The Russian Invasion of Ukraine in the United States National Security Strategy: A Geopolitical Approach From Neoclassical Realism

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Abstract

Nicholas Spykman contributed to defining the national security strategy of the United States during WWII, which has served as the framework for its foreign policy ever since. This strategy has been adapted to the current international scenario, in which the rise of China represents the main challenge to the US. As a result, the Indo-Pacific region has become the focal point of US security concerns. This paper examines the consistency of US policy towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine with its national strategy, employing a geopolitical approach based on neoclassical realism. To accomplish this, the paper utilizes the analytical concept of geographic mental map to shed light on how US foreign policy-makers comprehend international politics and make decisions. The objective of this article is to test the hypothesis that US policy towards Ukraine is not coherent with its national security strategy, as it has allocated significant resources to a region of lesser geopolitical importance compared to the Indo-Pacific, where the rivalry with China is taking place. Additionally, the article aims to explain this policy by reviewing the contributions of foreign policy advisors and analyzing official statements from US institutions and decision-makers.

Keywords: Geographic mental map; US foreign policy; national security strategy; strategic framework; perception of reality.

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has fostered bipartisan unity in the United States in providing assistance to Ukraine. However, the prolonged conflict in Eastern Europe has ignited controversy in American domestic politics, prompting discussions about the alignment with the US national security strategy. Within this context, realist scholars have examined various facets of the strategic implications of the ongoing US foreign policy towards Ukraine.[1] Nevertheless, there remains a gap in the analysis regarding the coherence of the US national security strategy in Eastern Europe. For this reason, this article aims to analyze the coherence between the US national security strategy and its foreign policy concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. To achieve this objective, the article addresses the following questions: Is the US policy in

the Russian invasion of Ukraine consistent with its national security strategy? What factors explain the US policy?

The hypothesis that answers these questions and seeks to be tested is as follows: The US policy in the war in Ukraine is not consistent with its national security strategy because it has involved diverting a significant portion of its resources to a region of lesser strategic importance than the Indo-Pacific, where China emerges as its primary international rival. However, due to the deterioration of relations with Russia in recent decades and the relative decline of Russian power, American leaders have perceived the war in Ukraine as an opportunity to weaken Russia and achieve a strategic defeat, aiming to remove it from the international competition among the major powers in the system.

Neoclassical realism serves as the theoretical framework to test the hypothesis. In this way, the system variable, namely the war in Ukraine, is related to the intervening variable of the perception of reality by American leaders. To accomplish this objective, the analytical concept of geographic mental map is employed to clarify the US national security strategy from a spatial perspective. This concept helps elucidate the framework through which the leaders of this country interpret the international reality. The aim is to determine the level of coherence between this strategy and the policy adopted in the Ukraine war.

The methodology employed is qualitative and is based on the review of literature on neoclassical realism, as well as on cognitive geography and geopolitics, for the theoretical framework. Regarding empirical analysis, official documents from US decision-making bodies, statements by US leaders, monographs on US foreign policy, academic articles, and news articles published in media outlets are utilized to elucidate the geographic mental map of American leaders and the US national security strategy. This approach enables a comparison between US national security and its foreign policy in strategic interactions with Russia and the war in Ukraine.

The research structure is as follows. Firstly, it addresses the theoretical framework, the variables considered, and how geopolitics is employed to develop a spatial analysis of the object of study. Secondly, it analyzes the configuration of the geographic mental map of the US elite and presents the national security strategy that guides this nation's foreign policy. Following this, the article examines the relationship between the US strategy and the policy adopted in the Ukraine war, along with the factors that have influenced the adoption of this policy.

The perception of reality

Neoclassical realism remains a theory that is still subject to discussion and has, therefore, been criticized. Some of these criticisms have been particularly harsh,[2] while others have been more lenient.[3] Nevertheless, these criticisms have not hindered its theoretical and practical development through various empirical studies.[4]

The theoretical framework of neoclassical realism is based on Kenneth Waltz's three levels of analysis: the individual, the state, and the international system levels, known as the first, second, and third images, respectively.[5] This perspective has led neoclassical realism to consider the system level as crucial in explaining a state's international behavior. However, unlike neorealism, it employs a multilevel analysis by integrating factors from both the first and second images.

The organization of the international system depends on the unequal distribution of material capabilities among units, resulting in a power structure that constrains the actions of each unit. The neoclassical realist approach to international relations is based on the role of systemic pressures, which interact with intervening variables at the unit level, providing an explanation for why states adopt different international behaviors in response to similar stimuli.[6] According to this perspective, intervening variables at the domestic level filter the systemic variables of the international environment. This means that the complex processes of domestic politics act as a transmission belt for external forces.[7]

Neoclassical realist analyses encompass various intervening variables from the first and second images.[8] This research specifically focuses on the interactions of systemic pressures with variables in the first image, such as cognitive filters that influence how American leaders process information and perceive reality.[9]

Cognitive filters consist of values, beliefs, and images that affect how foreign policy-makers understand and interact with the external world. Their function is to assist decision-makers in foreign policy to process information. The variation of these filters among individuals accounts for divergent reactions of leaders when confronted with similar challenges and opportunities.[10] This intervening variable is used through the analytical concept of geographic mental map to elucidate how American leaders perceive the international geopolitical reality and define the US strategy. In this way, the perception of the American elites can be clarified from a spatial perspective, as well as the role of the Ukraine war in their strategy.

