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# The genesis of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict: Russia under the American grand strategy in the post-Cold War era

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## Abstract

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict (2022-) can be understood as a proxy war between the United States and Russia. Most analyses identify Russia as primarily responsible, attributing revisionist characteristics to Moscow, with notable exceptions such as John Mearsheimer. Aligned with Mearsheimer's perspective, this work aims to identify the events that led to escalating US-Russia tensions during the post-Cold War period. Furthermore, we seek to understand why such events occurred, making it essential to examine American grand strategy and characterize its evolution throughout this period. The methodology employed consists of qualitative analysis based on the National Security Strategies (NSS) of successive American administrations throughout the post-Cold War era, supplemented by other relevant documents. The findings suggest that United States' responsibility in this process has been underestimated, given the asymmetry of relative power favoring Washington, particularly during the first two decades of the post-Cold War period, in the pursuit of a unipolar order at the expense of Russia. Consequently, Russia can be viewed as responding to policies it perceives as threatening from Washington, challenging the predominant narrative of exclusive Russian responsibility.

**Keywords:** United States; Grand Strategy; Russia; Ukraine; Proxy War.

# 1 Introduction

The beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in February 2022 evidenced the complex geopolitical dynamics of the region. The significant commitment of the Western bloc, led by the United States together with other G-7 countries, in sustaining the Ukrainian war effort demonstrated that the confrontation has dimensions that transcend purely regional issues. Following patterns observed during the Cold War, such confrontation can be characterized as a proxy war between the United States and Russia. Just as in the previous period, mutual nuclear retaliation capabilities direct these disputes toward third parties, a role played by Ukraine.

Fundamental questions arise: what is the distribution of responsibilities? What factors led to this conflict? According to the predominant narrative, the responsibility would be primarily Russian. The current explanations are many: some focus on Vladimir Putin's personalism (Frye, 2021; Gel'man, 2016), others consider Russian attempts to reconstruct the Soviet empire (Karaganov, 2018; Laruelle, 2008), while others attribute inherently belligerent characteristics to Russian political culture (Billington, 2004). However, these explanations seem insufficient to comprehensively understand the foundations of the conflict.

Given these potentially reductive explanations based on *ad hoc* assumptions, a more substantive examination of the factors underlying this confrontation is essential before assessing the question of responsibility. John Mearsheimer provided a significant contribution in 2014 with his article "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault," identifying NATO expansion, EU enlargement, and "democracy promotion" policies as the primary drivers of the crisis. While Mearsheimer's analysis is substantive and well-grounded, it leaves important questions unanswered. Despite identifying sources of tension in Russian-American relations, he does not address the underlying motivations behind institutional expansion or the strategic rationale for democracy promotion efforts.

This work therefore investigates why the United States pursued these policies during the post-Cold War era. We argue that these policies stemmed from particular interpretations of the Cold War that established strategic orientations which fundamentally shaped American foreign policy in this period.

## 2 The 1990s: American Primacy, Globalization, and International Interference

After the Soviet Union's dissolution, the United States could "[...] promote [their] interests rather than simply defend them [...]" (The White House, 1993, p.2), establishing what they called a "new world order" based on their values and ideals. Despite its "new" designation, this order represented a deepening of the existing hierarchy among industrial democracies established since World War II (Ikenberry, 2001, p.215).

This period was marked by significant power asymmetry favoring the United States—the so-called "unipolar moment" (Krauthammer, 1991)—which enhanced America's capacity to implement these policies. The Clinton administration would exemplify what Smith (2007) characterized as the "Liberal Imperialism" phase, originating at the end of the 1980s and developed until 2001. The imperial orientation would derive from growing American confidence in supporting military actions to promote liberal values and institutions in different cultural contexts.

In theoretical terms, three main concepts were formulated: democratic peace theory, democracy as a universal value, and the flexibilization of the concept of sovereignty. In summary, "While the pursuit of establishing democracy would be universal and peace would be achieved if all countries became democratic, the sovereign right of States would only be justified if they complied with certain norms" (Rodriguez, 2021, p.68).

