

**IDEATIONAL TRENDS IN AMERICAN  
GRAND STRATEGY**

**FUTURE IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPE AND FINLAND**

**Ville Sinkkonen**

# IDEATIONAL TRENDS IN AMERICAN GRAND STRATEGY

## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPE AND FINLAND

This FIIA Working Paper explores current ideational trends in American grand strategic debates. At present, discussions on US grand strategy are more contentious than at any other point since immediately after the end of the Cold War. Three ideational trends in particular – termed i) from primacy to restraint, ii) from internationalism to parochialism and iii) from great power engagement to great power competition – can be discerned from academic and policy debates within American foreign policy elites, but increasingly in presidential administrations’ policy formulations and actions as well.

The paper argues that these trends provide a lens into the future trajectory of US global engagement, with attendant implications for US allies and partners. In particular, they pull the United States towards an approach to the world that is more cognizant of resource constraints as well as the inhibitions placed on international conduct by domestic politics and public opinion. For Europe in general, and Finland in particular, this means a transatlantic ally less concerned with European security in the long run, more worried about burden/responsibility sharing and more willing to push its own policy preferences upon allies when pursuing institutional cooperation and contesting great power rivals.



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# IDEATIONAL TRENDS IN AMERICAN GRAND STRATEGY

## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPE AND FINLAND

### INTRODUCTION: US GRAND STRATEGY IN FLUX

Discussions on American grand strategy, broadly conceived as “the *intellectual architecture* that gives structure to foreign policy and helps nations find their way in the world,”<sup>1</sup> are currently more contentious than at any other point since the years immediately following the end of the Cold War. This contestation within the American foreign policy elite over the fundamental set of ideas that *should* guide US global engagement has attendant implications for how future presidential administrations seek to exercise American power in a changing strategic environment.

There are at least five drivers of the current ideational ferment. First, the balance of power in the international system is shifting, driven particularly by China’s rise to prominence as an economic and, increasingly, military power. Second, the liberal international order that the US has propped up in the post-World War II era is mired in crisis, challenged from without by the likes of China and Russia, and from within by nationalist and populist forces.<sup>2</sup> Third, the legitimacy of the US as a custodian of the international order has eroded during its post-9/11 counterterrorism campaign and wars of choice in Afghanistan and Iraq,<sup>3</sup> which have also decreased the willingness of Americans to support an active foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> Fourth, deepening domestic political polarization and the consequent chasm between the Democratic and Republican camps has increasingly seeped into foreign policy questions.<sup>5</sup> Finally, there is a generational shift underway in the American foreign policy establishment, with new thinkers more willing to challenge the post-Cold War policy orthodoxy.<sup>6</sup>

This increased volatility in American thinking about grand strategic questions should be of great interest to US allies and partners, including Finland as it stands on the cusp of NATO membership. While the US will remain a superpower for decades to come when measured in terms of material attributes – whether military capabilities, the size of its economy, the technological base or

population – its willingness to lead internationally will also depend on the health of its domestic institutions and, crucially, the ebb and flow of ideas about the country’s global role. This includes questions over what the core interests of the US are, and how it should go about safeguarding them, as well as how vigorously it should continue defending the liberal international order.

This FIIA Working Paper first lays out the rationale for studying the grand strategic debates of American foreign policy elites as a lens for projecting the future of US global engagement. This is followed by an exposition of three interrelated ideational trends that can be gleaned from current academic and policy debates as well as, increasingly, from the policy formulations and actions of the past three presidential administrations. These ideational trends, which look to define the evolution of US grand strategy in the coming years, flow i) *from primacy to restraint*, ii) *from internationalism to parochialism* and iii) *from (great power) engagement to (great power) competition*. The paper then argues that the convergence of the three ideational trends could produce a more resource-aware superpower that is less constrained by the views of allies and the international community as domestic and great power political considerations (especially in relation to China) increasingly drive American conduct. Such an approach carries potentially dramatic implications for the transatlantic relationship in the coming decades, forcing European allies and partners to enhance capabilities, engage in increased responsibility sharing and make sustained efforts to retain Europe’s policy agency in a world of intensifying strategic competition. For Finland as a future NATO member, this means building on the already proven components of its policy as an aligned but not-yet-allied partner of the United States.