Geopolitical codes, geographic mental maps, and geographic scales

This section explains the concept of geographic mental map, for which it is necessary to clarify both the compatibility between neoclassical realism and geopolitics, and the understanding of geopolitics as it pertains to the definition of geographic mental map.

Although realist theories are grounded in geopolitical assumptions that have been extensively discussed,[11] there are variations in how authors within this school of thought interpret geopolitics. For instance, Hans Morgenthau regarded it as a pseudoscience,[12] while John Mearsheimer incorporated geopolitics into his analysis by taking into account a state's geographical location when projecting its power in certain regions.[13] Neoclassical realist authors also share a similar perspective.[14] However, while realist authors typically perceive geopolitics in systemic terms, this study conceptualizes it across all scales, encompassing both the international and domestic levels.[15]

Furthermore, it is important not to overlook the significant divergences among specialists regarding the object, method, and foundations of geopolitics.[16] This highlights the necessity of acknowledging the plurality of geopolitics, as different definitions correspond to different worldviews.[17] The existence of a wide variety of geopolitical schools of thought confirms this assertion.[18]

Geopolitics is considered here as the study of how political phenomena interact with the geographical environment and how this influences the organization of space.[19] It is also approached from a strategic perspective, as it is grounded in geography, which is strategic knowledge.[20] Additionally, geopolitics involves the study of a state's external spatial

relations in the organization of the international space.[21]

Unlike authors of critical geopolitics, who view geopolitics as a set of discursive practices,[22] this study considers geopolitics as practices embedded in war, foreign policy, and diplomacy, with tangible manifestations in the organization of space. Therefore, no purely spatial processes precede, influence, or determine the social and political processes that occur within them.[23] Space is a socially constructed reality that implies, contains, and disguises social relations, reflecting power relations resulting from social superstructures such as the state. Hence, space is organized according to the specific demands of these structures.[24] Physical geography simply constrains the potential arrangements of space.

The decisions regarding spatial organization made by leaders in the domains of military, diplomacy, and foreign policy reflect the prevailing geopolitical practices within a country. These practices constitute geopolitical codes, representing a particular mode of reasoning grounded in politico-geographical assumptions about the security of the state or a group of states, potential threats, and available responses. State elites develop these codes in spatial arrangements through their daily geopolitical activities. Consequently, each country has its own set of geopolitical codes shaped by its geographical location and its position within the international power structure, which, in turn, influences the range of geographical scales (local, regional, and global) in which it operates.[25]

National capabilities and geographical location both play a role in delineating the national interest and its geopolitical extent. These factors impose limitations on the state's strategic engagements in the international arena. Consequently, the state's interactions with other international actors are directed by its geopolitical codes, which mirror the underlying vision or national image of its leaders.[26] These images constitute a mental framework that can be analyzed from a spatial perspective through geographic mental maps.

Material factors constrain the ideas or beliefs that shape a leader's perception of national capabilities and, consequently, their perception of the state's position in the international power structure.[27] These ideas include the spatial relationships between states based on their position within that structure. This research specifically focuses on how American leaders perceive Russia's international position, the significance of the war in Ukraine, and their role in American strategy.

Geographic mental maps simplify reality and assist decision-making. They comprise a cognitive framework constructed from a set of beliefs and ideas that filter geographic information, enabling its organization in a relatively cohesive manner.[28] Hence, geographic mental maps serve as spatial frameworks for policy-makers perceptions of reality and their definition of a given situation. Mental maps serve individuals or groups in diagnosing and assessing problems, ultimately limiting the possible policies that can be adopted.[29] Thus, mental maps represent a variable that exerts influence over the depiction of reality as they interact with systemic pressures in defining external threats and potential state responses.

Although geographic mental maps are an analytical concept with limited theoretical development,[30] they help elucidate the worldview of the US elite. Various methods exist to clarify these mental maps.[31] This research analyzes contributions from government advisors who have had the most significant impact on shaping the major strategic lines of US national security and foreign policy, as well as official documents that define strategic doctrine and the global vision of US leaders through their public statements. This is combined with the study of foreign policy actions and relations with other

countries.

By shedding light on the geographic mental maps of the American elite, it is possible to elucidate the relative significance of distinct locations and depict the spatial interconnections among diverse actors within the international arena. These maps are a simplified image of a complex reality. In this way, they contribute to defining foreign policy, projecting the vision that a country, in this case, the US, has of its place in the world, its national interest, and how to defend it, all of which guide the conduct of the state's foreign action.[32]

The levels of spatial analysis used in this study correspond to the conceptualization established by neoclassical realism regarding the interactions between the first and third images. Hence, the connections between these levels are thoroughly investigated.[33] Accordingly, geographic mental maps correspond to a large-scale spatial analysis level, focusing on individuals comprising the American elite and corresponding to the first image's conceptualization level. The other level of analysis is the small-scale level, as US foreign policy is the object of study, with the spatial sets being the US in the international system and the European region. This represents a spatial analysis level that aligns with the conceptualization level of the third image.