This "new world order" did not fundamentally alter American geostrategy—that is, its grand strategy. Having emerged during World War II (Wertheim, 2020) and consolidated in the post-war period, it was based on maintaining American primacy, sometimes characterized as "hegemony" or "leadership." According to Porter (2018, p.9), American primacy rests on four central pillars: military preponderance; alliance management and containment; integration of other states into U.S.-led international institutions and the global economy; and prevention of nuclear proliferation. Post-Cold War administrations adapted the methods for maintaining and deepening primacy rather than altering these foundational elements.

## 2.1 Historical Interpretations and Their Political Implications

The instrumentalization of narratives by political agents constitutes an important vector for seeking domestic and international support in post-conflict contexts. In this sense, the interpretation of the Cold War by the "winners" would present significant inaccuracies, insofar as its end was narratively associated with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

An alternative perspective suggests that it was precisely the prior cessation of the Cold War that enabled changes in the Soviet Union, generating its implosion in 1991. The Cold War's fundamental distinction lay in ideological competition, so the end of this ideological divide effectively terminated the conflict. Thus, "On December 7, 1988, Gorbachev publicly called off the ideological Cold War" (Matlock, 2010, p.63); speaking at the UN, he renounced the Brezhnev Doctrine <sup>1</sup> and announced unilateral Soviet troop reductions. In January 1989, Reagan declared the Cold War's end (Cohen, 2009, p.191), and Fukuyama wrote his influential "The End of History?" (1989), predicting the triumph of Western liberal values.

By omitting the Cold War's termination in late 1988, Western narratives erased Soviet agency in ending the conflict. The prevailing interpretation instead suggested that ideological competition persisted until the Soviet collapse, with history supposedly "demonstrating" which system was superior. This reading fostered the triumphalism of democracy and "economic liberalism" as the victorious political-economic model.

Parallel to the triumphalist interpretation, neoconservative sectors of the Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations had a particular understanding about the reasons for the dismantling of the communist bloc. For these groups, American military pressure would have been the main cause of this process. However, such understanding would be a questionable historical interpretation in two dimensions: both in the Soviet relationship with Warsaw Pact countries and of the Soviet Union with its republics.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Medeiros (2008, p.204): "[...] instability in a socialist country would be considered political instability for the entire socialist field, thus justifying military intervention."

The fall of the Berlin Wall illustrates the first dimension. According to Matlock (2010, p.77): "Gorbachev created conditions that allowed the Germans to remove the wall," conditions that were military (troop withdrawal) and political (freedom of political choice). Therefore, the Soviets enabled the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact by renouncing the Brezhnev Doctrine and fostering *glasnost* (political opening) in satellite countries.

The Soviet Union's implosion resulted from internal political dynamics, primarily Gorbachev's reforms and Yeltsin's consolidation of power in Russia (Cohen, 2009, p.119). Reagan's military escalation cannot adequately account for Soviet collapse—at most, it might explain a strategic reorientation (Medeiros, 2008, p.177). This interpretation reinforced the emphasis on maintaining American military primacy and privileging hard power over soft power (Smith & Nye, 1990).

A third interpretation was consolidated: the perspective in which the Cold War would constitute a Third World War and Russia a defeated country. Regarding the first point, Matlock (2010, p.22) contests: "[...] in fact, the Cold War was totally unlike the two world wars: there was no direct conflict between the principal antagonists and no surrender by one side." Not only was the conflict "cold" but its end came through diplomatic means, representing a political decision by the Soviet Union itself, not American imposition.

"Kissinger (1994, p.763) reinforces this critique of the prevailing interpretation: "No world power had ever disintegrated so totally or so rapidly without losing a war." Even had the Soviet Union been militarily defeated, treating Russia as a vanquished state would remain problematic. As Matlock (2010, p.22) observes: "The Russian Federation of today was not a party to the Cold War because it was at that time part of a Communist empire, the Soviet Union, and therefore not an independent actor. This myth conflates Russia and the old Soviet Union."