### GRAND STRATEGIC IDEAS: PROJECTING THE FUTURE OF US GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

Grand strategy is the “considered set of national policies [...] that both set out the goals of the state in international politics and prescribe how a broad range of national resources should be utilised in pursuit of those

1 Brands 2012, 3, emphasis added.  
2 Ikenberry 2018.  
3 Hurd 2007.  
4 Kupchan 2020, 322–350.  
5 Schultz 2017.  
6 Kitchen 2020.

goals”.<sup>7</sup> While strategic thinking always entails tying means to ends, in the case of grand strategy, those ends are long-term in nature, and the means utilised are holistic, encompassing the totality of a state’s power toolbox. In this manner, grand strategy “binds a country’s highest interests to its daily interactions with the world”.<sup>8</sup> Studying grand strategy thus requires paying attention to a country’s *perceptions of the international arena* and key relationships therein, as well as the manner in which they harness *instruments of power* in pursuit of key *objectives*.<sup>9</sup>

Grand strategies can be articulated in policy documents, but this need not always be the case – they can also be “revealed” through policy action.<sup>10</sup> The concept therefore straddles the fields of idea production and policy. Ideas about grand strategy inhabit the American foreign policy community, a large group of academics, think-tankers, public intellectuals and policymakers.<sup>11</sup> However, the prescriptive debates over grand strategy are not mere academic parlour games. Given the “surfeit of power” the US enjoys, it can set expansive policy objectives, and American “elites [...] get to debate and engage in worldmaking”.<sup>12</sup> Still, even for an extremely powerful state, grand strategy always necessitates the making of trade-offs in terms of the interests that the state wants to secure.<sup>13</sup>

In the US, the boundaries of the worlds of analysis and policy tend to be blurry. Political appointees, often drawn from think tanks, universities and the private sector, move in and out of presidential administrations, staffing the White House and departments relevant for the formulation and implementation of foreign and security policy. Consequently, ideas that emerge in grand strategic debates not only permeate the government via the media, think tank discourse and backroom discussions, but the debaters are also immersed in the business of governing. A telling example is the formulation of the National Security Strategy (NSS), which presidential administrations publish roughly once every four years. These documents not only reflect the understanding the administration holds about America’s global role, but also draw ideas (and drafters!) from past and current grand strategic debaters and feed into future debates.

Ongoing discussions on grand strategy therefore provide a crucial lens into the future trajectory of US global engagement as perceived by strategic thinkers and policymakers alike. The following sections will outline three ideational trends that can be discerned from these debates as well as, increasingly, from presidential administrations’ policy articulation and practice during the past decade or so. These trends entail shifts from primacy to restraint, internationalism to parochialism and (great power) engagement to (great power) competition.

### **Ideational trend 1: From primacy to restraint**

In reaction to changing international and domestic realities, as well as self-inflicted policy blunders especially in the Greater Middle East, the grand strategic idea environment has gradually shifted from a bipartisan commitment to maintaining American primacy in the international arena towards a more restrained approach.<sup>14</sup> This trend is increasingly reflected in the policy formulations and actions of the last three presidential administrations.

Primacy has traditionally been the default US approach to the world, especially in the post-Cold War era.<sup>15</sup> Espoused by large sections of the foreign policy elite, commitment to primacy entails a belief in the utility of American power in pursuing transformative objectives in the world. Primacists subscribe to a broad reading of US national interests, which include the maintenance of a liberal (or rules-based) international order that is conducive to both America’s economic prosperity and cherished values. Primacists also endeavour to maintain America’s place as the most powerful state in the international arena. Achieving this most fundamental of objectives has necessitated a considerable American military footprint in key regions including Europe, the Greater Middle East and the Indo-Pacific along with a global alliance network.<sup>16</sup> Primacist views certainly undergirded George H. W. Bush’s conception of a “New World Order”<sup>17</sup> and the Clinton administration’s notion of “democratic enlargement”.<sup>18</sup> The apogee of primacist thinking arrived