The configuration of the American elite's geographic mental map

The geographic mental map of American leaders constitutes a relatively stable reference in guiding the country's foreign policy. This stability arises because the configuration of the mental map depends on the geographical location of the state and its position in the international power structure. In the case of the US, the country enjoys a highly advantageous geographic position, as there are no other major powers in its region that pose an external invasion threat. As a result, the US has achieved notable levels of security, further bolstered by the fact that most major powers are situated in Eurasia, effectively averting threats from its borders. Thanks to this favorable location, the US has preserved its economic production capacity intact during recent military conflicts in which it has participated.

In addition to physical geography, national capabilities are another critical factor in shaping the geographic mental map of the American elite. Thus, since the end of World War II, the US has held a prominent position in the international system, influencing the perspective American leaders have developed regarding the global stage. This has led to a shift in how American leaders perceive and comprehend international reality, driven by the expanded geographical scope of US interests.

The current configuration of the American geographic mental map is rooted in Alfred Thayer Mahan's work,[34] who conceptualized the US as a maritime power due to its geographical location. However, the most significant contribution to defining the mental map of American leaders came from Halford John Mackinder. His work, reflecting the perspective of a maritime power like early 20th century Great Britain, was instrumental in explaining the interests of the US in the world in spatial terms. Mackinder framed history as an enduring contest between maritime and continental powers influenced by the arrangement of landmasses. Based on this premise, he formulated his theory of the geographical pivot of history, later renamed the heartland.[35] According to Mackinder's theory, the heart of Eurasia encompasses a vast expanse that is

impervious to encirclement by sea or complete invasion, thus rendering it a strategic zone whereby control equates to dominance over global politics.
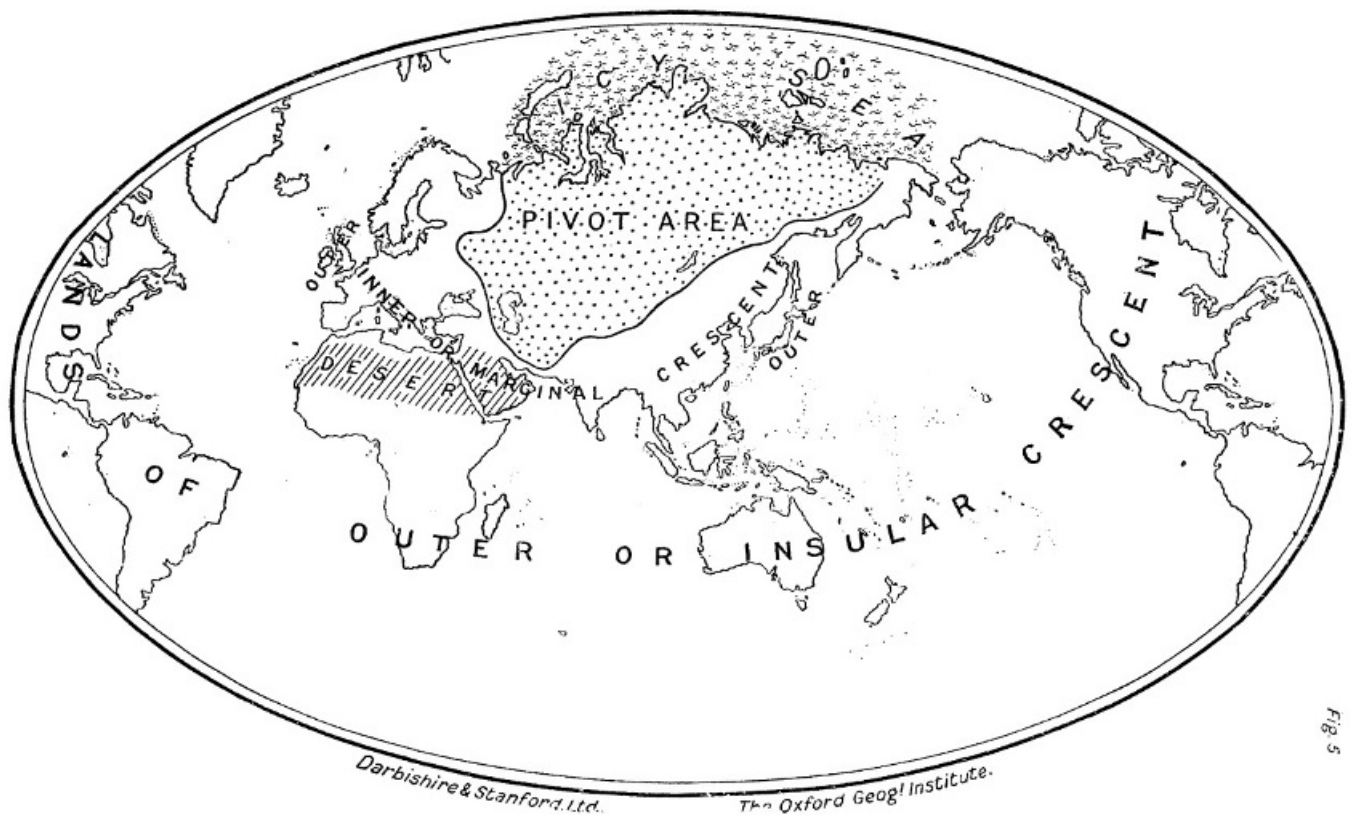
Map 1. Map of the pivot area reflecting Mackinder's geographic mental map. [36]

From Mackinder's perspective, the foreign policy of a maritime power like Great Britain had to prevent a continental power from gaining control of the Eurasian heartland and, therefore, achieving hegemony in the world island. Such a scenario would pose a significant threat to the interests and security of the British Empire, given its potential to amass abundant resources for naval construction, enabling it to contend for oceanic control and ultimately attain global dominance.