## **2.2 National Security Strategies and how mere interpretations become policy (1994-2001)**

The Clinton administration (1993-2001) was the first U.S. presidency to govern entirely in the post-Cold War era. Throughout this eight-year period, the administration developed

seven National Security Strategies that maintained remarkable consistency in their core strategic principles and objectives. The updating of American grand strategy was called *Engagement & Enlargement*, based on the assumption that the United States constituted the "Indispensable Nation," reflecting the "Unipolar Moment" (The White House, 1994).

While "engagement" demonstrated American inclination for international involvement, "enlargement" referred to democracy promotion in other countries. The strategy aimed to expand democracies (enlargement) and foster the transformation of opponents (engagement). The conclusions generated by historical interpretations appear in this foreign policy: the supposed success of the "Western model" (democracy and economic liberalism) should be promoted globally and guaranteed by American military primacy.

A clear feedback loop between economic, military, and moral objectives was perceived. When commenting on the democratic question, President Clinton stated: "[...] democratic states are less likely to threaten our interests and more likely to cooperate with the U.S. to meet security threats and promote sustainable development" (The White House, 1994, Preface).

In strategic terms, these documents demonstrate that European stability remained central to American foreign policy. The primary objective was to foster a democratic, peaceful Europe fully integrated with the United States (Ibidem, p.21). To achieve this goal, security through military force emerged as the most critical element <sup>2</sup>, underscoring the vital importance of maintaining and expanding NATO. The military alliance would cease to maintain only defensive character and become a proactive instrument (Idem, 2001, p.5).

Another important vector would be the consolidation of democracy in former communist countries. The documents make this clear: "This is not a democratic crusade; it is a pragmatic commitment to see freedom take hold where that will help us most" (Ibidem, p.19). Therefore, according to the United States "Russia is a key state in this regard," which is why "[...] we must target our effort to assist states that affect our strategic

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<sup>2</sup> The Cold War is over, but war itself is not over" (NSS, 1994, p.21).



interests, such as those with large economies, critical locations, nuclear weapons [...]. We must focus our efforts where we have the most leverage" (The White House, loc. cit.)."

There is pragmatism behind democracy promotion in Russia. American interests in consolidating this policy are evidenced in the following passage: "Our economic and political support for the Russian government depends on its commitment to internal reform and a responsible foreign policy" (Idem, 2000, p.34).

The critical energy question, particularly oil and its strategic significance, underlay security, economic, and moral considerations. Oil represented a strategic asset for both the economy and military operations, serving as both an energy source and the foundation for manufacturing petroleum derivatives (Klare, 2004). From the outset of the Clinton administration, policymakers emphasized America's dependence on oil imports and their projected growth. This dependence was particularly problematic given the substantial quantities imported from the volatile Persian Gulf region.

According to the 1997 National Security Strategy, given the turbulence caused by the oil shocks of the 1970s, the United States was expected to seek stability of oil flow and develop new sources that would diversify risks. Beyond guaranteeing their own supply, the United States needed to ensure acquisition by allies and, when considered necessary, deny access to adversaries. In this context, the National Security Strategy identified the Caspian Sea Basin as a region of growing relevance due to its energy potential (The White House, 1997, p.21).

### **2.3 Sources of tension between Russia and the United States (1993-2000)**

According to Cohen (2009, p. 171), "[...] the Cold War ended in Moscow, but not in Washington". This statement effectively summarizes what was to follow.

The Clinton administration (1993-2001) inherited the primacy imperative as an aspect of its grand strategy, based on the premise that the "American model" (republic, institutions, and way of life) required a favorable international environment (Brzezinski, 1997). To



this end, "[...] the United States actively prevents the world returning to competitive multipolarity. In particular, it seeks to forestall the emergence of a hostile power seizing control of Eurasia's resources" (Porter, 2018, p.19).