7 Kitchen 2010, 121.

8 Brands 2012, 3.

9 Kitchen 2010, 121.

10 Dueck 2015, 5.

11 On the make-up of the foreign policy establishment, see Walt 2018.

12 Kitchen 2020, 88.

13 Silove 2018, 45–47.

14 This shift has been flagged on both the primacist and restraint sides of the debate; cf. Wright 2020; Ashford 2021a.

15 Montgomery 2020, 772–775. Other terms often used to describe primacy as defined here include “deep engagement” and “liberal hegemony”; see e.g. Walt 2018; Ikenberry 2012; Brooks & Wohlforth 2016.

16 On key primacist tenets, see e.g. Brooks & Wohlforth 2016; Brands 2018.

17 Brands 2018.

18 Cox 2022, 29–39.

with George W. Bush’s “Freedom Agenda” as the US sought to use military force to transform societies in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>19</sup>

Restrainers, in turn, have long advocated for a more circumscribed understanding of national interests focused on the physical security of the country. For restrainers, defence of the liberal international order or the active promotion of American values abroad are secondary concerns at best or even detrimental to safeguarding US interests. At the end of the Cold War, restrainers either argued that US pursuit of sustained primacy would elicit balancing from other states or deemed regional powers sufficiently capable of maintaining a balance of power in Asia, Europe and the Middle East without robust US involvement – both eventualities would render primacy useless. More recently, restraint advocates – a heterogeneous group including academic balance-of-power realists, libertarians on the right and anti-imperialist liberals on the left – see American power as increasingly constrained given the shifting global balance of power. They also call attention to domestic resource constraints and public opinion dynamics,<sup>20</sup> and perceive a liberal international order that is coming apart at the seams (if it ever existed in the first place).<sup>21</sup> In their view, the US can therefore no longer afford to pursue a primacist approach to the world.<sup>22</sup>

There has been agreement amongst restrainers on making the US military footprint smaller, but the extent of this remains under debate. Some, such as realist advocates of the strategy of “offshore balancing”, would be content with ensuring favourable balances of power in key regions like Europe, the Greater Middle East and the Indo-Pacific. In their view, the US could achieve this aim by pulling back elsewhere and prioritising Asia.<sup>23</sup> Others of a more libertarian persuasion argue that the US, secured by two oceans, should pull back the entirety of its global military presence.<sup>24</sup> Relatedly, certain restrainers would be content with renegotiating, sometimes drastically, the burdens of America’s alliance network.<sup>25</sup> Others would rescind alliances altogether, viewing such permanent commitments as a drain on resources and potential

entanglements in conflicts as peripheral to US national interests.<sup>26</sup>

The increased purchase of restraint-oriented ideas is most evident in thinking about military power. There is growing wariness over the utility of military tools or at least greater appreciation that military power needs to be better married with economic and diplomatic statecraft to achieve policy ends. For instance, the three most recent presidential administrations have increasingly relied on precision strikes to combat terror threats and utilised symbolic shows of force in reaction to actions by the likes of Syria and Iran. The growing unwillingness to commit US ground troops to faraway places culminated in the Trump-negotiated and Biden-implemented withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, to the chagrin of many restrainers, these changes have not resulted in a reduction of the US defence budget.

Relatedly, scholars and policymakers alike have come to acknowledge a greater need for geographical prioritization of US military assets. This trend is especially evident when discussing the Greater Middle East, which has fallen on the list of US foreign policy priorities despite its manifold challenges.<sup>27</sup> However, there is also a lively debate regarding the US ability to maintain its military posture in Europe and Asia simultaneously, a question which has come to have even more relevance with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and China’s increasingly assertive stance towards Taiwan.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the US has been trying to “pivot to Asia” since the Obama administration, but the results so far have been chequered.