The configuration of Mackinder's geographic mental map is based on physical morphology. In this regard, he stated, "There is one ocean covering nine-twelfths of the globe; there is one continent—the World-Island—covering two-twelfths of the globe; and there are many smaller islands, whereof North America and South America are, for effective purposes, two, which together cover the remaining one-twelfth."[37] Mackinder's view of the global geographic space established the foundations for the definition of the American leaders' geographic mental map, as well as the conceptualization of the US as a maritime power.

During World War II, Mackinder's geopolitical model was adapted to the US national security strategy to define its foreign policy. This task was undertaken by Nicholas Spykman in 1942, considering, like Mackinder, the influence of physical geography on historical events. In this respect, Spykman deduced the foreign policy of nations from the attributes of their geomorphology.[38] According to his viewpoint, physical geography is the most fundamental factor in foreign policy, as it is

the most stable of all.[39] Hence, the international strategy of the US should conform to the physical realities dictated by geography, thus adopting a maritime perspective due to its geographical location.

Unlike Mackinder, Spykman considered the rimland the decisive region in world politics, the strip of land extending from northwest Europe and reaching the Far East of the Eurasian continent through the Middle East and South Asia. Gaining control over this extensive geographical region that stretches across the periphery of Eurasia is essential for global dominance. Spykman summarized it as follows: "Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world."[40] The intermediate zone between the heartland and the insular crescent, encompassing the adjacent islands, represents the pivotal geopolitical area on the planet. Throughout history, it has witnessed significant conflicts between maritime and continental powers, underscoring the decisive nature of its control in asserting a dominant position on the international stage.

Map 2. The world according to Spykman.[41]

Drawing upon the aforementioned points, Spykman concluded that safeguarding the security of the US hinges on thwarting the dominance of any individual state or coalition of states in the Old World (comprising Eurasia, Africa, Australia, and their respective coastal islands). To achieve this objective, a balance of power policy based on alliances with weaker states is developed in these regions to counterbalance any potential hegemonic aspirations of other states.[42] Therefore, foreign policy should focus its actions on the rimland, the coastal areas of Eurasia from Northwest Europe to Southeast Asia and East Asia, spanning the Middle East and South Asia, to prevent any other power from controlling this strategic zone.[43]
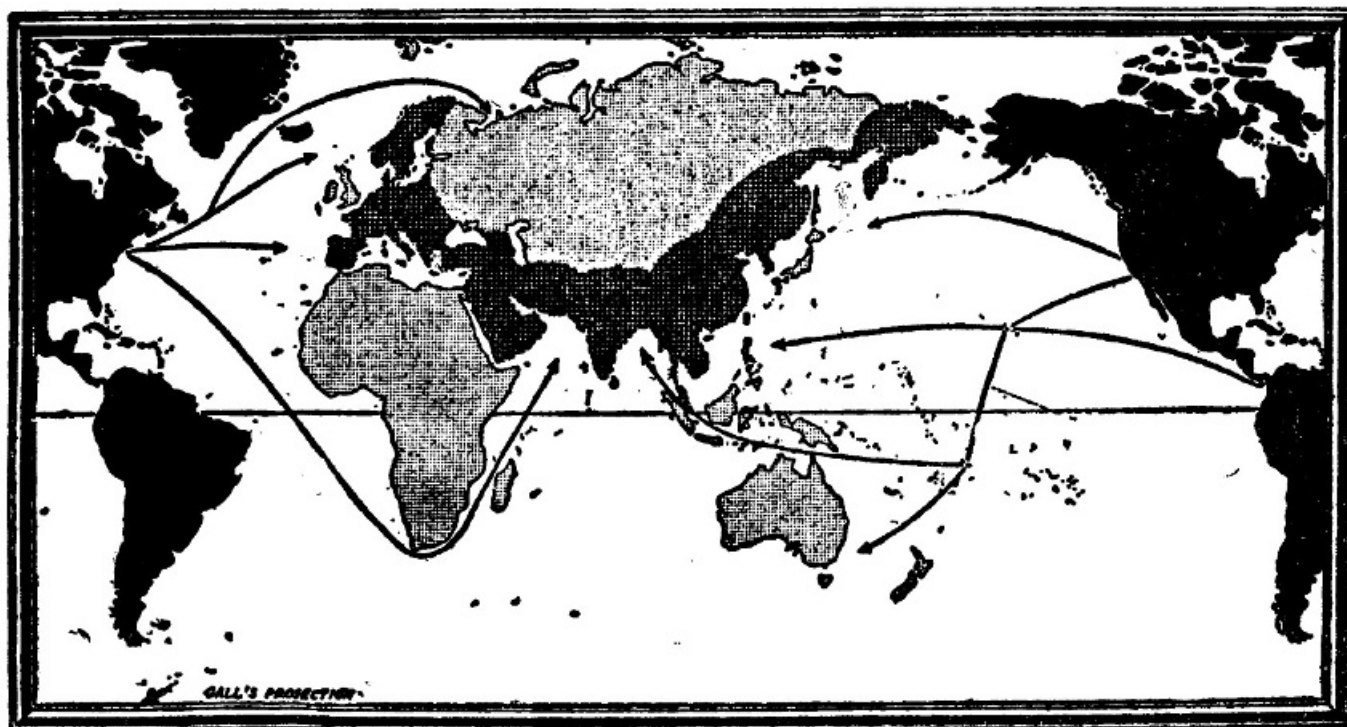
Map 3. Old World encirclement and rimland (Spykman 1944a, 177). [44]