However, Clinton prioritized domestic objectives, particularly addressing the ongoing economic recession<sup>3</sup> (Matlock, 2010, p.174). There was, therefore, no new strategy or grand objectives for foreign policy, leaving it in the hands of National Security Advisor Anthony Lake and Secretary of State Warren Christopher, making his administration characterized as functioning "on autopilot" (Gaddis, 2000). The administration implemented modifications that preserved American primacy while introducing new approaches. These modifications were bi-dimensional: whereas containment had maintained a defensive character, enlargement adopted an offensive posture; simultaneously, engagement would be pursued through geo-economic means and democracy promotion initiatives (Porter, 2018, p.21).

Regarding foreign policy toward Russia, the United States implemented a dual approach: declaratory and practical. While officially proclaiming that the Cold War had ended and that Russian-American relations should be strategic and friendly, "The real U.S. policy was different—a relentless, winner-take-all exploitation of Russia's post-1991 weakness" (Cohen, 2009, p.168). This "practical policy" was marked by unfulfilled promises and demands for unilateral concessions, proving more assertive than American policy had been toward the Soviet Union.

The parallel execution of these policies and underlying American interests can be observed across two dimensions: political and economic. Economically, since 1992 a group of American economists, led by Jeffrey Sachs, assisted Russia's economic transition through the so-called "shock therapy." Supported by Washington and based on the principles of free markets, private property, and reduced state intervention, these policies produced significantly negative results for Russia's economic and social indicators (Mazat & Serrano, 2013).

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<sup>3</sup> The slogan that permeated the 1992 elections was "It's the economy, stupid," coined by Ross Perot.

Washington's defense of the Yeltsin government on the basis of democratic values revealed significant inconsistencies. In 1993, Yeltsin launched a military attack on the Russian parliament and dissolved it, imposed a constitution that provided minimal limits on executive power, and presided over elections marked by reported irregularities (Cohen, 2009, p.170).

The justification for treating Russia as a defeated state stemmed from perceptions of it as a potential threat to Western interests. Analyzing the perspective of anti-Russian factions in Washington, Tsygankov (2009, pp. 21-22) argues that these groups “viewed the country—with its formidable nuclear arsenal, vast energy reserves, and strategically crucial geographic position—as a major obstacle to achieving [American] primacy.” Consequently, he contends, “it was essential to keep it in a state of military and economic weakness”.

By the first term of the Clinton administration, NATO expansion was already viewed as inevitable rather than merely possible—a matter of “when, not whether.” In the context of German reunification, the Soviet Union had agreed to allow the unified country to join NATO as a means of maintaining American control over a power that could rise to prominence (“to keep the Germans down”<sup>4</sup>). This agreement was contingent upon Western assurances that the military alliance would not expand eastward. These guarantees have been extensively analyzed and documented by the National Security Archive at George Washington University, which has published relevant declassified materials<sup>5</sup>. Among prominent critics of this expansion policy was George Kennan (Friedman, 1998).

The second source of tension occurred when, in 1999, NATO bombed Serbia without UN Security Council approval (Matlock, 2010, p.118). Consequently, NATO came to be

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<sup>4</sup> Lord Hastings Lionel Ismay, first Secretary General of NATO, characterized NATO's reason for existence as follows: “[to] keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.” See [https://www.nato.int/cps/uk/natohq/declassified\\_137930.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/uk/natohq/declassified_137930.htm)

<sup>5</sup> See <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>

perceived in Russia as offensive and as trying to replace Security Council authority (Zhebit, 2019, p.435).

### **3 Deepening sources of tension: The "Second Cold War" (2001- )**

The George W. Bush administration (2001-2009) can be characterized as a convergence of neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies, embodying what Smith (2007) termed the "Liberal Fundamentalist" phase. This convergence saw neoliberals supplying the theoretical and moral framework while neoconservatives contributed the military strategy and implementation.

