU–United States relations

The joint response to global challenges is perhaps the most successful area of cooperation between the EU and the United States. Among these, the effort to slow climate change and environmental protection in general stand out. However, unlike in the field of defense, it is the EU that is considered the frontrunner and—naturally from the European perspective—the model to be followed. Throughout the evolution of the EU treaties, environmental protection has become an increasingly important issue, and the EU possesses effective institutional instruments in this field. The imperative of economic growth often makes the United States ambivalent about establishing and legally committing itself to climate objectives because of global economic competition. Both sides accept that we share a single planet, but compared to the EU, the United States has generally been a reluctant rather than a genuine global leader by example in this area. At the same time, it is indisputable that without the leadership of these two actors, movement toward the form of global governance that many consider necessary is hardly conceivable. Although environmental protection and climate change are clearly global challenges, the issue has not become securitized (Wright, 2021), and therefore transatlantic cooperation in this area cannot be compared to the close relationship found within NATO. For a very long time, the EU was practically alone among the developed countries—that is, among the largest emitters—in being willing to take genuine and costly action. These different approaches are also explained by different structural conditions. In terms of natural resources, the EU is largely dependent, whereas the United States is practically self-sufficient. This is also broadly true of the agricultural sector, despite the fact that the Common Agricultural Policy has been a priority area within the EU from the outset. A frequently expressed view among leading American political circles—articulated by Trump as well, who also withdrew the United States from the climate agreement (McGrath, 2020)—is that it has not been fully proven that current American economic activity is truly so harmful to the environment.

The emergence of these differing positions has been significantly influenced by the fact that, while the United States is practically capable of meeting its own energy needs entirely—and in the long term—the EU remains heavily dependent on external sources for both oil and natural gas. Even before 2022, this encouraged the EU to place greater emphasis on renewable energy sources, a

trend that has been further reinforced by the Russian invasion and the need to reduce dependence on Russian energy.

With regard to climate change and environmental protection, the failure of the United States to ratify the 1997 Kyoto Protocol represented a clear turning point. Although Al Gore, Vice President under Clinton, played a significant role in reaching the agreement, neither the American Congress nor the President—by then George W. Bush—ratified it. Meanwhile, the EU continued along its chosen path, adopting and pursuing clearly defined climate and emissions targets. In this respect, if American criticism concerning European defense efforts is considered justified, then in environmental protection it is the EU that has performed beyond expectations, while the United States has been the free rider. The American argument, however, was that the adjustment was easier for Europe because its economy and industrial structure would have required transformation anyway in order to sustain economic development. Consequently, the seemingly stringent climate targets did not impose substantial additional burdens. The United States, by contrast, feared falling behind in global economic competition.

Implementation of the commitments undertaken under the Kyoto Protocol ultimately failed on a global scale. In practice, only the EU continued implementing them while simultaneously establishing additional targets during the 2010s. Some change—at least in terms of general political orientation—came with the presidency of Barack Obama. It is certainly true that in 2009 the United States made significant and unprecedented commitments in preparation for the Copenhagen Summit. Nevertheless, the positions of the EU and the United States did not substantially converge regarding the actual consequences of climate change. Unsurprisingly, the summit itself was ultimately regarded as a failure (McGrath, 2020).

Although Copenhagen was unsuccessful, it laid the foundations for later cooperation, and the participating states agreed to negotiate an international agreement to replace Kyoto, in which the United States became an active participant. This process ultimately led to the 2015 Paris Climate Summit and the Paris Agreement.

With regard to the Paris Climate Agreement, the United States assumed genuine leadership and did not leave the EU to act alone. American representatives continuously negotiated with other key partners, including China and Russia. Following the summit, for example, the historically significant—though less

consequential in practical terms—joint Chinese-American declaration on climate change was adopted (A. Gardner, 2020). These newly shared European-American ambitions sounded impressive and were legally binding from the EU's perspective. However, Obama had little more than a year remaining in office. Emphasizing the continuing disagreements, one of President Donald Trump's first actions was to ensure that the United States would not be legally bound to fulfill even voluntary commitments. The American constitutional framework provided legitimate grounds for this, since the agreement should have been approved by the Senate. Because it could not pass the Republican majority, the presidential order used instead of formal ratification could easily be nullified through another presidential order. The United States nevertheless respected its existing treaty obligations and formally withdrew only after the required transition period had expired—a withdrawal that, interestingly, took effect the day after the 2020 presidential election. Despite this, nearly half of the American states continued to implement the agreement's commitments voluntarily.

During his presidential campaign, Joe Biden sharply criticized Trump's decision, and one of his first executive actions was signing the order that returned the United States to the Paris Agreement on February 19, 2021. Biden also participated actively in the Glasgow Climate Summit in 2022, after which another joint declaration with China was adopted. For Biden, the principal challenge has been to restore American leadership and rebuild credibility in environmental protection, including within the framework of transatlantic cooperation.

The renewed transatlantic consensus on climate policy proved relatively short-lived. Following the return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2025, the United States again adopted a more skeptical approach toward international climate commitments and environmental regulation, emphasizing economic competitiveness, energy independence and industrial growth over multilateral climate governance (Fiorino, 2026). The European Union, by contrast, continued implementing the European Green Deal and increasingly regarded climate policy as a strategic instrument for enhancing economic resilience, technological leadership and reducing external dependencies. Consequently, climate policy has evolved from being primarily an environmental issue into an increasingly geopolitical and geoeconomic one, linking decarbonization with industrial policy, critical raw materials, supply-chain security and technological competition.

More broadly, global governance itself has undergone profound transformation. Whereas the liberal international order assumed that global challenges could be

managed primarily through increasingly universal multilateral institutions, contemporary international politics is characterized by growing fragmentation. Great-power competition has increasingly constrained the effectiveness of global institutions, while cooperation has become more selective and issue-specific. Instead of comprehensive global governance, flexible coalitions, minilateral arrangements and ad hoc partnerships have become more common instruments for addressing global challenges. This evolution has not eliminated cooperation between the European Union and the United States, but it has fundamentally altered the institutional environment in which that cooperation takes place.

The growing importance of China has further transformed the global dimension of transatlantic relations. Issues such as climate change, international development, technological standards, infrastructure investment and digital governance can no longer be examined independently of strategic competition between Washington and Beijing. Consequently, many policy areas previously considered components of liberal global governance have increasingly become arenas of geopolitical competition. The European Union has sought to balance cooperation with strategic autonomy, while successive American administrations have viewed these same issues primarily through the broader framework of strategic competition with China. Managing this difference without undermining transatlantic unity has become one of the defining challenges of contemporary EU–United States relations.

Another prominent area of global cooperation is international development assistance and humanitarian action. This field is essentially a global EU-American joint enterprise, since together the two sides provide approximately two-thirds of global development assistance funding. From a historical perspective, EU–United States cooperation in this area began with the Marshall Plan. Encouraged by its success and learning from its experience, it is unsurprising that development assistance became and has remained a major policy area. Humanitarian action also clearly includes combating global pandemics. A successful example was the joint response to the West African Ebola epidemic of 2014–2015, which was successfully contained. Unfortunately, cooperation did not prove equally effective in the case of Covid-19. Although the virus had already been detected in 2019, genuinely effective action was not achieved until the end of 2020. Despite vaccines being developed jointly, significant disagreements emerged between the EU and the United States. These disagreements concerned not only the

reciprocal lifting of travel restrictions—until November 2021 the United States prohibited entry in almost all cases—but also the inadequate coordination of the economic instruments used to manage the pandemic’s economic consequences. Covid-19 has not disappeared, and similar pandemics clearly require close cooperation. While this need is widely recognized, practical politics continues to fall short. It is still too early to draw definitive conclusions regarding the management of Covid-19 and the quality of transatlantic cooperation, despite the large number of publications addressing the subject, many of which are not necessarily based on sound scientific analysis. For this reason, the present study does not intend to examine this undeniably crucial challenge in greater detail.

When considering the joint management of global issues, it should be recognized that the United States generally acts over the long term primarily where it perceives a security threat. Development assistance is likewise motivated largely by security considerations, illustrating once again that American policy is fundamentally realist, whereas the EU’s approach is liberal. It is therefore unsurprising that, from the American perspective, development assistance was already placed within a broader strategic context during the 1990s. This was also due to the fact that containing communism was no longer the primary motivation. The reconstruction of dysfunctional states—described in American terminology as failed or fragile states—became a major element of the agenda under Clinton, even more so under Bush, and although it has largely disappeared from official rhetoric, it has not entirely lost its significance (Rada, 2012b). In these “state-building operations,” it is particularly important to eliminate the “shotgun effect” (Etzioni, 2007) and ensure that the EU and the United States genuinely coordinate their development assistance efforts. The objectives are broadly similar, but the lack of coordination during implementation has produced numerous unintended consequences, helping to explain the emergence of “aid fatigue,” which also began to characterize the EU during the second decade of the new millennium.

The character of international development assistance has likewise changed considerably. Traditional development cooperation has increasingly been complemented by strategic investment, infrastructure financing and supply-chain partnerships. Programs such as the European Union’s Global Gateway and the American Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment illustrate that development policy is no longer understood solely as humanitarian assistance or poverty reduction, but also as an instrument for strengthening political influence,

economic resilience and strategic partnerships. This transformation reflects a broader shift from aid-driven cooperation toward geoeconomic competition, particularly in response to China's expanding global presence through the Belt and Road Initiative.

Taken together, these developments illustrate that the global dimension of EU–United States relations has entered a new phase. Rather than replacing global governance, growing geopolitical rivalry has fundamentally reshaped it. Security, economic competitiveness, technological innovation, climate policy and development assistance increasingly reinforce one another instead of existing as separate policy domains. This evolution also reflects the broader transformation of the liberal international order discussed throughout this volume. Shared liberal objectives remain important, yet they are increasingly pursued through realist instruments of competition, strategic investment and selective coalition-building. The result is a form of cooperation in which transatlantic partners continue to defend many common principles while simultaneously adapting them to an increasingly competitive international environment.

5.6.3 The economic dimension of EU–United States relations

Economic cooperation represents the closest dimension of EU–United States relations, and its history stretches back to the very origins of the European Communities. Since the historical development of these economic relations has already been examined in detail in an earlier chapter of this study, this subsection focuses primarily on current and unresolved issues.

Among these, the failed free trade agreement is unavoidable. The two sides negotiated for many years on establishing the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), but fundamental disagreements in several areas—including data protection, which will be discussed later—prevented its successful conclusion. Trump's trade war against the EU merely added to the difficulties. It should also be noted that public opinion on both sides of the Atlantic harbored reservations about free trade. TTIP would have covered approximately 60 percent of global GDP, one-third of global merchandise trade, and 42 percent of global trade in services (Eliasson & Huet, 2018).

Since 2023, however, the debate has fundamentally shifted. Rather than pursuing comprehensive free trade agreements, both the European Union and the United States have increasingly prioritized economic security. Russia's

invasion of Ukraine, supply-chain disruptions, technological competition with China and the growing use of economic coercion have transformed trade policy into an instrument of broader geopolitical strategy. Consequently, the objective is no longer simply to liberalize markets but also to increase resilience, reduce strategic vulnerabilities and secure access to critical technologies, infrastructure and raw materials. Economic cooperation has therefore become inseparable from broader questions of national and collective security.

Even during the negotiations themselves, disputes emerged regarding investor protection, the rights of host states, and the question of who should have access to judicial dispute settlement. In practice, both sides transformed the issue into one of sovereignty, despite the original objective being the creation of a predictable investment environment through regulation and the clear separation of political and economic issues. The United States argued that not all EU member states sufficiently protected investors from state intervention, while the EU viewed American demands as increasing the vulnerability of European consumers and governments. Ultimately, it was not France, originally considered the most likely obstacle, but Germany that became the principal barrier to concluding the negotiations (A. Gardner, 2020). German policymakers followed public opinion, which believed that weaker American consumer protection standards and uncontrolled investment would become the norm, including lower safety standards in sectors such as automobile manufacturing. Despite these difficulties, by 2013 the parties had identified the principal areas around which the agreement would have been structured: elimination of tariffs and other barriers to trade in goods; facilitation of trade in services, including access to public procurement; harmonization of regulatory systems; joint action against anti-competitive practices (Eliasson & Huet, 2018).

Trump clearly turned against TTIP. This was based not only on his substantive assessment but also on the fact that Obama had portrayed the agreement as revolutionary and that it had become too closely associated with free trade. Trump, proud of his business achievements, simply refused to accept an arrangement whose details he had not personally shaped. A similar approach characterized his treatment of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, TTIP's Asian counterpart, which he abandoned despite its already existing framework. From the American perspective, TTIP also became a matter of prestige because, in essence, it represented nothing more than extending the principles of the EU's Single Market across the Atlantic. As had been the case during European

integration itself, the most inflexible positions during the TTIP negotiations concerned agriculture.

Trump's return to the White House in 2025 further accelerated this transformation. The administration reintroduced tariffs against several trading partners, including the European Union, while emphasizing reciprocity, domestic manufacturing and the reduction of persistent trade deficits (Dür & Invernizzi, 2025). Although these measures were presented primarily as instruments of economic policy, they inevitably affected broader transatlantic relations by increasing political uncertainty among allies. Economic disputes were no longer viewed as isolated trade disagreements but became closely connected to wider strategic negotiations concerning defense spending, industrial policy and technological cooperation. The result has been a more transactional economic relationship than at any point since the end of the Cold War.

The tariff confrontation that followed illustrated the asymmetric nature of transatlantic economic relations. Although the European Union repeatedly emphasized the importance of rules-based trade and sought negotiated solutions through established institutional channels, the United States demonstrated that its economic weight enabled it to shape the agenda unilaterally. Faced with the prospect of escalating tariffs, deteriorating access to the American market and the wider geopolitical consequences of a prolonged economic dispute, the European Union increasingly shifted from confrontation toward accommodation. The eventual political compromise reflected not so much a jointly negotiated redesign of transatlantic trade as a pragmatic European recognition that preserving the broader strategic partnership had become more important than winning an individual trade dispute.

The outcome also demonstrated a broader transformation of transatlantic relations. Throughout the post-Cold War period, economic cooperation had largely been insulated from political and security disagreements. Under Trump's second administration, however, trade became an instrument of strategic bargaining. Tariffs, market access, investment and industrial policy were increasingly linked to wider questions of burden-sharing, defense expenditure and geopolitical alignment. In practice, economic interdependence became another source of political leverage rather than merely a foundation for mutual prosperity.

From the European perspective, the trade dispute also revealed the limits of the European Union's concept of strategic autonomy. Despite its status as one of the

world's largest trading powers, the Union ultimately found it difficult to sustain a prolonged confrontation with its principal security ally while simultaneously managing Russia's continued aggression, growing competition with China and internal economic challenges. Consequently, European policymakers increasingly prioritized preserving transatlantic unity over maintaining every element of their original negotiating position. This does not necessarily imply European weakness; rather, it reflects the reality that economic policy has become inseparable from broader strategic considerations. Nevertheless, the episode reinforced the perception that contemporary transatlantic relations are characterized by greater asymmetry and a more pronounced willingness on the part of Washington to translate economic predominance into political influence.

The idea of TTIP represented far more than a simple economic issue, although the EU was reluctant to recognize its geopolitical significance. It is no coincidence that expectations concerning TTIP were greatest among the Baltic and Central European countries, which depended most heavily on the American security umbrella and desired continued American engagement, even though these same countries would have gained the least tangible economic benefit from the agreement. TTIP would have definitively ended any realistic prospect of expanding Russia's Eurasian Union project. It might also have limited the growth of Chinese economic influence throughout the region. Instead, the United States unilaterally demanded—without offering anything in return—that its regional partners reject Russian and Chinese economic involvement. Ultimately, however, it was the United States itself that prevented TTIP from becoming a reality.

TTIP is not entirely dead, but it is difficult to imagine a major breakthrough during Biden's presidency. First, because it is currently not a political priority. Second, if agreement could not be reached even on strategic issues, it is difficult to imagine that the highly bureaucratic logic of the EU can be reconciled with the American approach to technical details. It nevertheless appears more likely that a simpler transatlantic free trade area could eventually be established rather than the more comprehensive TTIP.

Under these conditions, the prospects for reviving TTIP have become increasingly remote. Rather than negotiating a comprehensive free trade agreement, the two sides have focused on more pragmatic forms of cooperation through the EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC), established in 2021. The TTC has facilitated dialogue on export controls, supply-chain resilience, artificial intelligence, semiconductor production, critical raw materials and common technology

standards. Although it has not eliminated regulatory differences, it demonstrates that contemporary transatlantic economic cooperation increasingly concentrates on strategic sectors instead of broad trade liberalization.

Closely connected to TTIP, but more generally representing both a major area of economic cooperation and, at times, an obstacle to it, are the differing traditions of data protection regulation. In 2016, the EU and the United States concluded a new and more comprehensive agreement than any before it, the EU-US Privacy Shield (EU, 2022a). The agreement sought to preserve data protection principles while allowing companies on both sides to access consumer data. Unsurprisingly, the arrangement encountered difficulties within EU legal practice, and in 2020 the European Court of Justice invalidated the entire agreement. Following Biden's inauguration, the issue returned to the agenda, and negotiations began on a new arrangement known in 2022 as the Trans-Atlantic Data Privacy Framework (White House, 2022b). The agreement is likely to face additional complications because legal proceedings are currently underway in the EU against major technology companies such as Facebook and Twitter, while regulatory requirements governing their operations continue to tighten.

A central issue in data protection is the effective implementation of the Safe Harbour principles (E.U., 2017). As early as 2015, the EU argued that these principles failed to provide adequate protection for personal data transferred within transatlantic commerce. Data were used not only for commercial purposes but also for intelligence activities. From this perspective, existing intelligence cooperation should also be taken into account. The comprehensive monitoring of the Internet likewise belongs here. While this undoubtedly serves security objectives—as discussed earlier under the security dimension—it also raises significant questions regarding data protection. Americans generally fail to understand European concerns about the United States when other contractual partners of the EU demonstrably engage in large-scale intelligence-related data collection. China and Russia provide the clearest examples, remaining highly active within the EU while often disguising intelligence activities as economic cooperation, such as long-term energy supply contracts or information technology infrastructure projects. Although large-scale state surveillance understandably generates concerns, the United States considers the EU to exaggerate the problem, whereas the EU believes that the United States exploits the framework of the common fight against terrorism.

The importance of technological cooperation has likewise increased significantly. Artificial intelligence, advanced semiconductors, quantum technologies and digital infrastructure have become strategic assets rather than merely commercial products. Consequently, export controls, investment screening and restrictions on sensitive technologies increasingly complement traditional trade policy. While both sides broadly agree on limiting strategic technological dependencies upon authoritarian competitors, important differences remain regarding industrial subsidies, digital regulation and competition policy. The European Union generally favors stronger regulatory oversight, whereas successive American administrations have been more inclined to prioritize innovation and industrial competitiveness.