Spykman's geopolitical outlook embodies a regionalist viewpoint, underscoring the significance of distinct geographical locations within the global geopolitical arena and, in turn, the relevance of regional actors or power hubs in shaping dynamics across the globe. This perspective has been developed by different authors who have shaped the geographic mental map of the American elite, such as George Kennan, referring to areas where military-industrial power is concentrated,[45] Saul B. Cohen and his notion of the shatter belt,[46] or Zbigniew Brzezinski and his concept of the linchpin state.[47] According to this regionalist approach, there are zones of special strategic importance for the security and interests of the US. Hence, its foreign policy should focus on maintaining the balance of power and concentrate on these regions, primarily on the rimland.

The containment policy outlined by George Kennan follows the basic framework established by Spykman, aimed at preventing any state or alliance of states from taking control of the Eurasian continent.[48] In this instance, the focus of containment was directed at the Soviet Union. Derived from this geopolitical theory, it was deduced that there existed a set of strategically significant geographic locations along the periphery of Eurasia that needed to remain beyond Soviet control. These locations were critical for the US and were concentrated within the shatter belt encircling the USSR's periphery. The objective was to hinder the Soviet Union's access to the sea via the Indian Ocean or the Mediterranean.[49] To accomplish this, a strategic approach was employed, entailing the formation of alliances with various countries along the rimland to discourage Soviet expansion. In any case, the implementation of the containment policy underscores the influential role of specific geopolitical theories in shaping the perspectives and actions of foreign policy decision-makers. This influence is reflected in maps that embody the vision of US leaders regarding the international environment.[50]

The US national security strategy and its policy in the war in Ukraine

Spykman warned that China could become a real threat to the US in the future due to its large population and its geographical expanse along the rimland, with a coastline of 18,000 kilometers providing access to the South China Sea.[51] The rise of China has confirmed Spykman's prediction, explaining why China is currently a priority in US strategy.

While it is true that US foreign policy had been focused on the Middle East until the presidency of Barack Obama, it was under his administration that greater attention began to be paid to the rise of China as it narrowed its economic gap with the US.[52] Thus, the US started reorienting its foreign policy towards the Western Pacific, adopting a more realist approach to its relations with China. While it took time for these changes to materialize in US foreign policy, Obama expressed his intentions early in his presidency by declaring himself as the first Pacific President.[53] This, coupled with the perspectives of certain advisors on China's ascent, prompted the exploration of a fresh strategy aimed at effectively addressing the complexities of an increasingly significant region.[54]

The pivot to the Pacific began to materialize in US foreign policy during the administration of Donald Trump, moving from intention to a visible reality within the framework of the new structural trends of an international system in transformation. The hardening of US policy towards China, particularly in trade, technology, and security, which resulted in increased tensions between the two powers, was reflected in the strategic doctrine of national security. In 2017, a pivotal moment emerged as the US acknowledged, for the first time in several decades, that the rivalry between major powers presented the utmost challenge to both American security and the global order.[55]

Changes in the international arena due to the systemic pressure that China's rise represents for the US have been interpreted by the American elite through their geographic mental maps. This has led to considering Russia a regional power,[56] which is no longer the primary strategic threat to the US[57] In this way, China has become the primary threat to the US, having increased its national capabilities and expanded the geographical scope of its interests with a growing presence in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, American policy-makers have reached the conclusion that China has the potential to emerge as a regional hegemon, capable of obstructing American access to the East Asian region. Consequently, China has been characterized in the US national security strategy as the sole competitor with the potential to combine its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might to pose a sustained challenge to the established international order. This assessment has substantiated the imperative to realign US foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific.[58]

The increasing importance of China at the expense of Russia has relegated the latter to a secondary position in US foreign policy. The reduction of the US military presence in Europe during the Obama presidency, except for rotational troops deployed during the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, serves as clear evidence of this shift. In addition to this, the 2017 National Security Strategy categorized Russia as a revisionist state and a regional threat, aspiring to great power status and seeking to establish its own spheres of influence.[59] In the 2022 National Security Strategy, Russia is now deemed an immediate threat to security in Europe, further diminishing the region's relevance to the US.[60]

US foreign policy aims to constrain Russia's foreign action as its behavior has proven dangerous and destabilizing, as demonstrated in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. However, due to Russia's lesser importance than China, the US

envisions European countries assuming greater responsibility for their security.[61]