Among the theories underpinning the moral framework, three stand out: democratic peace theory (the proposition that "democracies do not wage war against each other"), democratic transition theory (the conviction that any society could achieve democratization, particularly with external support), and the responsibility to protect (R2P), which provided legitimization of intervention to protect populations when states were incapable, unwilling, or complicit in causing harm (Smith, 2022, p. 22). The military component advocated for maintaining military supremacy and positioned hard power as essential to projecting American influence, ultimately resulting in pronounced military unilateralism.

This highly interventionist foreign policy framework was largely maintained by the Obama administration (2009-2017) (Smith, 2022, p. 22), generating significant international problems—with US-Russia relations serving as a prominent example. However, Obama latter modified the approach, emphasizing multilateralism, soft power, and geoeconomic tools rather than military force.

During the first two decades following the Cold War's end, the prevailing interpretation in Washington held that Russia had lost significant international relevance and that a new Cold War was improbable, given Russia's apparent inability to recover great power status

(Cohen, 2009, p. 163). This American perspective was characterized by a blend of confidence, triumphalism, and ignorance regarding Russian internal dynamics.

As a result, the United States consistently disregarded Russian interests throughout this period—whether through interference in domestic Russian politics during the 1990s or by demanding Russian compliance with American policies as a "junior partner" (Cohen, 2009, p. 181). While Russians sought recognition as equals, American policy reinforced the hierarchical dynamics of the "unipolar moment." Following Vladimir Putin's ascent to power in 2000 and his pursuit of restored Russian sovereignty, bilateral relations grew increasingly strained, accompanied by the emergence of critical narratives about Russia and its president in American media (Ibid., p. 178).

The deterioration of US-Russian relations during this period culminated in what Barreiros and Grass (2021) conceptualize as "Cold War 2.0"—a phenomenon fundamentally different from its 20th-century predecessor. Unlike the original Cold War's clear ideological divide between socialist and capitalist blocs, this new confrontation lacks a distinct ideological cleavage, with Russia no longer representing a socialist alternative but rather being categorized under the broader label of "authoritarianism" alongside China. The Cold War 2.0 is directly connected to the 2013-2014 Ukrainian crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea, with its origins rooted in interpretative disputes over two critical post-Cold War diplomatic agreements: the alleged NATO non-expansion promise regarding Eastern Europe during German reunification negotiations in 1990, and the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 concerning Ukrainian denuclearization. This "Second Cold War" is characterized by the absence of solid international institutional architecture capable of containing destabilizing strategic advances, creating what the authors term a "rules vacuum" particularly dangerous in the nuclear domain. The result is a more complex and less manageable strategic environment, occurring within a multipolar rather than bipolar system, where traditional arms control mechanisms have collapsed and new forms of confrontation — including cyber warfare — have emerged alongside a renewed conventional and nuclear arms race.

### **3.1 National Security Strategies in the "New Century" (2001-2022)**

The George W. Bush administration (2001-2009) formulated two national security strategies (2002 and 2006) that drew inspiration from the Defense Planning Guidance (1992) and *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century* (2000). These documents emphasized American unipolarity, the necessity of maintaining overwhelming military supremacy, global democracy promotion, the critical importance of preventing the emergence of peer competitors in strategically vital regions, and the imperative of constraining nuclear proliferation.

The core elements of the grand strategy were maintained while altering form and rhetoric. As a novel component, the doctrine of preemptive warfare was introduced: "we recognize that our best defense is a good offense" (The White House, 2002, p. 6). The "Bush Doctrine" represents the strategy that most aggressively sought to advance post-Cold War interpretations. Concerning the triumphalism of liberal democracy, the Cold War "victory" purportedly established "a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise" (Ibid., preface).

Militarily, the United States would maintain "incomparable military force" (The White House, 2002). Regarding policy toward Russia and China, the strategy declared: "America will encourage the advancement of democracy and economic openness in both nations, because these are the best foundations for domestic stability and international order" (The White House, 2002). As with the Clinton administration, the strategic direction was modified—becoming offensive-expansive—while altering the methodology through greater emphasis on hard power and unilateralism.