Cooperation in digitalization is unsurprisingly another priority area of economic cooperation and is not free from the dilemmas discussed above. Beyond data protection, developing the digital economy and digital cooperation also raises the need to strengthen cybersecurity. Cyberspace belongs largely to the security dimension, and common practices have already been established in this field. Public attention has increasingly focused in recent years on the extent to which Amazon, Google, Apple, and Facebook—commonly referred to by the media as GAFA (Chatzky, 2017), although Microsoft could equally well be included—would dominate the European digital market in the absence of protective regulation. These technology giants have faced numerous legal proceedings even within the United States, and the American Congress has established investigative committees concerning them on several occasions. Unsurprisingly, their business practices generate even greater concerns within the EU, where antitrust traditions and regulations are considerably stronger. One area in which agreement and cooperation are unquestionably necessary concerns the harmonization of regulations and the taxation of the digital activities and revenues of technology companies. This issue should concern not only the United States but also the EU, because regulatory differences among member states themselves mean that uncoordinated action could produce unpredictable consequences for the digital market. This naturally raises the broader question of whether a genuine EU Digital Single Market exists and whether it should be regarded as falling within the scope of the four freedoms.

Industrial policy has also re-emerged as a central element of transatlantic economic relations. The American Inflation Reduction Act and CHIPS and Science Act, together with European initiatives such as the Net-Zero Industry Act, the

Critical Raw Materials Act and the European Chips Act, illustrate a broader shift away from purely market-driven globalization toward more active state involvement in strategic industries. Although these policies pursue similar objectives—strengthening domestic production, technological leadership and economic resilience—they have also generated concerns regarding subsidy competition and unequal market conditions across the Atlantic. Managing these tensions while maintaining a common approach toward external competitors has become one of the principal challenges of contemporary EU–United States economic relations.

5.6.4 EU–United States relations in a changing world order

The preceding sections have demonstrated that contemporary EU–United States relations can no longer be understood through separate analyses of security, global governance and economic cooperation. The three dimensions are interconnected. Trade policy influences alliance politics, technological competition affects national security, while climate policy, development assistance and industrial strategy have acquired significant geopolitical implications. As a result, the transatlantic partnership has evolved from a predominantly liberal economic and political relationship into a multidimensional strategic partnership operating in an increasingly competitive international environment.

The future of EU–United States relations is profoundly shaped by the return of great power politics to Europe and by the Russian invasion, which has overridden virtually every item on the agenda. This is particularly noteworthy because EU–United States relations have traditionally been separated—primarily in line with American interests—from strictly security and defense issues, whose principal institutional framework is NATO. In practice, however, it has always been difficult to draw a sharp distinction, and it is therefore unsurprising that this development has also made future prospects considerably less clear. The Russia–Ukraine war, together with its disregard for and serious violation of the existing framework of international law and institutions, raises much more urgent questions than whether Europe’s relationship with the United States will continue under a form of American exceptionalism characterized as “Martian,” or whether the softer, liberal European model of “Venusian” exceptionalism will become the guiding principle.

Under present circumstances, the dominance of hard military arguments and instruments appears highly likely. This is unfavorable for the EU because, according to the frequently expressed view, the Union is an economic giant but a political dwarf without further strategic autonomy. If the EU cannot demonstrate that it must also be regarded as a global actor in security and defense matters, it will not play a meaningful role in shaping the emerging international order. Should this scenario materialize, the United States will no longer need to justify its exceptional status, while the long-term interest of its European allies will likewise be to ensure that American dominance does not decline either in Europe or globally, particularly in relation to China.

EU–United States relations are fundamentally shaped by changes in world politics and by the transformation of the world order that defined the transatlantic relationship after the Cold War. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, we have experienced numerous historical turning points, yet the institutional order reflecting the realities of the Second World War has never been revised. This institutional framework was built on the assumption prevailing after 1991 that great power wars belonged to the past and that world leaders would be capable of jointly managing the international system in pursuit of common objectives. This assumption remained valid only as long as those leaders had no interest in fundamentally revising the system through force. Although somewhat simplified, the underlying logic of the United Nations—widely regarded as the guardian of international peace and security—illustrates this situation particularly well. The UN Charter is founded upon the prohibition of the use of force and the principle of collective security, according to which members violating the rules may be punished collectively. However, the Security Council, originally designed to ensure effectiveness, has always contained the inherent danger that its permanent members would prove to be more equal than the others. Put simply, the system functions only until one of the permanent members itself occupies the defendant's bench and the rules would have to be applied against it. Protected by the veto power originally designed as a safeguard, the United Nations is powerless against the Russian aggression. It must be acknowledged that the same would almost certainly apply in the case of China.

If we wish to characterize the international environment and changing political geometry within which transatlantic cooperation has developed, it is essential to examine the major trends in international relations over the past three decades.

It is insufficient simply to describe recent history by stating that the bipolar world became unipolar and that the position of the United States, which temporarily occupied a virtually monopolistic position, later came to be challenged, with the EU now seeking to define its place somewhere within this transformation. One of the defining characteristics of today's world is the growing interdependence of international actors, the overlap between different processes, and the simultaneous existence of numerous international developments. This complexity is clearly reflected in the most intensive areas of EU–United States relations. Within the political and security sphere, the United States unquestionably occupies the leading role. In areas requiring global governance, however, such as environmental protection, the EU acts as the normative, exemplary, and leading power. In economic affairs, both sides unsurprisingly pursue their own interests and seek to maximize benefits, with the important difference that the EU position already represents the outcome of a negotiated compromise among twenty-seven member states. By contrast, the American position is more frequently shaped by shorter-term domestic political considerations. Washington often struggles to understand the logic of the Single Market and, pursuing its own interests, frequently bypasses Brussels to engage directly with individual member states as a means of political pressure. It was precisely this dynamic that enabled a form of trade war to emerge even between the closest allies during Trump's presidency.

However attractive simplification may appear, and however tempting it is to argue that certain events—perhaps even a war—override everything else, it is nevertheless impossible to isolate any single event from the broader complexity of international affairs. Individual actors, processes, and events cannot be separated from one another; they must be understood and managed simultaneously. This is unquestionably true of EU–United States relations. Every dimension of cooperation and every set of interests involved must be considered together. This complexity is further reinforced by the fact—although not examined in detail in the present study and deserving more extensive future research—that finding convergence among differing interests is exceptionally difficult, while the failure of relationships built upon synergy becomes readily apparent if this complexity is ignored. Even within the EU, numerous tensions arise from divergent national interests, making it difficult to speak of a single, coherent European position. It therefore matters greatly what exactly is being evaluated in EU–United States relations. Placing Brussels at the center and assuming the existence of a genuinely unified European Union is not the same as

analyzing the national policies of the member states, which more frequently reflect political reality.

The transformation of the international environment therefore presents both partners with a strategic dilemma. The liberal international order that shaped transatlantic relations after the Cold War has not disappeared, but it now operates under conditions of intensified great-power competition, economic fragmentation and technological rivalry. The challenge for both the European Union and the United States is no longer simply to preserve existing institutions, but to adapt them to a geopolitical environment in which power politics has returned without eliminating deep economic interdependence. This increasingly requires balancing cooperation with competition, openness with resilience, and liberal principles with strategic considerations.

Whether the transatlantic relationship will continue to constitute the principal pillar of the evolving international order depends less on the absence of disagreements than on the ability of both actors to manage them while preserving their broader strategic convergence. Despite recurring disputes over trade, technology, defense burdens and global governance, the European Union and the United States remain each other's closest economic, political and security partners. Their relationship has become more complex and increasingly transactional, yet it continues to represent one of the most influential bilateral partnerships shaping the future evolution of the international order.

5.7 Europe in American strategic calculations

The preceding chapters have demonstrated that the transatlantic relationship has entered a fundamentally new strategic era. For much of the post-Cold War period, the European Union and the United States operated within a relatively stable international environment characterized by American predominance, expanding globalization and the expectation that liberal institutions would gradually shape international politics. Although disagreements periodically emerged over trade, burden-sharing or global governance, they rarely challenged the foundations of the partnership itself. Today, however, the relationship operates under markedly different conditions. The return of great-power competition, the resurgence of military conflict in Europe, technological rivalry, economic fragmentation and the growing use of geoeconomic instruments have transformed both the priorities and the functioning of transatlantic cooperation.

The war in Ukraine has decisively reshaped the European security landscape and once again elevated Europe as a central theatre of global power politics (Rada, 2023). While American grand strategy continues to identify the Indo-Pacific and strategic competition with China as its principal long-term priority, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated that European security remains indispensable for maintaining the broader international balance of power (Rada & Medgyesi, 2025). Ukraine therefore represents far more than a regional conflict. From Washington's perspective, it has become a test of the resilience of the liberal international order, the credibility of Western security guarantees and the cohesion of the transatlantic alliance.

American policy toward Ukraine has reflected a combination of normative commitments and strategic calculations. Under the Biden administration, support for Kyiv was framed around the liberal principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and resistance against revisionist aggression (Russell, 2023). At the same time, Washington recognized that supporting Ukraine also weakened Russia's military capabilities without requiring direct American military intervention, thereby reinforcing deterrence throughout the Euro-Atlantic area. The conflict likewise strengthened NATO's political relevance and reassured European allies of continued American engagement. Nevertheless, prolonged military assistance, growing financial costs and the persistent danger of escalation with a nuclear power complicated Washington's strategic calculus.

Even before the change of administration, American policymakers increasingly acknowledged that the conflict would most likely conclude through some form of negotiated settlement rather than outright military victory (Rada & Nyilas, 2023). Such an outcome would also reduce the strategic distraction from the Indo-Pacific and allow greater attention to return to long-term competition with China.

The return of Donald Trump to the presidency has introduced an additional layer of uncertainty into American policy toward Europe. Although the United States has not abandoned NATO or Ukraine, Washington has increasingly adopted a transactional approach toward alliance management, linking security guarantees, economic relations and burden-sharing more explicitly than previous administrations (Mitchell, 2026). Renewed trade disputes with the European Union, growing expectations regarding European defense spending and Washington's willingness to employ tariffs and economic pressure against its closest allies have demonstrated that security and economics can no longer be treated as separate policy domains. The transatlantic relationship has therefore become more strategic, but also more conditional, as cooperation increasingly depends on political bargaining rather than being assumed as the natural consequence of shared values alone.

In this context, the European Union faces strategic ambiguity. On the one hand, Russia's aggression has reinforced transatlantic ties and NATO's centrality, with the United States playing the decisive role in arm deliveries, intelligence support and political coordination. On the other hand, Washington's long-term focus on Asia and systemic competition with China foreshadows growing pressure on Europe to assume greater responsibility for its own security (Gyarmati-Szijj & Rada, 2024b). There are already clear indications that the United States expects the European Union to take the leading role in Ukraine's long-term reconstruction and in addressing regional security challenges that do not directly threaten core American interests (O'Brien, 2024). For Central and Eastern Europe, Ukraine's future remains inseparable from regional stability. The emergence of a permanent geopolitical grey zone on the EU's eastern border would represent a long-term strategic risk (Pongrácz & Rada, 2023). Consequently, Ukraine's gradual integration into Euro-Atlantic structures appears to be the most sustainable means of deterring future Russian revanchism, while simultaneously requiring long-term financial assistance, institutional reforms and credible security guarantees.

The question of how the war in Ukraine may ultimately end—and whether Russia's future behavior can be predicted or influenced—therefore remains one of the defining questions of contemporary international security (Gabuev, 2025; Naftali, 2025). Russia's trajectory is shaped not only by Vladimir Putin's personal leadership but by the broader transformation of the Russian political system since 2022. The war has entrenched militarization, strengthened anti-Western ideology and created powerful domestic constituencies with a vested interest in the continuation of confrontation (Gabuev, 2025). Even if active hostilities were suspended through a ceasefire or negotiated settlement, Russia would likely remain strategically suspicious of the West, increasingly dependent on China and unlikely to return quickly to cooperative relations. While post-Putin leadership may eventually create opportunities for a gradual normalization of relations, any future transformation will depend not only upon developments within Russia itself but also upon the ability of Western governments to formulate coherent long-term policies that combine deterrence with credible diplomatic engagement.

At the same time, the United States' ability to shape the eventual settlement remains more limited than is often assumed. The increasingly transactional approach characterizing recent American diplomacy seeks rapid political outcomes and measurable returns on American support, including greater European burden-sharing and stronger economic commitments from partners. Such an approach may facilitate negotiations under certain circumstances, yet it also risks weakening Western cohesion if European allies or Ukraine perceive American objectives as diverging from their own (Naftali, 2025). As many recent analyses suggest, the end of the war will ultimately depend less on diplomatic initiatives alone than on the interaction between developments inside Russia, Ukraine's resilience and the long-term strategic consistency of the West (Gabuev, 2025; Naftali, 2025).

Taken together, these developments illustrate that Europe has regained strategic importance in American foreign policy, although for reasons fundamentally different from those that defined the Cold War. The continent is no longer the principal arena of ideological confrontation but an essential pillar of a broader global competition involving Russia, China, technological leadership and the future of the liberal international order. At the same time, the nature of transatlantic relations has evolved. The United States increasingly expects Europe to assume greater responsibility for its own defense, economic resilience

and regional stability, while European governments seek to preserve American engagement without becoming strategically dependent on increasingly unpredictable political developments in Washington.

Consequently, the future of EU–United States relations will depend less on the absence of disagreements than on the ability of both partners to manage an increasingly complex strategic environment. Security, economic competitiveness, technological leadership, global governance and industrial policy have become closely interconnected, while geopolitical competition has blurred the traditional boundaries between them. The transatlantic partnership therefore remains the cornerstone of the Western alliance, but it now operates under conditions that are considerably more competitive, more transactional and more uncertain than at any point since the end of the Cold War. Preserving this partnership will require continuous adaptation by both sides. Rather than relying on the assumptions of the post-1991 liberal order, the European Union and the United States must increasingly reconcile shared values with the realities of strategic competition. Their ability to do so will largely determine not only the future of transatlantic relations but also the resilience of the broader international order in the decades ahead.

PART III

6 Central Europe and the multiple realities of the Liberal World Order

The previous chapters argued that the contemporary international system can no longer be understood through a single geographical or functional perspective. Global competition, European integration, and regional security increasingly interact across multiple layers, producing different strategic realities for different groups of states. This chapter therefore shifts the analytical focus from the European level to the Central European subregion and asks a different question: how do global and European transformations translate into the strategic environment of a smaller regional subsystem?

History repeatedly demonstrates that major geopolitical transformations are rarely experienced uniformly. The same international order that creates opportunities for one region may generate insecurity for another (Buzan, 2000). Great powers negotiate spheres of influence, redesign institutions, and redefine strategic priorities at the global level, yet the practical consequences of these decisions are most visible in regions situated along geopolitical fault lines. Central Europe has repeatedly occupied such a position (Marton et al., 2015). Located between competing political, military, and economic centers of gravity, the region has historically experienced global shifts not as distant developments but as immediate strategic realities.

The concept of world order has always been dynamic, shaped by competing visions, changing distributions of power, and evolving normative aspirations. Historically, the international system has oscillated between periods of relative stability under hegemonic leadership or mutually constraining bipolarity and phases of intense rivalry and fragmentation. The end of the Cold War appeared to inaugurate a new era in which the liberal international order—built upon free trade, democratic governance, multilateral institutions, and U.S. leadership—seemed destined to become universal. Over the past decade, however, this assumption has become increasingly difficult to sustain as multidimensional crises, revisionist powers, and renewed geopolitical competition have challenged

both the institutional foundations and the normative legitimacy of that order (Ikenberry, 2020).

For Central Europe, the changes carry particular significance. Following accession to NATO and the European Union, the region became one of the principal beneficiaries of the post-Cold War security architecture. Today, however, it occupies a far more complex strategic position. The return of great-power competition, the reorientation of American strategic priorities toward the Indo-Pacific, Russia's military revisionism, and Europe's search for greater strategic autonomy all reshape the regional security environment. Consequently, understanding Central Europe requires more than analyzing either the global system or the European Union alone. It requires examining how global dynamics are filtered through the European level before producing distinctive patterns of adaptation within the Central European subregion. This chapter therefore analyses the region as a strategic subsystem whose behavior cannot be understood independently from the multiple layers of the evolving international order. The rise of multipolarity, the strategic competition between the US and China, and the revisionist threats from Russia all demand nuanced regional responses. Central and Eastern Europe's future will hinge on its ability to navigate this new world order, balancing its enduring Atlantic commitments with the pressures and opportunities of a more pluralistic global environment. Thus, while the liberal world order may not have collapsed, it has unquestionably entered a new, contested phase. Understanding this transformation is essential not only for global powers but also for smaller regional actors like the V4, who must adapt their strategies to ensure security, prosperity, and relevance in an increasingly fragmented international system (Rada & Nyilas, 2024).

6.1 Central Europe as a strategic subsystem

Regions do not merely receive systemic pressures passively but modify them through their own historical experiences, institutional arrangements, and security perceptions. Consequently, understanding Central Europe requires recognizing the region as a strategic subsystem whose behavior reflects both global constraints and regional particularities. For Central Europe, the post-Cold War period represented not only a geopolitical transformation but a civilizational return. The year 2024 symbolically captured this historical trajectory. Hungary, together with the other Central European states, commemorated the 35th anniversary of the democratic transition, the 25th anniversary of NATO accession, and the 20th anniversary of European Union membership. These milestones reflected considerably more than institutional anniversaries. They marked the restoration of strategic agency after four decades during which the region's geopolitical orientation had been determined externally. Following the decisions taken at Yalta, Central Europe became part of the Soviet sphere of influence with little opportunity to shape its own foreign or security policy. The democratic transformations of 1989 fundamentally altered this reality. Although political, economic, and institutional reforms proved difficult and uneven, NATO and EU membership enabled the countries of the region to rejoin the Western political and security community and pursue development according to their own interests and values. There was, and remains, no realistic alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration. Disagreements within these institutions are therefore better understood as debates over their future evolution than as challenges to their legitimacy.

Yet accession did not eliminate Central Europe's distinct strategic outlook. Although the region formally entered the Euro-Atlantic community, many societies continued to perceive themselves as newcomers whose experiences and concerns were not always fully understood by the established members. During the accession process, Central European states generally adopted Western institutions and norms with little resistance, often prioritizing integration over the articulation of region-specific interests. Consequently, several issues that later became central to European politics—including energy security, the strategic implications of dependence on Russia, and the management of irregular migration—received comparatively limited attention within broader European debates. The resulting perception that the region's strategic concerns were frequently underestimated has periodically resurfaced

and has contributed to the emergence of a distinct Central European strategic identity (Nyilas, 2023).

This identity has been shaped less by ideology than by accumulated historical experience. Since the end of the Cold War, Central Europe has repeatedly confronted major international crises whose regional consequences differed substantially from those experienced elsewhere in Europe. The wars accompanying the dissolution of Yugoslavia unfolded directly on the region's borders. The global financial crisis disproportionately affected the highly open economies of the Visegrád countries. Russia's growing revisionism transformed the security environment long before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, while energy dependence exposed structural vulnerabilities that were less visible in Western Europe. The migration crisis of 2015 challenged regional perceptions of sovereignty and border security, whereas the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated both the importance and the limitations of European coordination. By contrast, the Global War on Terror after 2001 influenced Central Europe primarily through alliance commitments, including participation in NATO operations in Afghanistan and the U.S.-led "Coalition of the Willing" in Iraq (Lorenz, 2003). Each of these crises required regional adaptation despite having largely originated outside the region itself.