In line with Spykman's geographic mental map, the US aims to utilize the support of its European allies in countering Russia and its imperial ambitions. This strategic approach materializes in offshore balancing,[62] where the US aims to avoid direct involvement in European security, gradually shifting the economic and military burden onto European hands. The European support to Ukraine, totaling roughly €85 billion,[63] exemplifies this strategy, enabling the US to focus on its competition with China. Consequently, the US has pressured its European allies to fulfill their commitment of allocating 2% of GDP to defense spending.[64]

Europe is a geographically less important theater for the US compared to the Indo-Pacific region. However, US leaders have interpreted the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an opportunity to undermine Russia and deal it a strategic defeat, as indicated in the 2022 National Security Strategy. This entails obstructing Russia's access to specific resources (financial and technological) crucial for sustaining the invasion and, to the best of their ability, limiting Russia's participation in international decision-making arenas. All of this is combined with an increased US military presence in Europe and the strengthening of defense and deterrence capabilities on NATO's eastern flank, along with corresponding financial, humanitarian, political, diplomatic, and military support to Ukraine.[65] Thus, US military aid to Ukraine since the invasion on February 24, 2022, amounts to approximately $44.2 billion,[66] and when combined with other non-military assistance, it totals roughly $113.4 billion.[67] All of this reflects the US political will to thwart Russia's plans in Ukraine.

US policy leaves no doubt about its intentions to weaken Russia to the point where it suffers a defeat that impacts its national capabilities and decisively undermines its strategic position. This policy aims to prevent Russia from undertaking future aggressions against third countries. This perspective, as expressed by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, confirms that US leaders consider the war in Ukraine as an opportunity to exclude Russia from the international competition among the major powers of the system.[68] This course of action ultimately denies Russia any possibility of reclaiming its status as a great power.

If US policy in Ukraine succeeds in weakening Russia to a point resembling the situation in the 1990s, the foreign policy of this country will be severely constrained, and its external dependence on China will relegate it to the status of a vassal state and a mere low-cost repository of natural resources.[69]

However, the policy adopted by US leaders is not consistent with the strategic framework defined by their geographic mental map. The European region, and more specifically, the war in Ukraine, has less strategic importance compared to the Indo-Pacific region and the competition with China. In this regard, the actions of the US are not coherent with its own strategy, as Ukraine may ultimately become a distraction that consumes resources to the detriment of the needs posed by the much tougher rivalry with China. It is important to highlight that US assistance to Ukraine almost equals the total aid received by Afghanistan in 2011 when it peaked at around $110 billion.[70] Depending on the war's duration and intensity, it may contribute to weakening the US and leaving it in an economically and militarily compromised position when confronting the challenge posed by China.

Although this conflict appears to significantly undermine Russia's international position, the potential costs for the US in

economic, military, and political terms remain uncertain. Internal problems may arise due to changing alliances among different political and social forces, which can also impact the development of US foreign policy. For this reason, the approach adopted with Ukraine does not align with the strategic framework of the US.

Additionally, it should be noted that the strong support for Ukraine has effectively hindered any possible resolution of the conflict other than a clear military defeat of Russia, which may not occur in the end. It is important to point out that US policy has only contributed to bringing Russia and China closer together, as evidenced by the renewal of the strategic partnership between these nations. Collaboration between China and Russia contributes to creating the scenario that Spykman warned should be avoided, namely, the formation of an alliance of states dominating the Old World and blocking US access to Eurasia. Brzezinski later echoed this idea, emphasizing the importance of avoiding the convergence of two powers capable of controlling both the heartland and the rimland, which would directly threaten US security.[71]

From a strategic perspective, it would be more advantageous for the US to maintain cordial relations with Russia to counterbalance China and prevent collaboration between these countries against US interests in Eurasia. In doing so, the US would create a political and military pressure point north of China, which could distract its determined attempts to become a maritime power capable of controlling the South China Sea and annexing Taiwan.[72] As Alfred Mahan pointed out, the need to monitor vast interior borders, especially when they border other major powers, poses a significant challenge to becoming a maritime power.[73]

Different historical events confirm the previous perspective. The Tumu Crisis in 1449, where the Mongols defeated China, marked a turning point that prevented the empire from becoming a maritime power. The defensive system of China shifted its focus towards repelling attacks from steppe peoples thereafter.[74] Similarly, tensions between China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War created a continental focal point of tension, hindering China's ability to modernize its navy and develop maritime power.[75] As the security environment in Eurasia changed, and Russia is no longer considered a threat, China modernized its navy and surpassed the US in the number of warships in 2020,[76] posing a significant challenge to American power. All this foreshadows the strengthening of the partnership between China and Russia, with the latter bound to be the junior partner.

While US policy in the war in Ukraine weakens Russia, it may also have unintended consequences that undermine the US in the medium term. It is crucial to note that Eastern Europe's relatively lesser geopolitical significance means that China does not suffer any negative consequences; instead, it benefits from the weakening of Russia, further increasing its dependence on its Chinese partner. China would also stand to gain from any weakening this conflict could ultimately cause for the US. This situation also aligns with Russia's pivot towards Asia, advocated by some Kremlin advisors.[77] This shift is driven by the growing economic importance of East Asia and Russia's strategic considerations amidst increasing isolation. China not only gains access to significant natural resources at favorable prices but also strengthens its political influence over Russia. In the long term, this increased influence may enable China to exert constraints on Russia's actions in the international arena, aligning them with China's own interests.