The Obama administration (2009-2017) sought to restore the legitimacy of American hegemony that had been undermined by the unilateralism of the preceding presidency. This restoration concerned the means of achieving strategic objectives—through multilateralism and the use of force as a last resort—rather than a fundamental revision of grand strategy itself. The administration maintained the centrality of core pillars: military primacy, allied security, integration of nations into international institutions, and prevention of nuclear proliferation (The White House, 2010, preface).

The maintenance of the ongoing grand strategy was deemed feasible given that the United States remained an "indispensable nation" in the "unipolar moment," making its international engagement essential. This strategy was underpinned by post-Cold War interpretations, particularly the emphasis on military supremacy (Ibid., p. 1) and the triumphalism of liberal democracy (Ibid., p. 5).

Regarding relations with Russia, the initial objective was to support the consolidation of "democratic-liberal values," under the assumption that these would build a "strong, peaceful, and prosperous" Russia that would respect "international norms" (Ibid., p. 44). However, in the 2015 strategy, Russia came to be viewed as a violator of international norms. The American response consisted of a combination of political support, military reinforcement of allies, enhanced European energy security, and economic sanctions against Russia aimed at imposing "significant costs" (The White House, 2015, p. 25). When indirect external influence proved ineffective, a direct rupture was established.

The first Trump administration (2017-2021) did not break with American grand strategy, maintaining the importance of allies, military preponderance, international institutions, and nuclear nonproliferation while reinforcing American leadership (The White House, 2017, preface). However, there was a revision of post-Cold War modifications: regarding strategic direction, where successive administrations since Clinton had pursued clear offensiveness, the Trump administration demonstrated greater restraint; in terms of approach, democracy promotion rooted in liberal triumphalism was replaced by pragmatism grounded in American national interests.

In this regard, the liberal discourse was modified: "It is a strategy of principled realism that is guided by outcomes, not ideology" (Ibid., p. 1). Certain interpretations were retained: a triumphalism discourse regarding the "American victory" in the Cold War (Ibid., p. 2), the understanding that military supremacy is central to negotiating from a position of strength ("peace through strength") (Ibid., p. 26), and the perspective that the American model is superior ("a force for good") (Ibid., p. 1).

Regarding Russia, it is seen as a revisionist country that threatens American security and prosperity, especially in Europe, seeking to undermine the credibility of American commitment to the continent, in addition to the sovereignty of neighboring countries

(Ibidem, p.47). The direct rupture with Russia and the importance of sanctions are maintained (Ibidem, p.34).

The Joe Biden administration (2021-2024) can be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile the realities exposed by the previous administration with post-Cold War liberal discourse. Contemporary geopolitical competition is acknowledged based on the erosion of unipolarity, framed through the contest between democracies and autocracies (The White House, 2022, p. 6). The United States would still retain primacy and remain internationally engaged to preserve it, reinforcing the continuity of grand strategy and the centrality of its four pillars.

Of the three post-Cold War interpretative frameworks, only liberal triumphalism is abandoned—more for practical than conceptual reasons. Despite rhetoric about international competition, American pragmatism is evident in seeking support not only from democratic allies but also from countries that, while lacking such values, depend on and/or support an "international system based on rules" (Ibid., p. 8).

"The most pressing strategic challenge facing our vision is from powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy" (The White House, 2022), with China and Russia identified as the primary adversaries. More specifically regarding Russia, it is perceived as a "direct threat," though one that is geographically circumscribed, particularly to Europe, due to its "strategic limitations" and absence of "across the spectrum capabilities" (Ibid., p. 11). Consequently, the strategy seeks to control exports and impose sanctions on Russia's strategic economic sectors as a means of undermining Russian capacity to wage future conflicts (Ibid., p. 39).