These cumulative experiences produced a strategic culture that differs in important respects from that of Western Europe. Mitchell (Mitchell, 2014) famously described Central Europeans as the "canaries" of the Euro-Atlantic community, warning that the region often recognized emerging security threats earlier than many of its Western allies. Russia's revisionism, energy dependence, migration pressures, and the importance of territorial defense all occupied a more prominent place within Central European security thinking well before they became common priorities across Europe. Whether these assessments were always correct is less important than the fact that they reflected a coherent regional perception of security formed by geography and historical experience rather than ideological preference.

Within the framework developed throughout this book, these characteristics justify analyzing Central Europe as a distinct strategic subsystem. Global power competition certainly shapes the region, but its effects are mediated through European institutions before being further filtered by regional historical experience and domestic political choices. Consequently, identical systemic pressures frequently generate different policy responses across Europe. The

Central European subsystem cannot be understood simply as a passive recipient of global or European dynamics. Rather, it constitutes an intermediate analytical layer in which global developments are interpreted, prioritized, and translated into regional strategies.

The institutional expression of this regional adaptation has been the Visegrád Cooperation. Established in 1991, the V4 emerged not as an alternative to European or transatlantic integration but as a mechanism for facilitating it and later for representing shared regional interests within both NATO and the European Union. Its continued relevance reflects the recognition that geographical proximity, common historical experiences, and similar security challenges create incentives for coordination even when national interests diverge on specific issues. This evolving sense of cooperation has frequently been described as the “Spirit of Visegrád”—a regional identity rooted less in permanent political consensus than in the practical recognition that many strategic challenges are most effectively addressed collectively (Rada, 2021b).

The objective of Euro-Atlantic integration has therefore never been questioned within the region. Rather, the principal debate concerns how equal membership should function within institutions whose rules were established before Central Europe joined them. After demonstrating reliability through support for NATO operations—including participation in Iraq in 2003—and through extensive compliance during the EU accession process, the Visegrád countries increasingly expected not only equal obligations but equal influence. Their concerns have generally centered not on the legitimacy of NATO or the European Union but on the perception that regional priorities have not always received comparable political attention. As a consequence, the V4 has sought simultaneously to remain a committed member of both organizations while ensuring that issues particularly relevant to Central Europe remain part of broader European and transatlantic agendas.

The significance of the Central European subsystem extends beyond the region itself. The experience accumulated over the past decades demonstrates that regional cooperation enhances resilience precisely because it complements rather than competes with European and transatlantic institutions. The management of successive crises—from the financial crisis through migration and the pandemic to the consequences of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine—illustrates that effective responses often require action simultaneously at the global, European, regional, and national levels. This multilayered adaptation

reflects the central logic of Layered Polarity: although the international system is increasingly shaped by global competition, its practical consequences are filtered through regional subsystems whose historical experiences, institutional capacities, and strategic cultures modify how systemic pressures are ultimately translated into policy. For Central Europe, the Visegrád framework represents one of the principal mechanisms through which this regional adaptation continues to take place.

6.2 Central Europe from the perspective of International Relations theory

6.2.1 Why classical theories are not sufficient?

Central Europe, while firmly embedded in NATO and the European Union, developed security perceptions and strategic priorities that are not always identical to those of its Western European partners. Explaining this apparent paradox requires drawing upon several complementary theoretical perspectives. No single International Relations theory fully captures the evolution of Central Europe since the end of the Cold War. Rather, realism, liberal institutionalism, constructivism, and the concept of securitization each illuminate different aspects of the region's strategic behavior.

Realism explains many of the external pressures shaping the region. Geography continues to matter, military capabilities remain relevant, and the return of great-power competition has once again placed Central Europe at the intersection of competing strategic interests. Russian revisionism, the growing strategic rivalry between the United States and China, and the renewed importance of deterrence all reinforce the realist assumption that states continue to pursue security within an anarchic international system.

Nevertheless, realism cannot explain why the Visegrád countries voluntarily transferred significant elements of sovereignty to supranational institutions or why they continue to regard NATO and the European Union as the indispensable foundations of their security despite periodic political disagreements.

Liberal institutionalism provides an important part of the explanation. Membership in NATO and the European Union transformed the security environment of Central Europe by embedding the region within institutional frameworks based upon cooperation, collective defense, economic interdependence, and common rules. The success of democratic transformation after 1989, the expansion of trade, and the institutionalization of political dialogue demonstrate the continued relevance of liberal theories, including institutionalism, interdependence, and democratic peace. Yet these approaches likewise remain incomplete. They struggle to explain why countries sharing the same institutional framework often interpret identical external developments differently or why regional cooperation has intensified precisely when institutional integration within Europe has deepened.

For these reasons, constructivism offers particularly valuable insights into the evolution of Central Europe. The regional identity discussed in the previous section—and more broadly the notion of the “Spirit of Visegrád”—cannot be fully understood through material interests alone. The foreign and security policies of the Visegrád countries reflect not only objective calculations of power but also historically constructed perceptions of security, sovereignty, and regional solidarity (Nyilas & Stepper, 2023a, 2023b). The security policy of the countries of the region can therefore be understood as a continuous process of choosing among possible futures—a process shaped simultaneously by national interests, political debates, historical experiences, and collective identities. Constructivism thus complements rather than replaces realism and liberalism by explaining how strategic cultures emerge and why similar structural conditions may produce different political responses across Europe.

This perspective also highlights the importance of securitization. According to Buzan and his colleagues, securitization is the process through which political actors define a particular issue as an existential security threat, thereby justifying extraordinary political measures beyond the routines of normal politics (Buzan et al., 1998). Security policy therefore represents “the extreme or special version of politics” (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Rather than viewing security threats as objectively given, securitization emphasizes that they are socially constructed through political discourse and accepted by relevant audiences. In this process, the securitizing actor identifies the threat and proposes exceptional responses, while the referent object represents that which is claimed to require protection. In most cases the state acts as the principal securitizing actor because it possesses the institutional authority and political legitimacy necessary to shape public security discourse, although non-state actors may also perform this function (Buzan et al., 1998). The referent object varies according to the issue under consideration and may include the state, the nation, sovereignty, democratic institutions, or broader political communities such as the European Union, NATO, or “the West”. The significance of these concepts differs across societies and historical contexts, reflecting the constructivist insight that security itself is socially interpreted rather than universally defined.

Central Europe offers numerous examples of such securitization processes. Throughout the past decades, governments across the region have increasingly framed energy dependence, migration, Russian military revisionism, cyber threats, critical infrastructure, and more recently economic resilience as security

issues requiring coordinated political responses. The importance attached to these questions often differed from that observed elsewhere in Europe, illustrating that security priorities are shaped not only by objective threats but also by regional historical experience and collective political narratives. Consequently, countries exposed to similar international developments may nevertheless develop different security agendas. The regional dimension of securitization is particularly relevant for understanding the Visegrád Group. In March 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea, the defense ministers of the V4 agreed to strengthen military cooperation and develop common defense initiatives (V4, 2014). Interpreted through the lens of securitization, the member states jointly identified emerging military threats and attempted to formulate coordinated regional responses. While national security policies naturally remained sovereign, regional cooperation increasingly reflected shared perceptions regarding the changing European security environment. This demonstrates that security communities may emerge not only through institutional integration but also through the gradual convergence of security narratives.

These dynamics correspond closely with Barry Buzan's concept of Regional Security Complex Theory. As Buzan and Wæver argue, "today, the members of the states-system are enmeshed in a global web of security interdependence" (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Security can therefore never be analyzed exclusively at either the global or the national level. Although global processes influence all states, many security challenges remain concentrated within particular geographical areas because political and military threats generally travel more easily over short distances. As Buzan and Wæver observe, "...because most political and military threats travel more easily over short distances, proximity is usually required for something to constitute a threat to someone" (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). They further conclude that "the pattern of security interdependence is normally regionally based—we call these identifiable regional clusters security complexes" (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

From this perspective, Central Europe represents a distinct regional security environment embedded within the broader Euro-Atlantic community. Security developments affecting the region are rarely isolated from wider European or global dynamics, yet their intensity and political consequences are shaped by geographical proximity and historical experience. Russian military activity, energy infrastructure, migration routes, and the security of NATO's eastern flank

illustrate how regional factors influence national strategic calculations more directly than many global developments. Consequently, cooperation among the Visegrád countries should be understood not merely as political convenience but as a response to shared security interdependence. Regional Security Complex Theory helps explain the interaction between regional dynamics and great-power politics. Buzan distinguishes between ordinary security complexes and more centralized complexes characterized by dominant, hegemonic, or integrated forms of organization. The Euro-Atlantic security architecture combines several of these characteristics. The European Union represents one of the most highly integrated regional structures in the contemporary international system, while NATO simultaneously reflects the hegemonic role historically exercised by the United States through security guarantees, military capabilities, and alliance leadership. At the same time, globally active powers possess the ability to penetrate regional security complexes and shape their internal dynamics. The strategic behavior of both the United States and Russia demonstrates that regional security cannot be separated from broader patterns of global competition.

For Central Europe, these theoretical perspectives collectively explain why the region simultaneously exhibits strong commitment to Euro-Atlantic institutions and an increasing emphasis on regional cooperation. Realism highlights the enduring relevance of power politics; liberal institutionalism explains the stabilizing role of NATO and the European Union; constructivism accounts for the emergence of a distinct regional strategic identity; securitization clarifies how security priorities are socially constructed; and Regional Security Complex Theory demonstrates why geography continues to organize patterns of security interdependence despite globalization. Together, these approaches provide a more comprehensive understanding of Central Europe's evolving position within the Liberal World Order than any individual theory could achieve alone.

6.2.2 Interpreting multidimensional challenges in Central Europe

The theoretical perspectives discussed above provide a useful framework for understanding why the security agenda of Central Europe has evolved differently from that of many Western European states. While realism explains the return of power politics, liberal institutionalism highlights the stabilizing role of NATO and the European Union, constructivism emphasizes the influence of historical experience and identity, and securitization illustrates how political actors define

and prioritize threats. Together, these approaches demonstrate that security is neither static nor uniform but continuously shaped by changing international circumstances and regional interpretations.

Since the end of the Cold War, the countries of Central Europe have experienced a succession of systemic shocks that have fundamentally transformed their understanding of security. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the international system entered a period characterized by American predominance, the expansion of liberal institutions, and the global diffusion of the Washington Consensus. In Fukuyama's well-known formulation, history itself appeared to have reached its conclusion. However, the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 marked the beginning of a new era in which military power and security once again became central elements of international politics. The subsequent Global War on Terror was followed by another major turning point when the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 shifted international attention from military affairs toward economic resilience and the vulnerabilities of globalization. The United States simultaneously attempted to preserve stability through a reset with Russia while gradually reorienting its strategic focus toward Asia.

These developments did not occur in isolation. The unresolved consequences of the financial crisis were accompanied by an identity crisis within the European Union, while Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 returned territorial revisionism and conventional deterrence to the center of European security. At the same time, the Arab Spring, the migration crisis of 2015, the COVID-19 pandemic, and finally Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 demonstrated that contemporary security challenges increasingly emerge simultaneously across multiple domains. Military conflict, economic vulnerability, energy dependence, migration, public health, technological resilience, and food security interact in ways that make it increasingly difficult to separate one security sector from another.

For Central Europe, these successive crises have not represented isolated events but cumulative strategic experiences. Constructivist approaches suggest that repeated exposure to similar challenges gradually shapes collective threat perceptions and strategic cultures. Securitization theory further explains how governments interpret these developments as existential threats requiring exceptional political responses (Albert & Buzan, 2011). Consequently, although the Visegrád countries share membership in NATO and the European Union with their Western partners, they frequently prioritize security issues differently

because they interpret risks through different historical experiences and geographical realities.

This helps explain why debates surrounding the future of the Liberal World Order often appear differently in Central Europe than elsewhere in the Euro-Atlantic community. The principal question is less whether the liberal order should survive than whether the institutions created after the Second World War remain capable of adapting to increasingly complex and multidimensional security challenges. Political and ideological disputes within the alliance frequently obscure this more fundamental issue. While liberal and conservative narratives may dominate domestic political debates, the practical requirements of regional security often encourage pragmatic cooperation. The continued existence of the Visegrád Group since 1991, despite governments representing different political orientations, illustrates that common strategic interests frequently outweigh ideological differences (Nyilas, 2025b).

The cumulative experience of successive crises has also demonstrated the continuing relevance of regional cooperation. The financial crisis of 2008–2009 revealed that regional coordination often provided more immediate and effective responses than broader European mechanisms alone. Similar patterns emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Visegrád countries sought to coordinate practical responses while simultaneously operating within the broader framework of the European Union. These experiences reinforced the importance of regional resilience, the development of physical and human infrastructure, and the exploitation of regional synergies as complementary rather than competing elements of Euro-Atlantic integration.

The changing geopolitical environment has further increased the complexity of regional decision-making. The strategic competition between the United States and China directly affects all four Visegrád countries through their alliance commitments while simultaneously creating significant economic dilemmas. Although the emergence of an alternative Chinese-led international order is not perceived as desirable within the region, neither is a complete dismantling of mutually beneficial economic relations with China viewed as an optimal outcome. This illustrates the multidimensional character of contemporary security, where geopolitical competition cannot be separated entirely from economic interdependence.

Relations with Russia present an even more complex challenge. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has elevated military security to the forefront of the

regional agenda, but the consequences extend well beyond the military domain. Energy dependence, food security, economic stability, critical infrastructure, and societal resilience have all become closely interconnected with the broader security implications of the war. Addressing the military dimension alone is therefore insufficient, since the conflict simultaneously affects multiple sectors of regional security.

Importantly, the Visegrád countries have not interpreted these challenges uniformly. Poland identified Russia as a major security threat already after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and has consistently belonged to the strongest advocates of deterrence within NATO. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary also condemned Russian actions but initially interpreted the threat with greater caution. From the perspective of securitization theory, Poland securitized Russian revisionism much more strongly than the other members of the V4. Historical experience, geographical proximity, energy dependence, domestic political debates, and differing national interests all contributed to these divergent assessments. As a result, no fully unified regional position emerged regarding Russia or the war in Ukraine (Nyilas, 2023).

These differences should not be interpreted as evidence of the failure of regional cooperation. Rather, they demonstrate one of the central characteristics of regional security complexes. States sharing the same geographical space remain interconnected by common security dynamics even when their perceptions of individual threats differ. Security interdependence therefore does not eliminate national differences but instead provides a framework within which states continuously negotiate common responses to shared strategic challenges. The experience of Central Europe over the past three decades illustrates precisely this dynamic: successive systemic shocks have strengthened the importance of regional cooperation while simultaneously revealing the diversity of national threat perceptions within the Visegrád Group.

6.3 The Visegrád experience as a test of Regional Security Complex Theory

One question is still open. If Regional Security Complex Theory explains Central Europe, why has the V4 survived despite repeated political disagreements?

The preceding chapter argued that the security environment of Central Europe is best understood through a regional perspective. Realism explains the return of power politics, liberal institutionalism highlights the stabilizing role of Euro-Atlantic institutions, constructivism accounts for the formation of regional identities and strategic cultures, while securitization theory demonstrates how security priorities are socially constructed. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) integrates these perspectives by arguing that security interdependence is primarily organized geographically rather than globally. The question, however, is whether the experience of the Visegrád countries confirms this theoretical proposition or whether it requires its refinement.

Russian military aggression against Ukraine fundamentally transformed the European security environment and, above all, challenged prevailing assumptions about the stability of the post-Cold War international order. At the same time, it provided an empirical test of the explanatory power of Regional Security Complex Theory. If security is indeed organized regionally, then the reactions of the Visegrád countries should demonstrate both the common constraints imposed by geography and the diversity of national responses within a shared regional environment.

From the perspective of Hungary and the wider Central European region, this question is particularly important because it relates directly to the original purpose of the Visegrád Cooperation. The three founding states, later joined by Slovakia, sought to overcome historical divisions and jointly determine the international order to which they wished to belong. Their strategic orientation toward the West and Euro-Atlantic integration was never fundamentally questioned, either by political elites or by society. Membership in NATO and the European Union represented not merely foreign policy objectives but the restoration of a strategic choice that had effectively been denied to the region after Yalta. At the same time, integration was never regarded as requiring the abandonment of national interests. Rather, participation in the Euro-Atlantic community was understood as the framework within which those interests could be pursued more effectively through cooperation.

This distinction remains important when assessing the resilience of the Liberal World Order. For the Visegrád countries, the central question has never simply been whether the existing international order should be preserved, but whether the institutions underpinning that order remain capable of responding effectively to the security challenges that affect the region most directly. Consequently, regional cooperation has never represented an alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration but rather one of its complementary dimensions. The experience of the challenges of the past decades reinforces this interpretation. None of these developments replaced the previous one; instead, they accumulated, creating an increasingly complex security environment in which military, economic, energy, technological, and societal challenges interact continuously. The principal analytical difficulty therefore lies not in identifying individual crises but in understanding how multiple processes simultaneously shape the strategic environment of Central Europe.

This complexity also explains why interpretations of the Visegrád Cooperation frequently differ between observers inside and outside the region. External analyses often assess the V4 through the prism of a single issue—whether migration, relations with Russia, democratic governance, or the rule of law—and subsequently generalize from that issue to the entire regional partnership. Such an approach overlooks the multidimensional character of regional cooperation. Individual political disagreements undoubtedly emerged during the past decades, some of them fundamental, yet it would be equally misleading to conclude from these disputes that the Visegrád framework has lost its political relevance. The persistence of cooperation despite recurring disagreements suggests that the underlying logic of regional interaction is more robust than individual policy conflicts might imply.

The importance of this regional perspective becomes particularly evident when examining the relationship between global and regional security dynamics. Under the conditions of globalization, Hungary and the other Visegrád countries naturally participate in broader transatlantic security structures. Nevertheless, the immediate consequences of most security challenges are experienced primarily through the regional environment. Military developments on NATO's eastern flank, energy dependence, migration routes, critical infrastructure, and economic interdependence all affect Central Europe more directly than many global processes. As we argued in an earlier book (Marton et al., 2015), participation in particular security complexes cannot simply be abandoned

through political choice; interdependence creates enduring regional constraints from which individual states cannot easily “opt out.” The energy security complex illustrates this particularly clearly. Although shaped by wider transatlantic and post-Soviet dynamics, it exerts a direct influence on the strategic calculations of Hungary and its neighbors, while the possibilities for rapidly reducing existing vulnerabilities remain limited. The same logic also applies to the production of security as an international public good. Although it is difficult to determine whether individual states contribute more than they receive because contribution, benefit, and burden-sharing cannot easily be measured conceptually, Hungary—and similarly the other Visegrád countries—clearly benefits from participation in the Euro-Atlantic security community. Burden-sharing therefore represents not only an alliance obligation but also a direct strategic interest for the countries of the region. This dual position as both contributor and beneficiary reinforces rather than weakens the rationale for continued regional coordination within NATO and the European Union.