However, the US stance on the invasion of Ukraine contradicts the traditional strategic framework that has guided US

foreign policy. The portrayal of support for Ukraine as a struggle between democracy and autocracy aligns primarily with the liberal approach of the Biden administration, wherein ideological considerations have taken precedence over strategic ones. Nevertheless, other interconnected with the dynamics of US-Russia relations in recent decades have influenced the adoption of this policy.

Explanatory factors of US policy in the war in Ukraine

The explanatory factors of US policy in the war in Ukraine can be classified into two types. Firstly, the foreign policies of the US and Russia, which have been shaped by their respective goals, interests, and mutual interactions. These factors have played a significant role in shaping the perceptions developed by their respective leaders. Secondly, another prominent factor is the US leaders' perceptions of Russia's capabilities, greatly influencing their interpretation of the war.

Firstly, it is important to note that the dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in Russia's decline in the international power structure. In response, the US sought to establish a new type of relationship with Russia based on the belief that the country was gradually moving towards a liberal democracy, albeit hesitantly and unevenly.[78] This perception led the US to adopt an engagement policy to promote democracy in Russia. Consequently, Russia was granted participation in various international institutions despite not meeting the economic and political requirements. These concessions and gestures led Russian leaders to believe that the US was willing to recognize Russia as a great power.[79]

As Russia sought recognition as a great power from the US but failed to achieve it, their bilateral relations gradually deteriorated.[80] This rift can be traced back to the late 1990s when Russian foreign policy, under the leadership of Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov,[81] adopted a more nationalist approach. Subsequently, when Vladimir Putin became prime minister and announced his vision of transforming Russia into a great power,[82] Russian foreign policy became increasingly assertive and confrontational. This shift materialized in various events that further strained relations between the two countries.[83] In essence, Russia's deteriorating relationship with the US can be attributed to its reluctance to accept a subordinate role within the Western framework and its inability to adapt to the new international landscape that emerged after the Cold War.

Therefore, the combination of the Western refusal to accept Russia's integration into its economic and political structures and US unilateralist policies in the early 21st century contributed to a change in the perception of the international reality within the Russian elite, shaping their geographic mental map. This led Russian leaders to conclude that the US seeks to deprive Russia of its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. The US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, its intention to deploy a missile defense system in Eastern Europe, its unilateral use of force, and the expansion of NATO towards Eastern Europe reinforced this perception. As a result, Russian foreign policy sought to reaffirm the position of the Russian state in the post-Soviet space, as demonstrated by the war with Georgia in 2008. Russian leaders embarked on a new project of imperial reconstruction that crystallized in the new geographic mental map of Greater Eurasia.[84]

Despite a period of rapprochement between Russia and the US during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency (2008-2011), the

dominant trend in their long-term relationship has been one of gradual distancing and continuous friction. This is evident in the accusations against the US of interfering in Russian parliamentary elections and being behind the subsequent popular protests in 2011, while Russia granted asylum to Edward Snowden in 2013. The Syrian civil war and North Korea's nuclear ambitions contributed to mutual distancing, too. Afterwards, the Ukraine crisis in 2014, with the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donbas, was a turning point that accelerated and exacerbated the already strained US-Russian relations. The US not only imposed sanctions on Russia but also publicly considered it a regional power. The accusations of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential elections, the expulsions of diplomats from both countries during the Donald Trump administration, and the new economic sanctions brought the relationship between these countries to its lowest levels since the Cold War.

The alignment of Russia and China in 2015 reduced the US maneuvering room in managing its relationship with Russia. In this regard, it can be said that the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was within the calculations of the US, as its 2017 National Security Strategy already considered the possibility of a conflict with Russia due to a miscalculation on Russia's part.[85] In fact, the options for the US in the face of the Russian invasion were quite limited, so supporting Ukraine militarily, politically, diplomatically, economically, and humanitarianly has been largely inevitable to curb Russia's imperialistic aspirations.

Therefore, the policy adopted by the US towards Ukraine largely stems from the international context shaped by its relations with Russia in recent years, which have been constrained by the divergent objectives and interests of both countries. In this regard, the US has sought the transformation of Russia into a liberal democracy as a prerequisite for its integration into Western political and economic structures, which has been accompanied by its refusal to accept the existence of a Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Due to the impossibility of integrating into Western institutions without changing its internal political regime, Russia's goal has been to obtain the US recognition of its great power status and the existence of its exclusive sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. The latter was reflected in Russia's letter to the US and its Western allies as an ultimatum in late 2021.