### **3.2 The "Second Cold War": amplifying the sources of tension between Washington and Moscow**

Putin's rise to power consolidated the shift in Russian politics that had already begun under Yevgeny Primakov (1998-1999) (Zhebit, 2019). His first challenge involved addressing separatism in Chechnya, a province controlled by armed militias that allowed widespread human rights violations (Tsygankov, 2009, pp. 75-78). While Moscow



viewed the Chechen leadership as neither moderate nor legitimate, the United States criticized Russian military actions and insisted on dialogue between the parties. This reinforced Russian perceptions of American interference in its domestic affairs, deepening the divisions of the previous decade.

The September 11 attacks fostered a temporary Russian-American rapprochement, as the United States became increasingly focused on counterterrorism. Russia joined the United States in combating terrorism in Afghanistan, providing personnel, intelligence, and temporary military bases (Matlock, 2010, pp. 258-259). Nevertheless, Washington's policy toward Moscow remained ambiguous. Concurrently, the United States announced its unilateral withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in December 2001 and deployed rapid reaction forces in Georgia to protect the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. As Tsygankov (2009, p. 81) observed, "Killing two birds with one stone was hardly possible after all, since the birds were flying in opposite directions."

The 2003 invasion of Iraq without UN Security Council authorization was interpreted by Russia as an assault on state sovereignty, with the discourse of combating terrorism serving as justification for advancing geostrategic interests. Although condemning the invasion, Russia recognized its unfavorable relative position and sought to avoid direct confrontation. However, the imperative to restore Russian influence in international affairs became apparent. In this context, rising commodity prices, particularly oil, during the 2000s served as a catalyst for Russian economic recovery (Matlock, 2010, pp. 259-260).

Russian non-alignment with Washington's directives provided justification for anti-Russian factions to characterize the country as unreliable and focused exclusively on its own strategic objectives (Tsygankov, 2009, p. 81). Compounding these tensions, Russia witnessed three former Soviet republics—Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005)—undergo regime changes within its sphere of influence, in what became known as "color revolutions." Through NGOs largely financed by the public-private National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Washington's democracy promotion policy demonstrated American capacity for external influence (Rodriguez, 2021). For Krauthammer (2004), these events were fundamentally "about Russia first, democracy

only second. [...] The West wants to finish the job begun with the fall of the Berlin Wall and continue Europe's march to the east."

Sources of tension intensified when NATO announced a new wave of expansion to Eastern European countries and, most significantly, to the Baltic States. The ambiguity ended when the second national security strategy of the George W. Bush administration removed references to cooperation with Moscow and support for Russia's entry into the WTO. Furthermore, Belarus was sanctioned precisely when it was negotiating a supranational union with Russia (Cohen, 2009, p. 173).

In February 2007, at the Munich Security Conference, Russia reasserted its role as an international power and denounced what it considered hostile Washington policies. In this context, Putin's position was interpreted as a declaration of a "Second Cold War," though Russia was responding to "a refusal by the Bush administration to take Russian interests and attitudes seriously" (Matlock, 2010, p. 261). From that point forward, a spiral of tension between the United States and Russia was established.

At the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, the intention to admit Ukraine and Georgia into the military alliance was announced. In a telegram to Washington that same year, then-ambassador to Russia William J. Burns (2008) "noted that Russia considered the entry of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO a line that could not be crossed" (Abelow, 2022, p. 17). However, Georgian armed forces—equipped, trained, and financed by the United States—attacked the semi-autonomous region of South Ossetia, breaking a ceasefire and causing casualties among Russian peacekeeping forces stationed there under international agreements (Matlock, 2010, p. 262). Following Cold War patterns, Russia intervened against US-supported forces (Georgia), neutralizing its army and reestablishing its international position.

At the end of Barack Obama's first term, Ukraine (2013-2014) experienced social upheaval that culminated in a regime change in February 2014. John Mearsheimer (2014) analyzes the role of the United States in orchestrating and fomenting this process. In response, Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula. It was in this context that the Minsk Protocols 1 (2014) and Minsk 2 (2015) were signed, with Germany and France serving

as guarantors, seeking to end hostilities between the rebel provinces of Donbass and the Ukrainian central government.