The war in Ukraine has nevertheless demonstrated that common regional exposure does not necessarily produce identical political responses. Poland interpreted Russian revisionism as an immediate existential threat and rapidly emerged as one of the strongest advocates of military support for Ukraine and enhanced NATO deterrence. Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic condemned Russian aggression while initially placing greater emphasis on the broader economic, energy, and societal consequences of the conflict. At first sight, these differences may appear inconsistent with Regional Security Complex Theory. If neighboring states share the same security environment, why do they not always reach the same strategic conclusions?

Rather than disproving the theory, however, these divergent responses highlight one of its principal strengths. Regional Security Complex Theory does not require uniform policies; it argues that neighboring states are embedded within common patterns of security interdependence. States sharing the same geographical space remain exposed to many of the same strategic pressures while interpreting and prioritizing those pressures differently according to their historical experiences, domestic political debates, economic structures, and strategic cultures. The Visegrád countries therefore demonstrate that regional security interdependence coexists with national variation. The question is not whether regional dynamics exist, but how cooperation persists despite differing assessments of individual security challenges.

This observation provides the point of departure for reconsidering whether the original framework of Regional Security Complex Theory is sufficient to explain the contemporary experience of the Visegrád countries, or whether the concept requires further refinement through the incorporation of issue-specific forms of regional cooperation.

6.4 From regional security complexes to issue-specific regional cooperation

The preceding discussion suggests that the experience of the Visegrád countries broadly confirms the principal assumptions of Regional Security Complex Theory. The countries of Central Europe clearly constitute a region characterized by dense security interdependence, common historical experiences, overlapping institutional memberships, and similar external strategic constraints. At the same time, the empirical record of the past three decades also demonstrates that regional cooperation does not develop uniformly across every dimension of security. Rather, cooperation fluctuates according to the specific issue under consideration.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine illustrates this dynamic particularly well. There is no disagreement that the war represents one of the defining turning points of the contemporary European security order and that Russian aggression fundamentally challenged assumptions concerning the stability of the post-Cold War international system. The war also demonstrated that the Visegrád countries remain embedded within the same regional security environment while interpreting particular threats differently. Although all four states condemned Russian aggression, supported NATO's collective defense commitments, accepted the common positions adopted within the European Union, and approved sanctions against Russia, important differences emerged concerning the appropriate political, military, economic, and energy responses. These differences did not signify the disappearance of regional interdependence; instead, they revealed that different security sectors produce different patterns of regional cooperation. This observation raises an important theoretical question. If the Visegrád countries remain part of the same regional security environment, why does cooperation appear stronger in some policy areas than in others? Traditional Regional Security Complex Theory explains why neighboring states are connected by geography and patterns of mutual securitization (Buzan, 1991; Buzan & Wæver, 2003), yet it offers less guidance for explaining why regional cooperation remains remarkably resilient despite recurring disagreements over particular policy questions.

The experience of the V4 suggests that regional cooperation is organized less around permanent political consensus than around specific groups of common strategic problems. In other words, the regional dimension undoubtedly exists,

but it is expressed through jointly interpreted challenges and the responses developed to address them. Building upon the regional logic proposed by Buzan and Wæver, we introduced (Marton et al., 2015) therefore introduced the concept of issue-specific security complexes, arguing that security cooperation should also be understood through the particular policy domains that generate shared regional interests. From this perspective, the Visegrád Cooperation should not be understood as a single, homogeneous security complex operating equally across all sectors. Instead, different issue-specific complexes emerge, evolve, and occasionally disappear according to changes in the strategic environment. Energy security, migration, military deterrence, border protection, infrastructure resilience, economic competitiveness, technological development, and food security all represent examples of policy areas in which regional cooperation may become particularly intensive because the participating states confront similar external constraints.

The multidimensional character also explains why the Visegrád countries have remained capable of cooperation despite recurring political disagreements. During the past decades, disputes emerged concerning the Eurozone, relations with Russia and China, migration, the rule of law, and institutional reforms within the European Union. Yet these disagreements did not eliminate cooperation in areas where common regional interests remained evident. Defense cooperation, infrastructure connectivity, border management, economic coordination, and the articulation of shared regional positions within NATO and the European Union continued because they addressed practical challenges experienced collectively by the countries of Central Europe.

The concept of the “Spirit of Visegrád” (Rada, 2021b) provides an additional explanation for this continuity. Rather than representing a fixed political program, it reflects the accumulated experience of cooperation and the recognition that many strategic interests are more effectively represented collectively than individually. This regional identity functions as an institutional and political “glue” that enables cooperation to survive changes of government, ideological differences, and disagreements over particular policy questions. It explains why the V4 has repeatedly adapted to changing international circumstances without abandoning the underlying logic of regional coordination. The continued relevance of the V4 within the Euro-Atlantic community further reinforces this interpretation. Despite almost three decades of NATO membership and two decades within the European Union, the countries of

Central Europe have frequently been perceived by their Western partners as “new” members. This has strengthened the incentive to articulate regional interests collectively within larger institutional frameworks. Although bilateral or trilateral alignments among individual V4 members have occasionally become stronger than cooperation among all four countries, these fluctuations have not fundamentally altered the strategic rationale for maintaining the Visegrád framework.

Consequently, the empirical experience of the V4 does not invalidate Regional Security Complex Theory. On the contrary, it confirms its central proposition that security is primarily experienced and interpreted regionally. At the same time, it suggests that regional cooperation is best understood as a dynamic process operating across multiple issue-specific domains rather than as a uniform political relationship. Regional security complexes explain why neighboring states remain strategically interconnected; issue-specific security complexes explain why cooperation intensifies in some sectors while remaining limited or contested in others. The two concepts are therefore complementary rather than competing analytical frameworks.

Ultimately, the resilience of the Visegrád Cooperation over more than three decades derives precisely from this flexibility. Its durability has not depended upon continuous political agreement but upon the repeated identification of common regional challenges that can be addressed more effectively through cooperation than by individual states acting alone. The presence of issue-specific security complexes therefore provides the practical logic of Visegrád cooperation and helps explain why the regional framework has survived profound transformations of the international order, changes of government, and repeated geopolitical crises (Marton et al., 2015).

6.5 Implications for interpreting Central Europe in the Liberal World Order

The preceding discussion demonstrates that the evolution of the Visegrád Cooperation cannot be understood solely through the dynamics of the Liberal World Order or through the distribution of power at the global level. While transformations of the international order establish the broader strategic environment within which Central European states operate, they do not fully explain regional responses to those changes. Between the global and the national levels lies the regional dimension, where security challenges are interpreted, prioritized, and translated into concrete political action. The countries of Central Europe share a common geopolitical environment, belong to the same alliance structures, and remain exposed to many of the same external pressures. Geography continues to shape patterns of security interdependence, while historical experience, institutional integration, and strategic culture contribute to the emergence of distinct regional security perceptions. The region therefore constitutes more than a simple geographical category; it represents an analytical level at which international political developments acquire specific regional meanings.

At the same time, the empirical evidence presented in this chapter suggests that contemporary regional cooperation cannot be explained exclusively through the original formulation of Regional Security Complex Theory. The experience of the Visegrád Cooperation demonstrates that security interdependence does not automatically produce identical national preferences or continuous political consensus. Rather, cooperation develops unevenly across different policy domains, reflecting the multidimensional nature of contemporary security challenges. This observation is particularly relevant in an international environment characterized by overlapping crises. Military conflicts influence energy markets, economic sanctions reshape supply chains, migration affects domestic politics, technological competition influences economic security, while climate change increasingly interacts with infrastructure, food production, and societal resilience. These challenges cannot be understood independently of one another, nor can they be addressed exclusively through global institutions. Their practical consequences are experienced primarily within regions, where neighboring states confront similar constraints while retaining different political preferences and national priorities.

The concept of issue-specific security complexes complements this regional perspective by explaining why cooperation persists despite political disagreements. Rather than assuming that regional cooperation must be equally intensive across all dimensions of security, it recognizes that different policy areas generate different patterns of interaction. Some issues encourage broad regional consensus, whereas others produce divergent national strategies without fundamentally weakening the underlying regional framework. The Visegrád experience therefore suggests that regional cooperation is not sustained by permanent political agreement but by the continuing identification of common strategic interests requiring collective responses.

The Central European experience illustrates a broader characteristic of the contemporary international system. As the Liberal World Order becomes increasingly contested and global governance faces growing fragmentation, the significance of the regional level is likely to increase rather than diminish. Regional organizations, flexible coalitions, and issue-specific forms of cooperation are becoming increasingly important mechanisms through which states adapt to the complexity of international politics. The Visegrád Cooperation represents one manifestation of this broader tendency: it demonstrates how a regional grouping can remain strategically relevant without requiring complete political unity among its members.

Consequently, the principal contribution of this chapter is not to replace existing theories but to demonstrate their complementarity. Realism explains the persistence of geopolitical competition; liberal institutionalism highlights the stabilizing role of international institutions; constructivism accounts for the importance of identity and historical experience; securitization theory explains how threats are socially constructed; Regional Security Complex Theory identifies the regional level as the primary arena of security interaction; and the concept of issue-specific security complexes provides a more nuanced explanation of how cooperation develops across different policy domains within that regional environment. Together, these approaches offer a more comprehensive framework for interpreting both the evolution of the Visegrád Cooperation and the changing position of Central Europe within the Liberal World Order.

The following chapters build upon this analytical framework by examining how these theoretical propositions are reflected in the practical development of the Visegrád Cooperation and in the changing regional responses to the transformation of the international order. In doing so, they move from

theoretical interpretation to empirical analysis, demonstrating how broader changes in world politics have shaped the evolution of Central Europe over the past three decades.

7 The future of the Visegrád Cooperation in a changing world order

7.1 Why has the Visegrád Cooperation survived?

One of the most remarkable features of the Visegrád Cooperation is not its institutional development or its individual political achievements but its resilience. Since its establishment in 1991, observers have repeatedly questioned its relevance and predicted its eventual decline (Rada, 2018). The accession of the member states to NATO and the European Union appeared to remove its original purpose. Political disagreements among governments, differing approaches to challenges and growing divergences in national foreign policies each generated renewed claims that the V4 had reached the end of its political life. Yet more than three decades after its creation, the cooperation continues to function and remains one of the most recognizable regional groupings within the European Union. This persistence raises a more fundamental question than whether the V4 is currently politically influential. Rather than asking why disagreements have repeatedly emerged, the more relevant analytical question is why those disagreements have never resulted in the dissolution of the cooperation. The history of the V4 demonstrates that periods of political convergence have alternated with periods of significant divergence. Nevertheless, cooperation has repeatedly adapted to changing regional and international circumstances. Explaining this resilience provides important insights not only into the future of the Visegrád Cooperation but also into the role of flexible regional groupings within an increasingly fragmented international order.

The previous chapter argued that the resilience of the V4 cannot be explained through institutional arrangements alone. Regional Security Complex Theory demonstrates why the countries of Central Europe remain strategically interconnected despite changing international circumstances. Geography, historical experience, economic interdependence, alliance commitments, and common exposure to external security challenges create enduring patterns of regional interaction that cannot simply be abandoned because of temporary political disagreements. At the same time, the concept of issue-specific security complexes explains why cooperation continues to develop unevenly across different policy domains. Regional cooperation is therefore neither constant nor

uniform. Instead, it expands where common strategic interests emerge and contracts where national preferences diverge.

While these theoretical approaches explain the structural foundations of cooperation, they do not fully account for its political durability. The experience of the Visegrád countries suggests the existence of an additional factor that cannot easily be captured through institutional analysis alone. This may be described as the Spirit of Visegrád (Rada, 2021b). The Spirit of Visegrád does not refer to a formal institution, a common political ideology, or a permanent alliance. Rather, it represents a shared strategic understanding that the countries of Central Europe achieve more through cooperation than through political isolation. It reflects the recognition that common historical experiences, geographical proximity, intertwined economic interests, and membership in the same Euro-Atlantic institutions generate sufficient common interests to justify continued regional coordination despite recurring political disagreements. Cooperation has therefore never depended upon complete consensus. Instead, it has rested upon the repeated acknowledgement that the costs of abandoning cooperation are likely to exceed the costs of managing political differences.

This characteristic distinguishes the Visegrád Cooperation from many traditional regional organizations. Whereas institutionalized organizations often seek to reduce disagreements through increasingly formalized decision-making procedures, the V4 deliberately developed as a flexible and largely informal framework. The absence of supranational institutions, legally binding obligations, or majority voting has frequently been interpreted as evidence of institutional weakness. Yet the opposite interpretation appears equally plausible. Institutional flexibility has enabled the V4 to absorb domestic political changes, ideological differences, and fluctuations in foreign policy priorities without threatening the existence of the cooperation itself. In this sense, flexibility has functioned not as a deficiency but as an important source of resilience.

The resilience of the V4 also reflects a broader transformation of international politics. As the Liberal World Order becomes increasingly contested and geopolitical competition intensifies, states rarely possess the capacity to respond effectively through purely national policies. At the same time, global institutions often struggle to accommodate increasingly diverse strategic preferences. Regional cooperation therefore occupies an intermediate level between national sovereignty and global governance. It enables states to coordinate positions where interests converge while preserving sufficient flexibility where they do not.

The Visegrád Cooperation represents precisely such a mechanism. This observation has broader implications for understanding regionalism in the twenty-first century. The future relevance of regional cooperation is unlikely to depend upon deeper institutionalization alone. Instead, its effectiveness will increasingly derive from its capacity to adapt to changing geopolitical circumstances, to organize cooperation around specific strategic challenges, and to preserve sufficient political flexibility to accommodate differing national interests. In this respect, the Visegrád Cooperation represents less an exception than an example of a wider trend toward flexible, issue-oriented regional governance.

The central argument of this chapter therefore differs from many earlier interpretations of the V4. Rather than evaluating the cooperation through the presence or absence of political consensus at any particular moment, it argues that resilience itself constitutes the defining characteristic of the Visegrád model. The cooperation has survived not because disagreements have been absent, but because the participating states have repeatedly concluded that continued cooperation serves their long-term strategic interests better than institutional fragmentation. This resilience provides the most useful starting point for assessing how the Visegrád Cooperation is likely to evolve under the conditions of an increasingly contested international order.

7.2 Origins

The Visegrád countries have developed into mature members of the EU and NATO, and their foreign policy strategies are increasingly shaped by the EU's response to geopolitical shifts. However, the question remains: where does Central Europe fit within the evolving global order (Rada, 2022b; Rada & Bartha, 2013)? Central Europe is institutionally part of the liberal world order through its membership in the EU and NATO. This order aspires to universal values and norms, which the V4 countries must navigate while balancing their national interests. Regions outside the liberal core either align with its norms for benefits such as security and welfare or reject them in favor of alternative models. Central Europe's challenge lies in reconciling its position within the liberal order while managing diverse external influences and interests.

The EU acts as a central agenda-setter in shaping the policies and strategies of its member states. Within this context, the V4 countries find themselves having to navigate between their national interests and the EU's strategic priorities. The EU's push for strategic autonomy (*see more details later*), especially in areas like defense, energy, and technology, demands that V4 countries align their policies with broader EU objectives. This alignment often entails a delicate balancing act between supporting collective EU initiatives and safeguarding national sovereignty.

NATO membership further consolidates the V4's place in the liberal order. By participating in the Euro-Atlantic security framework, the V4 contribute to the collective defense and stability of the region. However, aligning with NATO's strategic objectives poses unique challenges for these countries. While NATO's principles of mutual defense are central to the V4's security strategies, the resurgence of great power competition – particularly Russia's assertiveness in Eastern Europe – has created new tensions that the V4 must address within the bounds of both NATO and EU policies (Rada, 2021a).

At the same time, the V4's integration into the liberal order comes with internal tensions, especially around questions of national sovereignty and EU governance. Some V4 countries, notably Hungary and Poland, have pushed back against certain EU policies, perceiving them as infringements on national autonomy (Nyilas & Stepper, 2023a, 2023b). This tension exemplifies the broader struggle within the liberal order, where states benefit from the economic and security advantages of integration but resist perceived overreach in domestic governance. The challenge

for the V4 lies in negotiating these dynamics while maintaining their commitment to the core values of the liberal world order.

While Central Europe is part of the liberal core, it is not shielded from the influences and pressures of actors outside this order. The liberal world order's norms are contested by regions and states that either engage with its principles selectively or actively oppose them, presenting alternative models of governance. However, no coherent alternative has been presented yet. China's growing economic presence in Central Europe, particularly through initiatives as the above-mentioned Belt and Road Initiative, poses both opportunities and strategic dilemmas for the V4. On one hand, Chinese investments promise economic development, infrastructure modernization, and trade benefits. On the other hand, these engagements can create dependencies that challenge the V4's alignment with EU policies and strategic autonomy (Rada & Stepper, 2026). The V4 countries must, therefore, weigh the benefits of economic cooperation with China against the risks of undermining the EU's strategic goals. Similarly, Russia exerts significant influence in Central Europe, particularly through its role as a major energy supplier. The V4 countries, especially Hungary under the Orbán government, have at times adopted a more friendly stance toward Russia, balancing their economic interests with the broader EU and NATO positions on Russian assertiveness in Eastern Europe (Nyilas, 2025a). This highlights the complexity of the V4's position: while they are institutionally part of the liberal order, they must also contend with regional geopolitical realities that often require a more nuanced foreign policy approach. The V4's ability to manage these outside influences while maintaining their alignment with the liberal core underscores their unique role within the global order. Their foreign policy strategies must reconcile the demands of the liberal order with the realities of an increasingly multipolar world. Furthermore, the question remains whether the V4 can actively shape the liberal world order or if they are primarily reactive to the agendas set by more influential actors within the EU and NATO (Rada, 2022a).

The V4 countries' integration into the EU and NATO has provided them with a platform to participate in the liberal world order actively. However, their influence is often mediated by the EU's institutions and NATO's strategic priorities. Within the EU, the V4 have sought to advocate for their regional interests, particularly on issues like energy security, migration, and defense. This advocacy is crucial, as it allows the V4 to contribute to shaping EU policies in ways that reflect their specific geopolitical concerns. Nonetheless, the V4's engagement with the liberal core is

not without contradictions as more examples were already mentioned. Central Europe's place in the world order is marked by a tension between upholding the norms of the liberal order and addressing the external pressures from actors outside it.

7.3 Institutional flexibility and the sources of V4 resilience

The resilience of the Visegrád Cooperation cannot be explained solely by the persistence of common interests. It also derives from the specific institutional form through which those interests have been coordinated. From its establishment, the V4 developed as an informal and deliberately non-overinstitutionalized framework. It did not create supranational organs, legally binding decision-making procedures, or mechanisms through which one member could be compelled to accept a common position. Although this institutional lightness has often been interpreted as weakness, the history of the cooperation suggests that it has instead become one of the principal conditions of its durability.

The Visegrád Cooperation was launched in 1991 through the initiative of Central European political thinkers and leaders committed to democratic transformation, regional cooperation, and Euro-Atlantic integration (V4, 1991). Its original purpose was clearly defined: the participating countries sought to support one another during the simultaneous processes of political democratization, market-oriented economic transformation, and integration into Western institutions. The underlying assumption was that the coordination of national efforts would increase the likelihood of achieving jointly desired outcomes without requiring the members to surrender their national particularities.