In addition to the international context shaped by US-Russian relations, US leaders perceive Russia as a declining power.[86] This view is further reinforced by various academic research studies.[87] This perception is confirmed by the underperformance of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine. In contrast, the fighting spirit of the Ukrainians and their demonstrated effectiveness in repelling the Russian attack solidified this impression. All of this helps explain why the US has chosen to allocate a significant amount of resources to defeat Russia strategically, believing that by undermining the foundations of its power, it will be able to deactivate Russia internationally and exclude it from the competition among the major powers.[88]

Conclusions

The geographic mental map of the US elite constitutes the framework for its national security strategy. Forged during World War II, this map has evolved and been shaped throughout the Cold War to the present day. This worldview is

based on the geographical location of the US and its position in the international power structure. The central idea guiding this vision is to prevent the formation of a coalition of states that could dominate Eurasia. To achieve this, the US has adopted a foreign policy focused on maintaining the balance of power through the rimland. In the context of the 21st-century, this translates into containing the rise of China as the most serious competitor to the US.

However, US policy in Ukraine is not consistent with the geographic mental map of its leaders, as it receives significant attention and resources despite having lesser strategic importance than the Indo-Pacific. This is further exacerbated by a foreign policy that has driven Russia closer to China, enabling greater collaboration between the two states with the potential to jointly dominate Eurasia. This policy contradicts the strategic framework of the US.

US policy in Ukraine is essentially the result of the deterioration of its relationship with Russia. On the one hand, this deterioration can be attributed to the US refusal to accept Russia's integration into the political and economic structures of the Western world and recognize its status as a great power. In turn, this has led the US to reject Russia's aspirations of having a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. On the other hand, there is Russia's mistrust of the US and the West for not obtaining the status of a great power. This prompted Russian leaders to undertake a project of imperial reconstruction, which, fueled by incidents in the post-Soviet periphery in recent decades, ultimately led to the invasion of Ukraine.

The interactions between Russia and the US, whose respective foreign policies are driven by divergent views of the international reality and opposing interests, have shaped the political landscape of Eastern Europe, which has been characterized by diplomatic, economic, and political friction. The dynamics of these interactions created a context in which US options in its relationship with Russia were significantly reduced due to the distancing between the two countries. Additionally, the US was unable to create suitable conditions to deter Russia from undertaking hostile military action against Ukraine or to reach any compromise due to their conflicting interests. Russia's rapprochement with China further compounded this situation due to worsening relations with the US, facilitating Russia's invasion of Ukraine under the belief that it would have China's support and that Western countries would not remain united.

The above largely explains US policy towards Ukraine, but only partially. The significant allocation of military and economic resources to Ukraine constitutes a qualitative difference in the level of support that could have been initially expected from the US. This is due to US leaders' interpretation of the situation based on their perception of Russia's capabilities and their deployment on the battlefield. Thus, the war in Ukraine is seen as an opportunity to severely weaken Russia and inflict a strategic defeat, removing it from the competition among the major international powers.

However, the military conflict in Ukraine could turn into a war that diverts significant resources from the US to defeat Russia. This scenario would weaken the US international position vis-à-vis China, making competition with this power more challenging. In fact, China would benefit geopolitically from a conflict in which both the US and Russia emerged significantly weakened, as it would increase Russia's dependence on China and create an opportunity to displace the US from its current position. Ultimately, the costs that the war in Ukraine may eventually impose on the US could significantly impact its competition with China, potentially turning a hypothetical strategic defeat of Russia into a strategic mistake for the US.

The evolution of the conflict and the deteriorating US-Russia relations have limited the options available to American leaders. In the current context, the US commitment to European security might complicate its rivalry with China. Furthermore, the ramifications of the Ukrainian war are anticipated to reverberate within American domestic politics, and bipartisan support for the foreign policy stance on this issue may erode significantly.

Amid the uncertainties surrounding the war's eventual outcome, safeguarding its international position remains paramount to the US national interest. Consequently, a protracted war is an undesirable prospect. If, within a reasonable timeframe, Ukraine fails to make substantial progress on the battlefield effectively, and a static frontline leads to a deadlock, the US should contemplate urging Ukraine to engage in armistice negotiations, effectively transforming the conflict into a frozen war. As in Korea seven decades ago, a cease-fire would pause the violence and put off thorny political issues.[89] This arrangement would entail a signed document, international mediation, an agreed-on cease-fire line, mechanisms for supervision, and enforcement measures.

Given the current circumstances, this kind of agreement would not settle the war but would be the least bad option by establishing certainties and curbing the prospects of renewed hostilities and escalating aggression. This strategy would empower the US to support Ukraine's growth under Western security guarantees and protection, thereby enabling the allocation of resources to the Indo-Pacific region.

Comparatively, this approach would be significantly more favorable than draining US resources with a declining power like Russia. In essence, it would signify a setback for Russia, attributed to the human and material toll it has incurred within less than two years, all while failing to achieve its primary objectives. This outcome would severely weaken Russia, likely plunging it into an unstable domestic scenario that would impede its foreign policy efforts and discourage further military campaigns.

In this way, the US could encourage its European allies to reconstruct Ukraine and assume a more relevant role in building security guarantees in Eastern Europe. At the same time, European nations and the US could buy time to formulate a containment and deterrence strategy against Russia, considering that any reconciliation with this country is improbable in both the near and mid-term. The strained relationship between the West and Russia is expected to persist beyond the current war.

While this may complicate efforts to distance Russia from China and establish divisions between them, it would afford the US the latitude to concentrate on countering China in the Western Pacific, which deserves much more attention in political, economic, diplomatic, and military terms. Ultimately, this approach would allow the US to align its policy towards Ukraine with its national security strategy.

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