However, the effectiveness of these agreements appeared to be undermined by Western actions. The United States initiated a substantial military aid program to Ukraine exceeding four billion dollars (Abelow, 2022, p. 20), alongside increased economic and financial sanctions on Russia (Aslund, 2019). Simultaneously, the United States installed an anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system in Romania that, while ostensibly defensive, could be converted to offensive capabilities. During the first Trump administration (2017-2021), the United States began selling lethal weapons to Ukraine, marking a departure from previous policy (Abelow, 2022, p. 21).

The United States unilaterally withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (1987) in 2019 and conducted military exercises on the Russian border in Estonia. Russia, in turn, entered the Syrian War in 2015 supporting the Syrian government, initiating a new proxy conflict with the United States. In 2021, NATO conducted joint military exercises with Ukraine, the United States signed the U.S.-Ukraine Strategic Defense Framework, and rejected security proposals submitted by Russia. In February 2022, diplomatic negotiations collapsed and force was employed, resulting in the suspension of Russian-American relations.

From the outbreak of the conflict through the end of the Biden administration (2021-2024), escalating tensions were evident through both rhetoric and increased economic-military assistance to Ukraine. The unprecedented exclusion of a major power like Russia from the international financial system via SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) exemplifies the degree of confrontation. Conversely, the second (and current) Trump administration signals an attempt at détente, observed particularly through increased diplomacy (including meetings between Putin and Trump) and greater restraint regarding financing the Ukrainian war effort. Thus, it remains to be seen whether the attempt to resolve the conflict is genuine or merely another strategic maneuver.

## 4 Final Considerations

The post-Cold War period witnessed the maintenance of American grand strategy focused on primacy, albeit under new parameters. Given the transition from a bipolar to a unipolar world, this grand strategy acquired an offensive character, employing military power, economic leverage, democratic discourse, or frequently all three dimensions simultaneously. Shaped by specific historical interpretations derived from Cold War narratives, American foreign policy was characterized by intensive engagement in international affairs and the conviction that democracy could be exported, fostered, and established in other nations.

Despite the moral narrative, democracy promotion would benefit the United States by advancing its geostrategic interests. In this regard, theories were developed to support the viability and justification of democracy promotion. Nevertheless, the central concern of the United States would not be "autocratic" states per se, but those that could threaten its geostrategic interests—in the case of Russia and China, characterized as revisionists. In summary, motivated by the desire to maintain primacy and unipolarity, and possessing significant relative power, the United States sought to expand its international order model and intervene when possible in the domestic affairs of other countries, especially Russia.

Regarding Russian-American relations, the United States operated from the premise that Russia had been defeated in the Cold War and, therefore, could neither maintain a sphere of influence nor possess full sovereignty. Furthermore, Russia's potential resurgence was not considered feasible. Initially, substantial American influence within the Yeltsin government was leveraged to internally weaken Russia, creating political-economic instability that nearly led to the country's fragmentation and enabled, given its vulnerability, the advancement of policies contrary to Russian interests.

With Putin's rise, Russia underwent political, economic, and military restructuring that reestablished its sovereignty and capacity to preserve its geostrategic interests. Consequently, as Russian and American interests began to diverge, Washington's policy became progressively more assertive, including fomenting regime changes in former Soviet republics, expanding NATO, withdrawing from international treaties, and

imposing sanctions on Russia. Ultimately, the United States pursued proxy conflicts to weaken Russia, with Georgia serving as the first example.

Despite the designation “Second Cold War,” largely due to proxy conflicts and rivalry, the current situation presents distinct characteristics from previous periods of US-Russia (USSR) relations: the United States does not treat Russia as an equal, does not recognize its security concerns as legitimate, and maintains limited diplomatic engagement.

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