Following the relatively successful initial phase, however, cooperation entered a period of passivity during the mid-1990s, primarily because of domestic political developments and the policy orientation of the Slovak government of the time (Dangerfield, 2001). The fact that the Visegrád framework survived this early period of stagnation was already an indication of its adaptive potential. It had not been institutionalized to such an extent that temporary political disagreement would produce an organizational crisis, yet it retained sufficient political meaning to be renewed once domestic and regional circumstances changed.

The first substantial institutional renewal occurred in 1999, when the member states reaffirmed the importance of cooperation and introduced a more regular structure based on rotating annual presidencies (V4, 1999). The presidency system provided continuity without creating a permanent political center. Each member state assumed responsibility for identifying priorities, coordinating

meetings, and continuing initiatives inherited from previous presidencies. At the same time, the agendas were developed consensually, meaning that national priorities had to be translated into programs acceptable to all four participants. This institutional arrangement generated a distinctive balance between leadership and equality. The country holding the presidency could emphasize particular policy areas and propose new initiatives, but it could not redefine the V4 unilaterally. The rotating system therefore created momentum while limiting institutional hierarchy. It also encouraged continuity, as successful initiatives could be carried forward by subsequent presidencies and adapted to changing circumstances. The presidency cycles became an important mechanism through which the cooperation repeatedly renewed itself without requiring the establishment of a centralized bureaucracy.

A further step in institutional development was the creation of the International Visegrad Fund in 2000. The Fund became the only permanently operating institution of the cooperation with its own headquarters and organizational structure. Its activities in the fields of education, research, culture, civil society, and regional exchange gave the V4 a societal dimension that extended beyond intergovernmental political coordination. This was significant because it created forms of cooperation less directly dependent on the political relations among governments. Even during periods of diplomatic tension, academic, cultural, municipal, and civil-society cooperation could continue through the Fund. The importance of the International Visegrad Fund lies therefore not only in the financial support it provides but also in its contribution to institutional continuity. It sustains networks and practices that are not immediately disrupted by electoral change or foreign-policy disagreement. In this respect, the Fund represents a limited but important form of institutionalization: sufficient to preserve cooperation below the level of high politics, but not so extensive as to transform the V4 into a traditional international organization.

The accession of the Visegrád countries to NATO and the European Union created the most important test of the cooperation's adaptability. By 2004, the original strategic objective that had justified the creation of the V4 had largely been achieved. Membership in the Euro-Atlantic institutions could therefore have rendered the regional platform redundant. Instead, the leaders of the four countries reaffirmed their intention to continue cooperation and reinterpreted the V4 as a platform operating within the EU and, in certain respects, within NATO (V4, 2004). This transformation demonstrated that the V4 was not tied

permanently to a single historical objective. Its initial function had been to facilitate accession to Western institutions; its subsequent function became the coordination of regional interests within them. The V4 therefore changed from an integration-oriented platform into a mechanism of intra-institutional cooperation. Rather than seeking an alternative to the EU or NATO, it enabled the four countries to increase their visibility and bargaining capacity inside those organizations.

The development of the V4+ format further extended this adaptive logic. Through V4+ cooperation, the four countries could engage external partners, regional organizations, and major powers without expanding the permanent membership of the grouping. This offered a flexible means of broadening cooperation while preserving the internal cohesion of the original format. It allowed the V4 to respond to changing foreign-policy priorities, develop relations beyond Central Europe, and address issues that could not be managed exclusively among the four member states. The V4+ format also demonstrated that regional cooperation did not need to be geographically closed. The Visegrád countries could act jointly in relation to neighboring states, EU partners, candidate countries, or global actors while retaining the informal nature of the group. The external dimension became especially important after EU accession, when the V4 increasingly sought to contribute to enlargement, neighborhood policy, energy connectivity, and regional stability.

Institutional flexibility also explains why the V4 has been able to survive periods in which political unity was weak. The cooperation does not require the members to formulate a common position on every issue. In fields where national sensitivities or strategic disagreements are particularly strong, the V4 can refrain from adopting a regional position without undermining the legitimacy of cooperation in other areas. The absence of binding majority decisions allows disagreement to remain compartmentalized. This capacity became especially important as the political agendas of the Visegrád states diversified. The four governments have not always agreed on European integration, relations with major powers, migration, energy, domestic governance, or responses to regional crises (Nyilas, 2025a). Yet disagreement in one field has not necessarily prevented cooperation in another. Infrastructure, cross-border connectivity, cultural cooperation, defense modernization, economic coordination, and institutional advocacy have often continued even when political relations became strained.

The V4 therefore functions through selective rather than comprehensive coordination. Its institutional logic does not assume that regional cooperation must produce uniformity. Instead, cooperation intensifies where interests converge and becomes less visible where they do not. This corresponds to the issue-specific logic discussed in the previous chapter: the relevance of regional cooperation varies across policy domains, while the institutional framework remains available for renewed coordination when circumstances change.

Such flexibility is particularly important in a region where domestic political changes can rapidly alter foreign-policy priorities. Elections may replace governments with very different ideological orientations, yet the V4 does not require each new government to reaffirm a detailed legal or political commitment to the group. Participation can be intensified, reduced, or redirected without a formal process of institutional withdrawal. The cooperation can therefore absorb political cycles more effectively than a more rigid organization might.

The annual presidencies illustrate this cyclical character. Different governments have attached different levels of political importance to the V4, and some presidencies have been more ambitious than others. Nevertheless, each presidency has operated within an inherited framework and has contributed to the continuity of the cooperation. Even when the foreign-policy focus of a government shifted during a presidency, the institutional calendar and previously agreed programs continued to provide a structure for political, economic, and cultural engagement. This continuity does not mean that the V4 has always been equally effective. Informality can limit implementation, weaken accountability, and make cooperation dependent on political will. The absence of binding commitments means that ambitious declarations do not automatically produce common policies. Furthermore, the same flexibility that enables the V4 to survive disagreements can also allow governments to avoid difficult compromises. Institutional resilience and political effectiveness are therefore not identical.

Nevertheless, evaluating the V4 only according to the criteria applied to formal international organizations would overlook its actual function. The purpose of the Visegrád Cooperation has never been to replace national decision-making or create an independent regional authority. Its value lies in providing a permanent platform through which the four countries can coordinate when coordination is useful. Its relatively limited institutional structure corresponds to this purpose.

The V4's institutional form also reflects the broader strategic preferences of its members. The countries of Central Europe have generally sought to preserve national sovereignty while participating actively in European and transatlantic institutions. The Visegrád framework embodies this approach particularly clearly. It creates opportunities for collective action without imposing supranational authority and strengthens regional influence without requiring permanent political unity.

In this sense, the V4 may be understood as a form of flexible regional institutionalism. Its resilience rests on a limited number of durable mechanisms: rotating presidencies, regular political consultations, sectoral meetings, the International Visegrad Fund, and the V4+ format. None of these mechanisms is sufficient independently to guarantee cohesion, but together they preserve the possibility of cooperation across changing political contexts.

The cooperation's durability therefore results partly from the modesty of its institutional ambitions (Rada, 2026). Because the V4 has not attempted to become a highly integrated regional organization, political disagreement does not create the same existential consequences that it might within a more formal structure. The group can experience periods of reduced political activity without ceasing to exist. It can return to specific fields of cooperation once interests realign, and it can redefine its priorities without negotiating a new founding treaty.

The historical development of the V4 thus reveals a recurring pattern of adaptation. The grouping survived the political stagnation of the 1990s, redefined itself after NATO and EU accession, expanded its external role through V4+ formats, and preserved cooperation despite increasingly visible political differences among its members. Each period of apparent decline was followed not necessarily by full political reconvergence but by a reorientation toward areas in which practical cooperation remained possible.

Institutional flexibility should therefore not be romanticized as a substitute for political agreement. The V4 cannot exercise significant influence where its members pursue directly contradictory objectives, and informality cannot compensate indefinitely for the absence of shared strategic priorities. Yet the absence of continuous political consensus does not automatically eliminate the value of the framework. The institutional design allows the V4 to remain dormant or selective without becoming obsolete.

This distinction is essential for evaluating the future of the cooperation. Predictions of the V4's disappearance have often treated temporary political divergence as evidence of institutional collapse. Such interpretations underestimate the capacity of a flexible regional grouping to survive in a reduced form and later regain relevance. The V4 does not need to operate with the same intensity across all periods or policy areas in order to remain strategically useful. Its resilience rests precisely on this capacity to combine continuity with adaptation. The institutional framework preserves established channels of communication, while informality allows the members to adjust the substance of cooperation to new circumstances. The Visegrád Cooperation has consequently endured not despite its limited institutionalization but partly because of it.

The explanation of resilience, however, cannot stop at institutional design. Institutions provide the mechanisms through which cooperation continues, but they do not fully explain why successive governments have repeatedly chosen to preserve those mechanisms. That question requires consideration of the shared regional understanding underlying cooperation: the recognition that, despite political differences and occasionally competing interests, the four countries continue to benefit from acting together. This less formal but enduring logic constitutes the Spirit of Visegrád examined in the following section.

7.4 Divergence after Ukraine

The global security environment has undergone profound transformations in recent decades, driven by the resurgence of great power competition, the emergence of multidimensional threats, and the contestation of long-standing international norms. Central Europe, particularly the Visegrád Four countries – Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – stand at the crossroads of these changes. Situated geographically at the juncture of East and West and institutionally integrated into the liberal world order through membership in the European Union and NATO, the region offers a compelling lens through which to examine the impact of global shifts on regional dynamics and strategy-making.

The liberal international order, which emerged after World War II and solidified following the Cold War, has been characterized by open markets, multilateral institutions, and a commitment to democratic governance. For Central Europe, this order provided a pathway for integration, enabling the V4 countries to transition from post-Soviet dependency to active participation in the Euro-Atlantic alliance. However, this order now faces unprecedented challenges, including the rise of revisionist powers such as Russia and China, domestic political shifts within liberal democracies, and the erosion of global consensus on shared norms. These challenges have direct implications for Central Europe, as they influence both external security threats and internal political cohesion.

The evolving global order necessitates a reexamination of theoretical paradigms in international relations. As we could see, realism, liberalism, and constructivism each provide valuable frameworks for analyzing Central Europe's strategic positioning within this complex environment. Realist perspectives emphasize the primacy of power politics and national interests in shaping international relations. From this viewpoint, the liberal order is seen as a facade for the dominance of Western powers, particularly the United States. Central Europe's security concerns—especially in relation to Russia—align closely with realist assumptions. The region's reliance on NATO and its calls for increased military presence on NATO's eastern flank underscore the enduring relevance of power dynamics in ensuring national security. Liberal theories, in contrast, highlight the role of institutions, interdependence, and democratic values in promoting peace and stability. For the V4, liberalism has been instrumental in shaping post-Cold War integration into the EU and NATO. The institutional frameworks provided by these organizations have facilitated economic growth, political stability, and collective

security. However, the increasing fragmentation within the EU, as well as challenges to democratic norms within some V4 states, raises questions about the resilience of the liberal paradigm. Constructivist approaches offer a nuanced perspective by focusing on the role of identities, norms, and historical experiences in shaping international behavior. Central Europe's integration into the liberal order can be seen as a reflection of its historical aspiration to align with Western democratic values and its strategic necessity to counter regional threats. Yet, the region's complex identity—rooted in both Western liberalism and its unique post-communist trajectory—complicates its relationship with broader Euro-Atlantic structures.

The V4's integration into the liberal world order has been marked by significant achievements. EU membership has facilitated access to a single market, structural funds, and a platform for political cooperation, while NATO membership has provided robust security guarantees. These frameworks have allowed the V4 to enhance their national capabilities, modernize infrastructure, and participate in international missions. However, integration has also brought challenges. The tension between national sovereignty and supranational commitments remains a persistent issue, exemplified by disagreements over migration policies, rule of law disputes, and differing approaches to external actors such as Russia and China (Nyilas, 2024).

Central Europe's strategic geography further complicates its position within the liberal order. As a frontline region in the EU and NATO, the V4 faces direct security threats from an increasingly assertive Russia. The 2014 annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine have heightened the region's security concerns, prompting calls for greater NATO engagement and a reevaluation of defense policies. At the same time, China's economic initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, present both opportunities and strategic dilemmas. While Chinese investments promise infrastructure development, they also raise concerns about dependency and alignment with EU strategic objectives.

The global power balance is shifting toward a more multipolar configuration, characterized by the rise of non-Western powers and the relative decline of U.S. hegemony. This transition has significant implications for Central Europe. The region must navigate competing pressures from traditional allies, such as the United States, and emerging powers, such as China and Russia. Additionally, the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy—a response to perceived U.S. retrenchment

and the need for greater resilience—introduces new dynamics that the V4 must reconcile with their national priorities.

In response to these challenges, regional cooperation within the V4 has become increasingly important. While the Visegrád Group was initially established as a platform for post-communist transition, it has evolved into a mechanism for coordinating regional responses to shared challenges. Defense collaboration, joint infrastructure projects, and coordinated positions within the EU illustrate the potential of subregional cooperation. However, internal divisions—driven by differing national priorities and political trajectories—often undermine the group's cohesion. The V4's ability to navigate the changing world order will depend on their capacity for strategic adaptation. This involves leveraging their collective influence within the EU, strengthening transatlantic ties, and engaging pragmatically with non-Western powers. By aligning their regional strategies with broader global trends, the V4 can enhance their resilience and contribute to shaping the future of the liberal order.

The conflict in Ukraine has significantly altered the security environment in Central Europe. It has marked the resurgence of great power politics, challenging the assumptions of a stable, rules-based liberal world order. The Ukraine war has demonstrated the limitations of the existing international system in addressing regional conflicts effectively, leading to a reevaluation of foreign and security policies within the V4 (Nyilas, 2023). The implications of the Ukraine war extend beyond the immediate region. It has prompted a renewed focus on collective security measures, urging the V4 countries to rethink their strategic priorities. With Russia asserting its influence in Eastern Europe, the V4 states face a delicate balancing act: reinforcing their military capacities while supporting diplomatic efforts to maintain regional stability. The situation has exposed the complexities of relying solely on the liberal order's mechanisms for conflict resolution, pushing the V4 to adopt a more pragmatic and multifaceted security approach (Marton et al., 2015).

Apart from the conflict in Ukraine, renewed tensions in the Middle East and power competition in East Asia are reshaping global power dynamics. The Middle East continues to be a source of security concerns, with conflicts and political instability contributing to global terrorism and migration pressures. Meanwhile, the rivalry between the United States and China has introduced new dimensions to international relations, prompting the V4 to reevaluate their economic and diplomatic strategies within this context (Rada & Nyilas, 2024).

The current security landscape is also marked by the emergence of what some scholars refer to as a “post-liberal” world order (Zakaria, 2011). This concept challenges the dominance of Western-led international norms and institutions, suggesting that the global system is transitioning towards a more multipolar structure. The expansion of the BRICS group and the increasing assertiveness of the Global South in international forums indicate that the global power balance is shifting. These developments also require the V4 countries to reconsider their strategic positions and alliances within this evolving order.

Central Europe’s response to this new order involves a strategic recalibration. The V4 countries, while firmly embedded in the EU and NATO, must navigate a global environment where the liberal order’s values and institutions are no longer uncontested. This situation creates both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, the V4 must address the external pressures – as mentioned above – exerted by non-Western actors, such as Russia and China, which present alternative models of governance and international relations. On the other hand, a multipolar world offers the V4 a chance to strengthen their regional influence and advocate for their specific interests within a more diverse global system. These countries must balance their national interests, such as energy independence or military modernization, with the EU’s collective efforts to enhance its geopolitical stance (Usiak, 2019).

In response to these changes, the European Union has pursued the idea of strategic autonomy, aiming to establish itself as an independent actor in global politics. For the V4 countries, the EU’s strategic autonomy encompasses economic resilience, energy security, and technological advancements (Gyarmati-Szijj & Rada, 2024b). However, achieving this autonomy presents a complex decision-making environment for the V4. The success of the EU’s strategic autonomy will significantly shape the V4’s future policies. A more autonomous EU could provide Central Europe with greater security and economic stability, allowing it to navigate global challenges more effectively. Conversely, any limitations in achieving this autonomy could leave the V4 exposed to the vulnerabilities of the international system, particularly the uncertainties associated with a multipolar world. Therefore, the V4 countries actively participate in shaping the EU’s strategic priorities, emphasizing their regional interests while contributing to the broader European agenda (Usiak, 2019).

7.5 EU's strategic autonomy and the V4

The concept of strategic autonomy encompasses economic resilience, energy security, and technological sovereignty. For the V4, aligning with these objectives requires balancing domestic interests with collective EU goals. For instance, energy diversification efforts—aimed at reducing dependence on Russian gas—necessitate investments in renewable energy, LNG infrastructure, and regional interconnectivity. Similarly, technological advancements in areas such as cybersecurity and artificial intelligence offer opportunities for collaboration but also demand compliance with EU standards and regulations. Thus, the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy is a central factor in shaping the foreign policy strategies of the V4 countries. Strategic autonomy aims to position the EU as an independent actor in global politics, influencing how the V4 countries align their national policies with broader EU objectives. Autonomy is some kind of must considering the different scenarios and the risk that the EU disappears from the agenda setters and gets relegated in the second league of decision makers.

A key component of the EU's strategic autonomy is enhancing economic resilience. This involves reducing reliance on external powers, especially in critical sectors like trade, finance, and supply chains. The V4 countries, integrated into the EU's single market, are directly affected by this push towards self-reliance. Enhancing intra-EU economic cooperation allows the V4 to diversify their economic partnerships, mitigate vulnerabilities, and strengthen their regional economies. The EU's focus on economic sovereignty has led to initiatives aimed at securing supply chains, promoting domestic production, and supporting regional investments. For the V4, this means opportunities to participate in EU-wide projects that bolster industrial capacity, digital infrastructure, and research and development. However, the V4 countries must balance these efforts with their existing trade relations, particularly with non-EU actors like China and the United States. While these external partners are vital for their economies, the V4 must align with the EU's objectives of reducing dependencies to contribute effectively to the union's strategic autonomy (Gyarmati-Szijj & Rada, 2024a).

Energy security is also a critical aspect of the EU's strategic autonomy, especially given the region's reliance on external energy suppliers, notably Russia. The V4 countries are particularly sensitive to this issue, as their energy security has long been linked to Russian gas imports (Rada, 2025). The EU's strategy involves diversifying energy sources, enhancing renewable energy production, and

building a more integrated energy market. For the V4, this approach necessitates policy changes and investments in energy infrastructure, such as the development of LNG terminals, interconnectors, and renewable energy projects. While these efforts align with the EU's broader autonomy goals, they require significant financial resources and political will. The V4's cooperation with EU initiatives like the Energy Union illustrates their commitment to diversifying energy sources and reducing reliance on external suppliers. However, tensions may arise when national energy interests conflict with the EU's strategic objectives, necessitating a delicate balancing act between national priorities and regional goals (Marton et al., 2015).

Technological adaptation is another pillar of the EU's strategic autonomy, aiming to maintain a competitive edge in international affairs, particularly in areas like digital sovereignty, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence. For the V4 countries, this focus on technological sovereignty offers both challenges and incentives. Participation in EU-led initiatives for digital transformation, 5G infrastructure development, and research into emerging technologies provides the V4 with access to funding, expertise, and collaborative platforms. However, technological adaptation also means implementing EU regulations that may affect national technology markets, such as data protection laws and cybersecurity standards. The V4 must ensure that their technological policies align with the EU's strategic goals while addressing their domestic economic and security concerns. By embracing the EU's drive for technological independence, the V4 can strengthen their digital economies and contribute to the union's collective security (Nyilas, 2023).

Debates on strategic autonomy have been dominated by Western European perspectives, particularly those of France and Germany (Miró, 2023). Yet Central Europe approaches the issue from a different strategic position. For the V4 countries, NATO and EU membership represented a return to the West and remain the foundation of regional security (Nyilas, 2024). As a result, the primary concern has never been excessive American influence but the risk of insufficient American engagement (Csiki Varga, 2023). This difference has shaped a distinct interpretation of strategic autonomy. The emergence of layered polarity reinforces this perspective. In a world characterized by overlapping military, economic, technological, and institutional competitions, the challenge is not to achieve independence but to reduce vulnerabilities and increase resilience. Strategic autonomy therefore becomes less about sovereignty and more about

capability. From a Central European perspective, strategic autonomy should not be understood as an alternative to NATO or the transatlantic relationship. Rather, it is a means of strengthening Europe's ability to act within them. This interpretation shifts the focus from independence to resilience. Strategic autonomy and Atlanticism are therefore not contradictory. A more capable Europe strengthens both European resilience and NATO's credibility.

7.6 Central Europe's possible role in the future

Central Europe, particularly the V4, has a unique position within the changing world order. The region's foreign policy has a distinct national character, influenced by its historical and geopolitical context. The V4's approach to international relations is built on several key assumptions. These include a state-centered view of the international system, the notion that global order is inherently anarchic and requires institutional compromises to function, and the need to balance domestic priorities with external pressures from dominant actors like the EU and the U.S.

One of the foundational assumptions of the V4's foreign policy is the centrality of the state in international affairs. The international system is inherently state-centric, with states acting primarily in their self-interest. For the V4 countries, this self-interest is shaped by internal values, economic conditions, security concerns, and historical experiences (Usiak, 2019). Given their historical experiences, including decades of Soviet dominance, the V4 countries place a strong emphasis on sovereignty, national security, and the preservation of their political and cultural identity (Marton et al., 2015). The V4's foreign policy reflects a pragmatic approach to international relations. Despite being members of the EU and NATO, they often prioritize national interests over collective or multilateral commitments. For instance, the V4's divergent responses to EU policies on migration and climate change underscore their preference for maintaining sovereignty over adopting one-size-fits-all approaches (Nyilas, 2023). This state-centric perspective leads the V4 to advocate for policies that align with their economic, political, and security priorities. Poland's security policy, for example, is heavily focused on countering Russian influence, given its historical tensions and geographic proximity to Russia. Poland emphasizes its strategic partnership with NATO and the U.S., advocating for a robust presence of NATO forces in Central and Eastern Europe (Nyilas & Stepper, 2023b). Hungary, on the other hand, takes a more nuanced stance, engaging diplomatically with both Russia and China while balancing its commitments within the EU and NATO. This state-centered approach enables the V4 countries to pursue flexible foreign policies tailored to their specific national interests. In such a system, states seek to establish hierarchies and order through institutional compromises, creating alliances and organizations like the EU and NATO to address common security, economic, and political challenges. Central Europe, as part of this international order, forms a subsystem where

interdependencies among states are particularly strong, resulting in more pronounced socialization effects.

The EU is a key institutional framework within which the V4 countries navigate the anarchic international order. EU membership offers the V4 a platform for economic development, political cooperation, and security. It also provides mechanisms for managing regional interdependencies. NATO, similarly, serves as a strategic anchor for the V4 in terms of security. The alliance provides a collective defense mechanism, helping to mitigate the uncertainties of an anarchic world order. For the V4, NATO membership is not just about military security but also about reaffirming their alignment with the liberal democratic values of the West. However, within NATO, the V4 countries occasionally push for policies that directly reflect their specific security concerns, such as reinforcing the alliance's eastern flank in response to Russia's activities in Eastern Europe (Marton et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the V4 countries are in a constant balancing act between their domestic interests and external pressures from the liberal order, particularly those emanating from the EU and the U.S. This dynamic is central to their foreign policy strategies, as they must navigate domestic political considerations while aligning with the broader goals of the international system's agenda-setters. Domestically, the V4 faces various pressures, including public opinion, economic needs, and political ideologies. For example, during the 2010s and the first half of the 2020s Hungary's emphasis on national sovereignty and cultural identity influenced its approach to issues like migration and EU integration, often resulting in policies that diverged from mainstream EU positions (Stepper & Rada, 2019). Similarly, Poland's strong focus on defense and energy security reflects its internal priorities, influenced by historical experiences and current geopolitical concerns (Nyilas & Stepper, 2023b). Externally, the V4 countries must respond to the expectations and policies of the EU and the U.S., which significantly shape the liberal world order. The EU, as a key agenda-setter, drives initiatives on economic integration, climate policy, migration, and human rights. The V4's engagement with these policies often involves a process of negotiation, where they seek to protect their national interests while contributing to the EU's collective goals. The U.S., through its strategic partnership with NATO and bilateral relations, also influences the V4's foreign policy decisions, particularly in the realm of security. Managing these domestic and external pressures requires the V4 to adopt flexible and adaptive foreign policy strategies. They actively participate in shaping EU policies to reflect their regional perspectives, whether it be in areas of economic

regulation, energy policy, or migration control. Simultaneously, they engage with global powers like the U.S., China, and Russia, seeking to navigate the complexities of a multipolar world while maintaining their commitments to the liberal order.

The liberal world order has entered a phase of profound uncertainty and transformation. While its normative appeal and institutional structures remain resilient, the system faces intensifying pressures from systemic competitors, regional powers, and new ideological and economic fault lines. These evolving dynamics validate a scenario-based thinking to understand the potential pathways of global order.

The worst-case scenario (Rada & Medgyesi, 2025) envisions a collapse of global governance mechanisms, leading to realist anarchy characterized by power struggles, ad hoc alliances, and rampant instability. The erosion of rules and norms would disproportionately impact smaller and medium-sized powers like the V4, who lack the resources and influence to shape outcomes unilaterally. In such a world, Central Europe would face acute strategic vulnerability, requiring intensified reliance on NATO, deepened EU integration, and the development of robust national defense and resilience mechanisms. Diplomatic agility, regional solidarity, and adaptive foreign policy strategies would be critical in navigating this deeply uncertain environment.

Although increasingly unlikely, the restoration of a reformed unipolar order remains a theoretical possibility. This scenario would see the United States reasserting itself as the preeminent global leader, compelling allies and adversaries alike to operate within a US-centered international system. For Central Europe, renewed unipolarity would offer enhanced stability and security, reaffirming NATO's primacy and transatlantic bonds. Yet, this would likely inhibit the EU's ambitions for strategic autonomy, reducing its capacity to act independently in defense, trade, and technological domains.

A scenario in which China emerges as the dominant global power carries significant risks and complexities for the liberal order (Economy, 2021). While unlikely in the short term due to structural and geopolitical constraints on Beijing's global influence, this possibility cannot be dismissed entirely given China's ambitions and initiatives (BRI, GSI, GDI, GCI) aimed at reshaping global norms and institutions. For Central Europe, a China-led order would pose deep strategic dilemmas. On the one hand, Chinese investment and market access could offer economic benefits; balancing economic pragmatism and geopolitical loyalty would thus become an increasingly delicate task.

The most geopolitically consequential scenario envisages a renewed bipolar structure, defined by US-China systemic rivalry (Brands & Gaddis, 2021). In this context, the global order fractures into opposing blocs. Washington and Beijing seek to decouple economically, technologically, and strategically, while competing for influence in the Indo-Pacific, Eurasia, and beyond. Central Europe would face significant pressure to align with the U.S.-led bloc, reinforcing transatlantic ties and security guarantees via NATO. However, this would come at the cost of economic diversification and relations with China, which remains an essential trading partner for many V4 countries. For Central Europe, the New Cold War would revive familiar patterns of dependency and geopolitical confrontation, limiting regional room for maneuver and threatening economic stability if supply chains and trade networks become weaponized. While China is unlikely to displace the United States in hegemonic terms in the short run, Beijing's enduring advantages and Washington's political volatility increasingly point toward a fragmented and contested order in which U.S. alliances and international institutions play critical, but strained, roles (Campbell & Doshi, 2025; Woods, 2025). The United States can no longer rely on unilateral primacy but must instead pivot toward a model of allied scale. This demands a fundamental rethinking of alliances (Campbell, 2005). Rather than treating partners as dependent clients, Washington must create integrated, co-productive networks across military, industrial, and technological domains. Ultimately, the contest between China and the United States is about more than power balances or trade flows. It is about competing visions for global order: one based on integrated, rules-based alliances, and the other potentially shaped by authoritarian scale and hierarchical spheres of influence. How the United States manages its own political cohesion and commitment to alliances, and how its partners act collectively in response to both American retrenchment and Chinese assertiveness, will define the global landscape for decades to come.

Another rather possible scenario is the multipolar world. It is a seeming contradiction, that under the Trump administration, the United States has radically downgraded its role in global governance. From withdrawing from treaties and international organizations to threatening withdrawal from key economic institutions like the IMF and World Bank, Washington increasingly signals disdain for cooperative frameworks (Woods, 2025). However, US abdication not necessarily leads to chaos. Drawing on historical precedents – such as the Concert of Europe, as the Trump administration does – multilateralism can endure and even thrive without hegemonic leadership. The demand for cooperation remains high among states seeking to hedge against both U.S.

unilateralism and Chinese assertiveness. Indeed, Europe, Japan, and other US allies are already exploring alternatives, from strengthening their roles in existing institutions to creating new groupings such as a prospective G-9 or G-12. Regional arrangements and currency swap mechanisms also suggest a growing capacity to govern without US dominance. According to this scenario, the world is thus moving toward a post-American multilateralism, where cooperative orders are maintained through collective self-interest and a reconfiguration of global governance mechanisms (Woods, 2025). This rather fragmented but structured landscape could empower middle powers and regional blocs to play a more assertive role in global governance. In an ideal case, theoretically, Central Europe could benefit from increased agency and flexibility, acting as a bridge between competing powers. However, multipolarity would also entail heightened competition, shifting alliances, and diminished global coordination. For the V4, this would require constant recalibration of foreign policy, enhanced regional cooperation, and the development of indigenous capabilities to safeguard security and prosperity amid systemic volatility.

Together, these analyses point to a paradox. On the one hand, China's rising power and industrial might pose a systemic challenge that only a reinvigorated and deeply integrated US-led alliance network can offset. On the other, the United States itself appears less committed than ever to playing that integrating role, instead leaning toward unilateralism and coercive transactionalism that risk alienating its own allies (Walt, 2026). This dynamic creates both danger and opportunity. If US leadership continues to falter, China may gain greater room to shape global norms and institutions to its advantage.

The significance of the V4 lies not in its ability to become an independent pole, which has never been a goal, in the international system. Rather, its value derives from its role as a regional strategic multiplier. Defense resilience, energy security, technological competitiveness, and regional connectivity all enhance Europe's ability to adapt to layered polarity. Through these areas, the V4 can strengthen NATO's eastern flank, improve European resilience, and contribute to strategic autonomy without challenging existing institutional arrangements. The future relevance of the V4 will therefore depend less on political unity (of the group) and more on its capacity to generate practical cooperation in areas where regional and European interests converge. The Central European approach offers a useful perspective for the broader European debate. It places capability before sovereignty (in the security policy sense and this argument should not be

misunderstood as a statement in a highly politicized and party-ideology fueled debate which concentrates on domestic political questions), resilience before independence, and partnership before separation.

Nevertheless, the future trajectory of both the European Union and the V4 remains uncertain. The degree to which Europe succeeds in strengthening its strategic autonomy will shape not only the EU's geopolitical relevance but also the future role of regional cooperation frameworks within. The following scenarios – slightly different than mentioned – explore possible pathways for the EU and the V4 under conditions of layered multipolarity.

The first scenario is strategic consolidation, in which the EU successfully adapts to the realities of layered multipolarity: the consequences of the Ukraine War, uncertainty surrounding future American administrations and foreign policy, which triggered the necessary reforms. European defense spendings stabilize at higher levels and are increasingly coordinated through common procurement and industrial cooperation. The defense-industrial base expands significantly, reducing critical capability gaps. Investments in emerging technologies, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, cybersecurity, and critical infrastructure enhance Europe's technological competitiveness. At the same time, strategic autonomy develops as a complement to NATO and the United States remains committed to European security, but Europe becomes a more capable partner capable of assuming greater responsibility within the alliance. For the V4, this represents the most favorable scenario. The region strengthens its role as a strategic connector between Western and Eastern Europe. In this scenario, the V4 functions as a regional force multiplier. It does not emerge as an independent geopolitical pole (which has never been the goal), but it becomes an important contributor to Europe's strategic adaptation. Strategic autonomy and Transatlanticism reinforce rather than contradict one another.

In the second scenario, managed dependence, which is probably the most realistic medium-term outcome, the US leadership continues, and the European capability growth is limited. It assumes that Europe recognizes the need for strategic adaptation but fails to fully implement the necessary reforms. For instance, defense spending increases, but coordination remains limited. Strategic autonomy develops incrementally and slowly and does not lead to transformation. The United States continues to provide the overwhelming share of high-end military capabilities, while European efforts focus primarily on closing the most visible capability gaps. Technological and economic dependencies are reduced

only partially. Europe remains an influential actor but lacks the capacity to act independently in major strategic crises. For the V4, this scenario also remains manageable. NATO continues to provide credible deterrence, and American military engagement remains substantial. Regional cooperation continues primarily through practical projects related to infrastructure, defense modernization, and energy security. However, the region remains vulnerable to future shifts in American strategic priorities. If Washington increasingly concentrates on the Indo-Pacific, Europe's limited strategic adaptation may prove insufficient to address future challenges.

Fragmented Europe is the third scenario, in which the diverging national interests and strategies weaken the prospect of strategic autonomy. The EU not only fails to develop a common understanding of strategic autonomy, but ideological differences, internal disagreements regarding defense, energy policy, industrial policy, relations with China, and the future of transatlantic relations undermine collective action. Strategic autonomy becomes/remains a politically divisive concept rather than a shared strategic objective. Some member states prioritize national solutions, while others pursue deeper European integration. As a result, Europe develops unevenly across different layers of power. The consequences are significant: defense-industrial fragmentation persists, technological investments remain scattered, economic resilience develops unevenly. Thus the EU keeps struggling to translate its economic weight into geopolitical influence and remains a political dwarf. For the V4, fragmentation presents a difficult challenge. Divergent national approaches toward Russia, China, European integration, and transatlantic relations may reduce the effectiveness of regional cooperation. The V4 survives institutionally but loses much of its strategic relevance.

According to the fourth scenario, regional actors gain importance as global competition between the United States and China intensifies. European subregions assume greater responsibility for managing security and resilience challenges. The EU remains the overarching framework, but regional groupings become increasingly important actors in implementation. The V4, Nordic cooperation, the Baltic states, the Weimar Triangle, and southern European coalitions all become more influential. Strategic autonomy develops through overlapping regional networks rather than through EU-led initiatives based on consensus. Within layered multipolarity, this scenario represents the institutionalization of regional multipolarity. Europe remains united, but influence becomes increasingly distributed across multiple regional centers. In the short

term it may offer significant opportunity to relatively increase influence within the EU but as the EU is less united it is unpredictable how it will cope with the simultaneous external pressures.

The fifth scenario represents the failure of strategic adaptation, when Europe remains economically prosperous in the short term but becomes even more dependent on external actors in critical areas: defense-industrial capabilities continue to lag behind strategic requirements, technological dependencies deepen, political fragmentation limits collective action. At the same time, the United States and China increasingly shape the international agenda, while Europe becomes more reactive than proactive. Strategic decisions affecting European interests are increasingly made outside Europe. For the V4, the consequences are particularly serious. Situated on NATO's eastern flank and exposed to the consequences of geopolitical competition, Central European states face growing uncertainty. The region remains strategically important geographically but loses much of its ability to influence outcomes. This scenario illustrates the core danger, without strategic adaptation, Europe risks becoming an object rather than a subject of international politics.

Although these scenarios differ significantly (similarly as the EU focused ones differ from the global ones), they share one important point. The future of Europe will not be determined solely by the distribution of military capabilities or by the outcome of great-power competition. Instead, it will also depend on the EU's ability to adapt to a complex environment characterized by simultaneous competition across military, economic, technological, institutional, and regional dimensions. In our opinion, the most favorable futures are those in which strategic autonomy strengthens rather than weakens transatlantic cooperation and where regional actors contribute to European resilience rather than compete with European institutions. In such an environment, the V4 can become an important regional pillar of European strategic autonomy. Ultimately, the central question is not whether the EU can become a global power comparable to the United States or China. The more relevant question is whether Europe can preserve sufficient agency to shape developments within its own strategic environment. Strategic autonomy represents the principal mechanism through which the EU seeks to achieve this objective, while the V4 may serve as one of the regional platforms that makes this adaptation possible.

The foreign and security policies of the Visegrád countries are being shaped by various potential global scenarios. These scenarios, ranging from a new Cold War

between the United States and China to a multipolar or even anarchic world order, have a profound influence on Central Europe's geopolitical strategies. The region's decision-making process involves navigating these changing dynamics while balancing national interests and regional cooperation within the Euroatlantic institutions (Rada-Stepper, 2019).

In a multipolar system, Central Europe would have greater flexibility to pursue a more diversified foreign policy, balancing relations with various global actors to maximize economic and security benefits. This approach would align with the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy, allowing the V4 to contribute to shaping a European foreign policy that reflects both regional and global interests. For instance, the V4 could engage in selective cooperation with China on infrastructure and trade while maintaining strong security ties with NATO. However, multipolarity also brings challenges. The absence of a dominant global power could lead to increased competition and instability, requiring the V4 to constantly adapt their foreign policies to shifting power dynamics. Moreover, a multipolar world would necessitate robust regional cooperation within the EU and among the V4 to ensure collective security and economic resilience.

This section argued that the resilience of the Visegrád Cooperation derives from its institutional flexibility and the enduring strategic logic of regional cooperation. Whether this resilience will translate into future relevance, however, depends less on the preservation of the existing institutional framework than on the V4's ability to adapt to an increasingly complex geopolitical environment. As the liberal world order undergoes profound transformation, the nature of regional cooperation is also changing. The V4 countries remain firmly embedded in the Euro-Atlantic community through their membership in the European Union and NATO. These institutions continue to provide the principal framework for their security and economic prosperity. At the same time, the strategic environment has become considerably more demanding than during the first decades following the Cold War (Marton et al., 2015). For Central Europe, these developments do not diminish the importance of regional cooperation; rather, they increase it. Individual V4 countries possess limited ability to influence the broader geopolitical environment independently. Acting together within the European Union and NATO, however, they can better articulate common regional interests while contributing to wider European and transatlantic strategies.

The first major challenge concerns security and defense. Russia's invasion of Ukraine fundamentally transformed European threat perceptions and reaffirmed the importance of NATO's eastern flank. For the V4 countries, defense cooperation is no longer limited to military modernization but increasingly includes military mobility, defense-industrial cooperation, protection of critical infrastructure, and the strengthening of societal resilience. While the four countries may differ in their individual foreign policy approaches, they share an objective interest in maintaining a stable and credible security architecture in Central Europe.

The second challenge relates to economic resilience and energy security. The weaponization of economic interdependence has demonstrated that supply chains, critical infrastructure, and energy systems have become strategic assets rather than purely economic questions. Diversification of energy sources, regional interconnectivity, and the reduction of excessive external dependencies have therefore become common priorities for the European Union and the V4 alike (Marton et al., 2015). These areas also illustrate that practical cooperation often proves easier to sustain than political consensus, reinforcing the issue-specific character of regional cooperation.

A third challenge arises from technological competition. Artificial intelligence, semiconductors, cybersecurity, digital infrastructure, and critical technologies increasingly determine both economic competitiveness and national security. Simultaneously, China's growing economic presence in Central Europe continues to present opportunities as well as strategic dilemmas. Chinese investment may contribute to regional development, yet it also raises concerns regarding strategic dependencies and compatibility with European objectives of technological sovereignty and economic security (Rada & Stepper, 2026). The V4 countries must therefore balance economic pragmatism with their commitments to the broader strategic priorities of the European Union and NATO.

These interconnected pressures suggest that the future of the V4 will depend less on maintaining permanent political unity than on identifying those policy areas where regional interests continue to converge. Defense, infrastructure, energy security, technological competitiveness, and the protection of critical supply chains all represent fields in which practical cooperation is likely to remain both politically feasible and strategically necessary. In this respect, the Visegrád Cooperation is likely to evolve further toward a flexible platform for

issue-oriented coordination rather than a comprehensive political alliance, which is evidently not the ambition.

The precise role that the V4 will play, however, ultimately depends on the broader evolution of the international order itself. Different trajectories of European integration, transatlantic relations, and great-power competition will create different opportunities and constraints for regional cooperation. The analysis presented in this chapter therefore challenges the frequently recurring predictions of the V4's decline. Since its establishment, the cooperation has repeatedly been described as obsolete, divided, or politically exhausted. Yet each major geopolitical transformation has led not to the dissolution of the V4 but to its adaptation. The intensity of cooperation has fluctuated, but the framework itself has endured.

This resilience ultimately reflects the broader strategic reality of Central Europe. The countries of the region remain connected by geography, economic interdependence, common institutional membership, and shared security concerns. While governments may differ in their political priorities or foreign policy preferences, these structural factors continue to create incentives for cooperation. Consequently, the future of the V4 is unlikely to be determined by temporary political disagreements alone but by its ability to respond pragmatically to new regional and global challenges. The central argument of this chapter has therefore been that the Visegrád Cooperation should be understood less as a permanently cohesive political alliance than as a flexible regional framework capable of adapting to changing geopolitical conditions. Its institutional flexibility, reinforced by what has been described as the Spirit of Visegrád, has enabled the cooperation to survive repeated crises that many observers expected would prove fatal. As the liberal world order enters a period of increasing uncertainty, this capacity for adaptation may become the V4's most valuable strategic asset. Rather than representing a relic of the post-Cold War period, the Visegrád Cooperation remains a relevant instrument through which the countries of Central Europe can articulate common interests, strengthen regional resilience, and contribute to shaping the future of Europe within an increasingly contested international order.

PART IV

8 Conclusion: the surRealism of an order in transition

The liberal world order after hegemony

Has the liberal world order collapsed, survived, or transformed? The analysis developed throughout this book suggests that none of these answers is sufficient on its own. The liberal world order has not disappeared, yet it no longer operates under the political, economic, and ideological conditions that supported its expansion after the Cold War. Its institutions remain influential, its rules continue to structure international interaction, and its economic networks still shape the choices available to states. At the same time, the order has become more contested, more fragmented, and increasingly intertwined with forms of power politics that liberal expectations once appeared to have displaced.

The present order is therefore neither fully liberal nor simply post-liberal. It is an order in transition. Elements created under American leadership after the Second World War, and extended after 1991, coexist with renewed great-power rivalry, geopolitical competition, economic coercion, technological fragmentation, and conflicts over political identity. International institutions have not been replaced by an unregulated struggle for power. Nor has interdependence prevented war, coercion, or strategic confrontation. Liberal, realist, and constructivist processes operate at the same time, frequently within the same institutions and policy decisions. This coexistence is the central empirical finding of the book. Contemporary international politics cannot be reduced to a single organizing logic. Power remains decisive, but power is exercised through institutions, markets, alliances, technologies, legal regimes, and political narratives. Institutions constrain states, yet they also serve as instruments through which influence is projected. Economic interdependence creates mutual benefits, but it also generates vulnerabilities that governments can exploit. Identities and narratives shape how threats are understood, while material capabilities continue to define which responses are possible.

The liberal world order is changing because the distribution of power underlying it has changed. The United States remains the most influential actor within the system it helped create, but it can no longer assume that its preferences will be accepted without resistance or negotiation. China has benefited from participation in the existing economic order while challenging parts of its strategic and political hierarchy. Russia has used military force to contest the European security order, even as it remains affected by the institutions, financial systems, technological networks, and markets associated with the broader international framework. Regional powers increasingly seek room for maneuver without necessarily proposing a coherent alternative world order.

Yet material redistribution tells only part of the story. The order is also contested from within. Western societies disagree over the meaning of liberalism, the boundaries of political community, the costs of globalization, and the legitimacy of international commitments. Political actors who formally operate inside the liberal order may question its norms, institutions, or domestic foundations. The resulting tension is not a simple confrontation between a liberal West and an illiberal rest. Contestation occurs between states, within states, across institutions, and among competing interpretations of what the existing order should protect. The liberal world order has survived without remaining unchanged. It persists because replacing it would be costly, uncertain, and politically difficult. Even governments that reject its ideological claims often rely on its institutions, markets, rules, and channels of recognition. Participation does not require complete ideological convergence. This has always been one of the order's sources of resilience, but it is also a source of contradiction. States can benefit from a system while resisting the political expectations attached to it. They can defend sovereignty while seeking institutional protection. They can criticize Western dominance while depending on access to Western-created financial and technological structures. The order is held together less by universal agreement than by a mixture of institutional continuity, strategic necessity, economic dependence, political habit, and the absence of a widely accepted replacement. This does not make it stable. It makes it adaptable.

What the book has shown

The book began from the premise that the transformation of world order could not be understood from a single geographical or theoretical perspective. It therefore moved from the global structure to Europe, from Europe to Central

Europe, and finally towards the question of national strategic agency. This architecture was not intended merely as a method of organizing empirical material. It reflected the way in which international politics itself operates.

Global structures define broad distributions of power and the principal rules of interaction. European institutions translate many of these rules into a dense regional order. Central European states experience and interpret these pressures through their particular historical, geopolitical, and political conditions. National governments then formulate strategies within constraints originating at each of these levels. Influence also travels in the opposite direction. National preferences can be coordinated regionally, represented through the European Union and NATO, and, under certain conditions, incorporated into broader international agendas. World order is therefore neither completely external to states nor simply constructed by them at will. It is reproduced through continuous interaction among global structures, regional institutions, political coalitions, and national choices. Different actors possess very different capacities to shape these interactions. Great powers may influence rules, institutions, and strategic expectations across several domains. Small and medium-sized states operate under stronger structural constraints, but they are not irrelevant followers. They can build coalitions, use institutional mechanisms, specialize in particular policy fields, shape regional agendas, and increase their influence through coordinated action. This distinction matters because sovereignty cannot be understood as either absolute independence or complete subordination. Sovereignty in contemporary Europe is exercised through interdependence. It provides legal authority and political responsibility, yet its practical content is constantly negotiated through alliances, institutions, economic relations, and regional cooperation. The ability to act depends less on escaping these structures than on using them effectively.

The analysis also indicates that resilience has become one of the defining concepts of the emerging order. During the period of liberal expansion, interdependence was often treated primarily as a source of efficiency and cooperation. It is now increasingly understood as a potential channel of coercion. Energy supplies, financial networks, trade routes, digital infrastructures, information systems, critical technologies, and industrial capacities have become strategic concerns. Security can no longer be separated neatly from economics, technology, or domestic stability.

Adaptation to the new order requires more than military modernization. It involves the capacity to maintain political choice under external pressure. This includes diversified energy supplies, secure infrastructure, reliable alliances, technological competence, functioning institutions, societal trust, and the ability to communicate political objectives credibly. States that remain formally sovereign but lack these capacities may find their choices severely restricted. The world described in this book is thus structured but not fixed. It is rule-bound but not governed by consensus. It is interdependent but increasingly competitive. It contains elements of hierarchy, anarchy, institutionalization, and normative conflict at the same time.

Why no single theory is sufficient

International Relations theories simplify reality in order to make it intelligible. This is their strength, but it also establishes their limits. Realism, liberalism, and constructivism each identify mechanisms without which the contemporary order could not be understood. None provides a complete account when treated as an exclusive explanation.

Realism explains why power, security, deterrence, and strategic dependence remain central. Russia's war against Ukraine demonstrated that territorial conflict and military force had not been displaced from European politics. The renewed emphasis on defense expenditure, alliance reliability, military-industrial capacity, and nuclear deterrence confirms the persistence of realist concerns. The strategic rivalry between the United States and China similarly shows that changes in relative capabilities can reshape institutions, markets, and foreign-policy priorities. Yet realism alone cannot explain why states continue to invest so heavily in institutions, legal frameworks, economic regimes, and political legitimacy. It cannot fully account for why governments seek authorization, recognition, or coalition support even when they possess material power. Nor does it adequately explain why similar distributions of capabilities can produce different outcomes depending on historical experience, political identity, and threat perception.

Liberal approaches remain necessary because institutions and interdependence have not ceased to matter. NATO and the European Union shape the strategic choices of their members in ways that cannot be reduced to temporary power calculations. International organizations provide information, establish

expectations, distribute resources, and create mechanisms through which smaller states may influence outcomes. Markets and economic networks generate costs that affect the sustainability of foreign-policy choices. Even coercive policies increasingly operate through institutional and economic channels rather than outside them. At the same time, liberal expectations concerning convergence, democratization, and the pacifying effects of interdependence proved too confident. Economic integration did not remove geopolitical rivalry. Participation in international institutions did not necessarily produce domestic political convergence. Interdependence created incentives for cooperation, but it also created dependencies that could be weaponized.

Constructivism helps explain why these contradictions cannot be understood only through material factors. States respond to what decision-makers and societies believe threats, alliances, institutions, and identities mean. Historical memory influences whether dependence is interpreted as protection or vulnerability. Political narratives determine whether cooperation is presented as shared sovereignty, foreign interference, or national necessity. Securitization processes shape which issues become treated as existential and which policy instruments become politically acceptable. Constructivism nevertheless presents its own risks when used without sufficient attention to structural constraints. The fact that meanings are constructed does not mean that all interpretations are equally sustainable. Smaller states cannot redefine the distribution of power through discourse alone. Material capabilities, geography, economic dependence, and alliance structures limit the range of plausible strategies. Perceptions matter, but they operate within conditions that actors do not freely choose.

The order is best understood by maintaining the insights of these approaches in productive tension. Power defines possibilities. Institutions organize interaction. Interdependence creates both incentives and vulnerabilities. Identities and narratives influence how actors interpret their environment. Domestic politics filters external pressures. None of these mechanisms disappears because another becomes more visible. This is why the book does not seek to replace established theories with a new universal theory. It instead develops SurRealism as an analytical perspective through which their simultaneous operation can be examined.

SurRealism as an analytical perspective

The term SurRealism captures the apparent contradiction at the heart of the international order. The system appears realist because power competition, military capabilities, strategic rivalry, and national interests remain decisive. It appears liberal because institutions, rules, markets, and interdependence continue to structure international behavior. It is also socially constructed because political identities, narratives, and perceptions determine how actors understand both power and institutional legitimacy.

The result may appear surreal, but it is not irrational. It is produced by the coexistence of different logics that traditional theories often examine separately. Governments defend a rules-based order while applying rules selectively. States invoke sovereignty while relying on alliances and supranational institutions. Economic cooperation continues alongside sanctions, export controls, investment screening, and technological restrictions. Political leaders describe interdependence as a source of prosperity while preparing for disruption and decoupling. Institutions intended to reduce uncertainty become arenas of strategic competition. SurRealism does not suggest that reality is unknowable or that every interpretation is equally valid. Nor does it claim that everything is connected to everything else. Its purpose is more limited. It draws attention to the interaction of material power, institutional structures, and constructed meaning within an order that cannot be described accurately through any one of these dimensions alone.

The perspective rests on several observations.

First, the liberal order has never operated independently of power. Its institutions were created and maintained within a particular distribution of capabilities. American power supported the expansion of rules, markets, and alliances, while the order itself reinforced American influence. Liberal institutionalization and realist hierarchy were therefore connected from the beginning.

Second, participation in the order has never required complete political or ideological uniformity. The liberal core developed the densest forms of political, economic, and security cooperation, but the wider order included states whose domestic systems differed substantially from liberal-democratic expectations. These actors could participate selectively, benefit economically, and contest political norms without leaving the system altogether.

Third, international institutions are neither neutral structures nor simple instruments of domination. They constrain powerful states under some conditions and extend their influence under others. They also provide smaller states with opportunities that would be unavailable in a purely bilateral or unregulated system.

Fourth, narratives are part of strategic behavior. Descriptions of the world order are rarely detached from political objectives. Labels such as liberal, rules-based, multipolar, sovereign, Western, or post-Western do more than describe reality. They seek to legitimize particular distributions of authority and particular courses of action.

SurRealism therefore offers a way to examine how apparently contradictory practices can form part of the same order. It explains why institutions survive even when their norms are disputed; why states remain economically connected while preparing for strategic confrontation; and why sovereignty is asserted most strongly through institutions that necessarily limit unilateral freedom. Its contribution lies in disciplined synthesis rather than theoretical replacement. It asks how power, institutions, and political meaning interact in particular contexts, and which of these dimensions becomes more influential under specified conditions. Such an approach accepts theoretical pluralism while avoiding the conclusion that explanation must therefore become arbitrary.

The emerging international order

The order taking shape is likely to be more pluralistic than the post-Cold War system, but pluralism should not automatically be equated with stable multipolarity. Power is distributed differently across military, economic, technological, institutional, and normative domains. The United States and China dominate several aspects of global competition, while other powers retain significant regional or sectoral influence. The European Union possesses extensive economic and regulatory capabilities but remains dependent on the United States in key areas of hard security. Russia retains military and disruptive capacity despite more limited economic foundations. India and several regional powers are gaining influence without forming a unified political bloc.

The resulting structure does not fit comfortably into a single polarity label. It may display bipolar characteristics in strategic competition between the United States and China, multipolar dynamics in particular regions, and fragmented

distributions of influence across functional domains. International organizations may preserve broader membership and formal universality even as coalitions within them become more fluid and contested. This does not necessarily signal a transition towards a coherent alternative order. Russia, China, and other critics of Western dominance do not share an identical vision of international governance. Calls for multipolarity often express opposition to hierarchy more clearly than agreement on replacement rules. Regional and middle powers may prefer greater autonomy without accepting the costs and responsibilities associated with creating a new institutional system. The emerging order may therefore be defined less by a clean transfer of leadership than by prolonged competition over the interpretation and application of existing rules. Contestation will occur inside institutions as frequently as outside them. States will seek to reform, reinterpret, bypass, or selectively apply established arrangements rather than abandon them completely.

Economic relations will remain central to this process. Complete separation among major economies would impose severe costs, yet governments will continue to reduce dependencies in sectors connected to national security. The likely outcome is neither unrestricted globalization nor comprehensive deglobalization. It is a more politically managed form of interdependence in which efficiency is balanced against resilience, security, and strategic control.

Technology will intensify this tendency. Artificial intelligence, semiconductor production, digital infrastructure, data governance, cyber capabilities, and space-based systems increasingly affect economic competitiveness, military power, and political authority. Control over technological standards may become as consequential as control over territory in some domains. At the same time, technological competition will remain embedded in global supply chains that no major power can reorganize without significant disruption.

Normative conflict will also persist. Liberal principles will not disappear, but their claim to universal and uncontested application has weakened. Governments will continue to invoke democracy, sovereignty, human rights, civilization, development, and security in competing ways. The future order may therefore contain a liberal institutional core surrounded by more heterogeneous forms of participation, contestation, and selective alignment.

This structure will be less predictable than the period of post-Cold War liberal predominance. It may also prove more durable than accounts of imminent systemic collapse suggest. Orders do not survive because they eliminate

contradiction. They survive when they can absorb it without losing their basic organizing capacity.

Europe between institutional power and strategic dependence

Europe occupies a distinctive position in this order. The European Union is one of the most developed institutional expressions of the liberal project. It has transformed relations among its members, embedded national economies within a shared legal framework, and created channels through which states pool authority without disappearing as political communities. Its influence rests heavily on regulation, market access, economic resources, institutional density, and the attraction of membership. These strengths remain significant. The EU can shape standards far beyond its borders, coordinate economic sanctions, finance infrastructure, regulate competition, negotiate trade agreements, and influence neighboring states through accession and association. Its internal order demonstrates that sovereignty and institutional integration need not be treated as opposites.

Yet Europe's strategic limitations have become harder to overlook. The war against Ukraine reaffirmed the continuing role of NATO and American military power in European defense. Dependence on external energy supplies revealed the costs of insufficient diversification. Technological and industrial vulnerabilities raised questions about Europe's capacity to act independently in prolonged geopolitical competition. Internal divisions have complicated the development of common policies on defense, migration, enlargement, relations with China, and the future balance between national and supranational authority.

Strategic autonomy emerged as a response to these pressures, but the concept remains disputed. For some, it means Europe's ability to act when the United States is unwilling or unable to do so. For others, it risks weakening the transatlantic relationship or providing a justification for protectionism. Central European states have often been cautious because their security depends directly on NATO and American engagement.

The most sustainable interpretation of strategic autonomy is therefore not separation from the United States. It is the development of greater European capacity within a renewed transatlantic partnership. A Europe capable of

contributing more to its own defense, protecting critical infrastructure, diversifying energy supplies, supporting technological innovation, and responding to regional crises would strengthen rather than necessarily weaken NATO.

This requires more than institutional declarations. It depends on material capabilities, political cohesion, industrial coordination, and agreement on the threats Europe faces. Strategic autonomy cannot be credible if it remains detached from defense production, energy policy, technological capacity, or public willingness to bear costs. Europe's broader challenge is to preserve the achievements of its liberal institutional order while adapting to a more competitive international environment. Excessive reliance on normative attraction will be insufficient. A purely realist turn would be equally damaging because it would weaken the institutional and legal foundations of European influence. The EU's capacity to act will depend on combining regulatory power, economic scale, military capability, democratic legitimacy, and strategic coordination.

Central Europe and the Visegrád experience

Central Europe illustrates the tensions of the changing order with particular clarity. The region is both a beneficiary of the liberal world order and an active participant in its internal debates. NATO and EU enlargement provided security, economic modernization, institutional stability, and access to decision-making structures that would have been unavailable to the region in a less institutionalized European system. Yet integration did not erase distinct historical experiences, strategic cultures, or national understandings of sovereignty.

The discussion in this book has focused primarily on the Visegrád Group. The V4 should not be treated as a complete synonym for Central Europe. The region extends beyond its four members, and the boundaries of Central Europe remain historically and politically contested. The Visegrád framework nevertheless provides a useful lens because it brings together four states with shared experiences of Soviet domination, post-1989 transformation, NATO and EU accession, and continued sensitivity to geopolitical dependence.

The V4 countries occupy a structural position characteristic of small and medium-sized powers. Their security and economic prosperity depend heavily on wider institutional frameworks, while their individual ability to shape those

frameworks remains limited. NATO—and, through NATO, the United States—continues to provide the principal external security guarantee for the region. Russia's war against Ukraine reinforced this dependence by exposing the fragility of the European security order and the continuing importance of American military capabilities on NATO's eastern flank.

The relationship with the EU is more complex. European integration remains the region's main economic and institutional framework, yet disputes have emerged over sovereignty, migration, the rule of law, and the balance between national and supranational authority. These tensions reveal an enduring state-centric element in the strategic culture of the V4 countries, although it appears in different forms and with varying intensity across the group.

The four countries do not follow an identical foreign-policy strategy. Poland has placed particular emphasis on bilateral security ties with the United States and on strengthening NATO's eastern flank. Hungary (2010-2026) has pursued a more transactional policy that combines formal alliance commitments with continued diplomatic and economic engagement with Russia and China. The Czech Republic and Slovakia have moved between different positions as governments and domestic political conditions have changed. Despite these divergences, NATO remains the foundation of external security for all four states.

Regional cooperation therefore cannot rest on the assumption of complete strategic unity. Its value lies elsewhere. The V4 has functioned most effectively when it has coordinated specific interests in areas where its members perceive common concerns. Border protection, infrastructure, energy security, EU enlargement, regional connectivity, defense cooperation, and aspects of cohesion policy have all provided grounds for joint action. This supports the interpretation of the V4 as a question-specific security complex. Cooperation is activated selectively rather than institutionalized comprehensively. The format can express common regional interests when agreement exists while allowing national strategies to diverge when consensus is absent. What may appear as institutional weakness can therefore also be understood as a source of adaptability.

Flexibility alone, however, does not guarantee influence. A regional format that becomes associated mainly with internal disputes or political symbolism risks losing its capacity to shape European decisions. The V4's relevance depends on its ability to generate practical cooperation and credible policy proposals. It must demonstrate that regional coordination contributes to wider European

objectives rather than serving only as a defensive coalition against external criticism.

The pursuit of European strategic autonomy creates both risks and opportunities. Central European governments have reason to resist interpretations that might weaken NATO or reduce American engagement. They also have a strong interest in greater European defense capacity, energy resilience, infrastructure security, and industrial development. The most productive regional strategy is therefore neither automatic opposition nor uncritical support. It is active participation in defining a form of autonomy that strengthens European capabilities while preserving the transatlantic bond.

Central Europe must also manage relations with China and other non-Western powers. Economic engagement may provide investment, trade, and diplomatic opportunities, but these relationships create dilemmas when they involve critical infrastructure, technological dependence, or divergence from common EU and NATO positions. Pragmatic cooperation will continue, yet it needs to be assessed against long-term strategic exposure rather than short-term economic benefit alone.

The region's geographical and historical position is often described as a bridge between East and West. This metaphor captures Central Europe's experience of overlapping influences, but it can also be misleading. A bridge is crossed by others and does not necessarily determine the direction of movement. Central Europe's more ambitious role should be that of an active coalition-builder within Europe: a region capable of translating its security concerns, historical knowledge, and economic interests into wider European policies. This requires movement from rule-taking towards selective rule-shaping. The V4 countries cannot determine the international order independently, but they can influence European decisions when their preferences are coordinated, their proposals are credible, and their actions are supported by broader coalitions. Their influence will remain issue-specific. That is not a weakness unique to Central Europe; it is the normal condition of small and medium-sized states.

Several strategic priorities follow from this position. The region needs to contribute more consistently to European defense capabilities while maintaining NATO as the foundation of collective defense. It must invest in energy diversification, transport connectivity, digital security, defense production, and critical infrastructure. It also needs to remain active in debates on enlargement, neighborhood policy, competitiveness, and the EU's external relations.

Regional cohesion should not be confused with the elimination of political difference. The V4 will continue to contain divergent governments, threat perceptions, and foreign-policy preferences. Its success will depend on identifying fields in which cooperation remains possible despite these divisions. A pragmatic regionalism based on concrete interests is more sustainable than attempts to impose a unified political identity.

Central Europe's future role will therefore be shaped by adaptation. The region is unlikely to become an autonomous pole in the international system, nor can it insulate itself from great-power competition. It can, however, increase its resilience, deepen its institutional influence, and use regional cooperation to expand the strategic choices available to its members.

From rule-takers to selective rule-shapers

The analysis of Central Europe points to a broader finding concerning small and medium-sized states. Their agency does not arise from freedom from structural constraints. It arises from their capacity to navigate those constraints more effectively than others. Three forms of adaptation are especially relevant. The first is institutional adaptation: using membership in alliances and international organizations to influence agendas, gain information, build coalitions, and reduce exposure. The second is material adaptation: developing the economic, technological, military, and infrastructural capacities necessary to retain meaningful political choice. The third is narrative adaptation: defining national and regional interests in ways that are credible both domestically and internationally. These forms of adaptation must reinforce one another. Diplomatic ambition without material capacity produces dependence. Material investment without institutional coordination can result in duplication or isolation. Political narratives that deny structural realities may generate domestic support for strategies that cannot be sustained externally.

Regional cooperation can reduce these weaknesses. It creates economies of scale, allows states to coordinate positions, and increases visibility within larger institutions. Yet regionalism succeeds only when it remains connected to practical objectives. Symbolic unity cannot substitute for compatible policies. The V4 experience also shows that adaptation is rarely linear. Governments may strengthen cooperation in one area while opposing one another in another. A regional grouping may become less coherent politically while retaining value in

sectoral cooperation. External shocks may expose internal divisions, but they may also create new incentives for coordination.

This unevenness is characteristic of the wider international order. It is another reason why simple labels such as liberal, realist, unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar provide only partial descriptions. The order consists of overlapping structures whose boundaries and internal dynamics do not fully coincide.

Implications for strategy and policy

The first practical implication is that states should avoid strategies based on the expectation of a complete return to the post-Cold War environment. The concentration of American power, the optimism surrounding liberal convergence, and the relative separation of economic and security policy that marked that period are unlikely to be restored in their previous form.

The second is that predictions of the imminent disappearance of the liberal order are equally misleading. Institutions, alliances, legal regimes, financial networks, and economic practices possess considerable durability. Governments must adapt to their transformation rather than build policy on the assumption that they have already become irrelevant.

Third, national sovereignty should be understood as a capacity rather than a slogan. A state possesses meaningful sovereignty when it can formulate and implement choices under conditions of interdependence. This requires credible institutions, diversified dependencies, economic resources, alliance support, social resilience, and informed political leadership.

Fourth, strategic autonomy is relative. No European state, and probably no European institution, can achieve complete independence across all military, economic, technological, and political domains. The relevant question is which dependencies are acceptable, which create excessive vulnerability, and which capacities should be developed collectively.

Fifth, values and interests should not be treated as entirely separate categories. Political communities define interests partly through values, identities, and historical experiences. Yet values must be translated into sustainable policy. A strategy that invokes principles without considering power and capacity will remain ineffective. A strategy that pursues short-term advantage while undermining institutional trust may reduce long-term freedom of action.

Sixth, adaptability should not become a justification for permanent ambiguity. Strategic flexibility is useful when it widens choice. It becomes counterproductive when partners can no longer determine whether commitments are credible. Small and medium-sized states depend heavily on trust because they cannot compensate for its absence through overwhelming material power.

The policy challenge is therefore to combine flexibility with reliability. Central European states need sufficient room to defend national interests and respond to changing conditions. They also need to demonstrate that their commitments to NATO, the EU, and regional cooperation are more than temporary calculations.

Limits of the analysis

This book has sought to connect the transformation of global order with its European, Central European, and national implications. Such an approach necessarily involves choices concerning scope. It has emphasized the relationship among power, institutions, and political narratives rather than offering a comprehensive history of the liberal order. It has also concentrated primarily on the Euro-Atlantic region, even though many of the most consequential changes in global power are occurring in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the wider Indo-Pacific.

The use of the V4 as the principal lens on Central Europe presents another limitation. Visegrád cooperation illuminates important regional dynamics, but it does not encompass Central Europe in its entirety. The countries of the region differ in historical experience, institutional position, economic structure, and strategic outlook. Future analysis should compare the V4 with the Baltic states, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, and other possible regional configurations.

SurRealism itself remains an analytical perspective rather than a fully operationalized theory. Its value has been demonstrated here through interpretation and synthesis. Further research is needed to specify more clearly when material power, institutional structures, or political narratives become the dominant explanatory dimension, and how changes in one affect the others.

The analysis also faces the broader problem confronting all research on an order in transition: the object of study continues to change. Policies and alignments that appear durable may be altered by elections, wars, technological breakthroughs, economic crises, or shifts in political leadership. The conclusions

presented here should therefore be treated as a framework for continued analysis rather than a prediction of a settled endpoint.

Future research

Several directions follow from the arguments of the book.

The first concerns the empirical development of SurRealism. Comparative case studies could examine decisions in which realist, liberal, and constructivist mechanisms generate different expectations. Research could then identify which combinations better explain outcomes under particular conditions. Cases might include sanctions, alliance burden-sharing, energy diversification, infrastructure investment, enlargement, or national responses to technological dependence.

A second direction concerns the interaction among levels of analysis. The global, European, regional, and national levels have been separated analytically in this book, but they operate through continuous feedback. Future research could trace how global rivalry is translated into EU policy, how European policy reshapes regional coalitions, and how national governments influence these processes in return.

A third field concerns the measurement of strategic room for maneuver. Sovereignty is often discussed in legal or rhetorical terms, but its practical content could be examined through indicators such as energy dependence, defense capacity, alliance embeddedness, financial exposure, technological reliance, institutional influence, and domestic resilience. Such research could show why states with similar formal status possess very different levels of effective autonomy.

A fourth direction concerns functional differentiation within the international order. Military, economic, technological, institutional, and normative power are distributed differently. Research that treats polarity as a single systemic condition may therefore overlook significant variation. Comparative analysis across these domains could provide a more precise account of whether the emerging order is bipolar, multipolar, hierarchical, or fragmented.

Artificial intelligence and technological competition require particular attention. AI affects military planning, economic productivity, information environments, administrative capacity, and political legitimacy. It may reinforce the position of actors that already possess data, computing capacity, energy resources, and

advanced research institutions. It may also provide smaller states with new opportunities for specialization. The governance of AI will test whether international rules can be developed in a field where commercial interests, national security, and normative concerns are closely connected.

Geoeconomics offers another research agenda. Sanctions, export controls, investment screening, industrial subsidies, supply-chain policies, and currency systems increasingly connect economic and strategic policy. Future research should examine when these instruments alter state behavior, when they encourage adaptation, and when their unintended effects weaken the actors imposing them.

Climate change and resource politics will add further pressure. Energy transitions may reduce certain dependencies while creating new ones involving critical minerals, technologies, grids, and production capacity. The political distribution of adjustment costs may also affect the domestic legitimacy of international cooperation.

Regional comparison would help determine how far the Central European experience can be generalized. Southeast Asia, the Gulf, Latin America, the Western Balkans, and parts of Africa contain states navigating great-power rivalry while remaining embedded in regional institutions of varying strength. Comparison could reveal whether flexible regionalism and selective alignment represent broader patterns of adaptation.

Domestic politics should be integrated more fully into the study of world order. International strategies are filtered through elections, party systems, economic interests, media environments, historical memory, and political narratives. The durability of any international order depends partly on whether domestic societies continue to regard its costs and obligations as legitimate.

Research should also examine whether a liberal international order can persist without uncontested liberal hegemony. The survival of liberal institutions may depend on their ability to accommodate greater political diversity without losing their basic normative content. Too little flexibility may encourage exit or obstruction. Too much may empty the order of meaning.

Finally, SurRealism should be placed in dialogue with neoclassical realism, the English School, practice theory, strategic narrative approaches, network analysis, and research on multiplex or layered forms of order. These literatures offer

concepts through which the interaction of structure, institutions, agency, and meaning can be specified more precisely.

Outlook: Hungary's room for maneuver

The global, European, and Central European analysis leads to a final question: what does the transformation of world order mean for Hungary?

The liberal world order has not disappeared. Hungary remains embedded within it through NATO, the European Union, international markets, legal regimes, financial networks, and political alliances. These structures are not external details of Hungarian foreign policy. They define many of the conditions under which national choices are made.

The order is nevertheless changing. Great-power competition is intensifying, the United States is reassessing its global commitments, the European Union is debating its strategic role, and Central Europe is searching for new forms of adaptation. Hungary must therefore operate in a less permissive and more contested environment than the one that supported its Euro-Atlantic integration after 1989.

Does Hungary possess sovereign room for maneuver? Yes. Membership in international institutions does not eliminate national agency. Hungary can formulate priorities, build coalitions, specialize in particular policy fields, maintain bilateral relationships, and influence European decisions. Its geographical location, economic connections, diplomatic networks, and membership in NATO and the EU provide instruments through which national interests can be pursued.

Is this sovereignty unlimited? No. Nor is the sovereignty of any contemporary European state. Hungary's choices are constrained by security dependence, economic integration, energy relations, alliance commitments, market access, legal obligations, technological structures, and the responses of partners. Policies that ignore these conditions may appear sovereign in rhetorical terms while reducing practical room for maneuver.

Hungarian sovereignty is therefore constantly negotiated across global, European, regional, and national levels. The global order determines the broad distribution of power and the rules within which Hungary operates. Europe institutionalizes many of these rules and provides the main framework of

economic and political integration. Central Europe creates opportunities for regional cooperation and coalition-building. National politics defines priorities, interprets interests, and determines which external relationships are considered legitimate.

Influence can travel through this structure in both directions. Global rivalry affects EU policy. EU decisions shape Central European choices. Regional cooperation can influence European negotiations. Hungary can use regional and European mechanisms to represent preferences that would carry little weight if expressed only bilaterally.

This is the strategic value of institutional membership for a small or medium-sized state. NATO and the EU constrain unilateral freedom, but they also expand the range of outcomes Hungary can influence. In a purely power-based system, Hungary would possess far less ability to shape its external environment.

The central question is therefore not whether Hungary should choose sovereignty or integration. The more relevant question is how integration can be used to preserve and expand effective sovereignty. This requires a clear distinction between room for maneuver and strategic isolation. Diversification may increase resilience, but only when it reduces genuine vulnerability. Maintaining multiple relationships may broaden options, but only when core partners continue to regard Hungarian commitments as credible.

Hungary's strategic position calls for a combination of realism, institutional engagement, and narrative awareness. Realism is needed to recognize the country's size, location, dependencies, and security requirements. Institutional engagement is needed because national influence depends heavily on NATO, the EU, and regional cooperation. Narrative awareness is needed because foreign policy also rests on domestic legitimacy and on how Hungary's objectives are understood by partners.

The country's future room will depend on several capacities: reliable security guarantees, competitive economic performance, diversified energy supplies, technological development, functioning infrastructure, diplomatic credibility, and the ability to form coalitions. Sovereignty without these foundations remains formal rather than effective.

Hungary also has an interest in a functioning Visegrád framework, although the V4 should not become the sole instrument of regional policy. Cooperation with neighboring states and other regional configurations may be equally relevant

depending on the issue. Flexible regionalism can widen Hungary's influence when it is connected to concrete policy goals and compatible with broader European commitments.

The choice facing Hungary is not between an unchanged liberal order and complete national independence. Neither option exists. The task is to navigate an order that remains institutionally liberal in many respects while becoming more realist in its strategic competition and more contested in its political meaning.

The analysis presented throughout this book suggests that the liberal world order has not disappeared, but it is undergoing profound transformation. Hungary therefore continues to operate within the institutional framework of the liberal order while simultaneously adapting to an international environment characterized by increasing great-power competition, geopolitical fragmentation, and normative contestation. Within this changing context, Hungary retains meaningful sovereign room, yet that sovereignty is neither absolute nor unconstrained. Rather than existing independently of its external environment, it is continuously negotiated across interconnected global, European, regional, and national levels.

The world affects Hungary, but Hungary is not absent from the processes through which the world is reproduced. National choices can influence regional alignments. Regional cooperation can shape European agendas. European action can affect transatlantic relations and aspects of the wider order. The influence of a smaller state is limited, uneven, and often indirect, but it is not negligible. The most sustainable Hungarian strategy is therefore one that recognizes constraints without treating them as destiny. It should use alliances without assuming they operate automatically, participate in European integration without abandoning national priority-setting, maintain regional cooperation without expecting permanent unanimity, and engage external powers without creating dependencies that narrow future choices.

Such a strategy is less dramatic than declarations of complete autonomy or inevitable subordination. It is also closer to how international politics actually works.

The SurRealism of world order

The world order does not know that it is liberal, realist, multipolar, or anarchic. These are concepts through which observers seek to understand patterns that emerge from the actions of states, institutions, societies, and individuals. Political leaders rarely act according to a single theoretical logic. They respond to threats, interests, rules, beliefs, domestic pressures, historical memories, and incomplete information.

This is why the present order appears SurReal. Liberal institutions continue to organize a world increasingly shaped by realist competition. States rely on interdependence while attempting to protect themselves from it. Governments defend sovereignty through alliances and institutions that require negotiated limitations on unilateral action. Political narratives construct competing realities, yet none can escape material power and economic constraint.

The liberal world order has neither fulfilled its universal promise nor reached its end. It has become one layer of a more complex structure: deeply embedded, frequently contested, selectively applied, and continuously adapted. Its survival will depend less on restoring a lost period of uncontested dominance than on whether its institutions can function under conditions of political diversity and strategic rivalry.

For Europe, the task is to connect institutional power with strategic capacity. For Central Europe, it is to move from passive adaptation towards selective rule-shaping. For Hungary, it is to convert formal sovereignty into practical room for maneuver without undermining the relationships that make such maneuver possible.

The international order that follows will probably remain untidy. It will contain competition without complete separation, cooperation without full trust, and rules without universal agreement. It will be shaped by power, mediated through institutions, and interpreted through political narratives.

This is not an exception to the operation of world politics. It is its contemporary form.

It is the SurRealism of the liberal world order.

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