Restraint has also garnered a stronger political following on the progressive left of the Democratic Party and on the Republican right. In the context of Russia’s war in Ukraine, a (later retracted) letter by the Congressional Progressive Caucus calling for a negotiated solution to the conflict caught the headlines in late October 2022, while recently anointed Republican House Speaker Kevin McCarthy has said Ukraine would no longer enjoy a blank cheque from a Republican-controlled House. Progressive Democrats would be happy to rethink the NATO alliance in a direction where Europeans would “replace existing U.S. defense capabilities, not just supplement them”, “shedding” as opposed to “sharing” US burdens.<sup>29</sup>

19 Hassan 2013.

20 Thrall 2016; Friedman 2020.

21 Cf. Porter 2020; Mearsheimer 2019.

22 For a review of restraint, see Ashford 2021a and Glaser et al. 2019; for a critique, see Deudney & Ikenberry 2021; for a defence, see Lieven 2021.

23 Mearsheimer & Walt 2016.

24 Glaser et al. 2019.

25 Ashford 2021a; Posen 2013.

26 Glaser et al. 2019; Carpenter 2016.

27 Karlin & Wittes 2019; Gause III 2019.

28 Michta 2023; Colby & Skylar Masto 2022; Fontaine 2022; Menon & DePetris 2023.

29 Duss & Wertheim 2023.

Some right-wing restraint-oriented Republicans like Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) or many in the House Freedom Caucus would happily do away with the alliance altogether.

## **Ideational trend 2: From internationalism to parochialism**

Recent years have also destabilised a long-running internal division in primacist grand strategic thinking, pushing the US from internationalism towards US-centric parochialism.<sup>30</sup> While they have shared a commitment to US global leadership, the global alliance structure and an open international order,<sup>31</sup> notable differences have long existed between the “liberal internationalists” associated with the Democratic Party foreign policy elite and their “conservative internationalist” counterparts with links to the Republican establishment. In general, the former have been more willing to advocate engagement with other states through multilateral fora, and more sceptical of the utility of military power in the pursuit of US interests, while also pushing for more progressive policies in areas like climate and women’s rights.<sup>32</sup> The latter, in contrast, view multilateral institutions as potentially corrosive of American sovereignty and freedom of action, are more amenable to unilateral solutions or ad hoc “coalitions of the willing”, and more willing to harness military power to advance US interests. At the same time, conservative internationalist views on climate, abortion and immigration have tended to reflect their domestic proclivities.<sup>33</sup>

These two groups are being increasingly challenged from the fringes. In the case of liberal internationalism, the challenge comes from the progressive left. On top of being critical of the militarization of US foreign policy, progressive thinking on grand strategy espouses a broad understanding of security that includes questions of peace, democracy and equality. It stresses structural conditions such as social justice and ecological sustainability as central to sustainable security and underlines the linkages between foreign and domestic policy.<sup>34</sup> Progressives are therefore all for international cooperation to solve global challenges but argue that unfettered free trade has created profound inequality in the United States to the detriment of the American middle class.

On the right, restraint-oriented and nationalistic strands were long held at bay by the conservative internationalists in the Republican foreign policy establishment. The nationalist group has emerged as a potent force, in no small part due to President Trump’s ability to tap into views held by a considerable chunk of Republican voters. These conservative nationalists are all in favour of maintaining a strong American military to enable the US to contend with great power challengers and answer terrorist threats, but are even more sceptical than conservative internationalists towards international institutions and the liberal international order, arguing that globalisation and trade liberalisation have effectively destroyed the American dream.<sup>35</sup>

Admittedly, part of the downgrading of American internationalism and the emergence of more parochial tendencies can be explained by the adoption of restraint-oriented ideas regarding military power on both the left and the right, but this is not the whole story. There is also little appetite for pushing forward a free trade agenda on either end of the political spectrum. It seems mainstream politicians have made the calculation – one not entirely supported by studies on public opinion<sup>36</sup> – that their constituents tend towards the extremes and do not support trade liberalisation. This has created remarkable continuity across the Trump and Biden administrations on trade policy.

Donald Trump’s resolve to put “America First” entailed a protectionist agenda. The president decided to pull the US out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), placed various tariffs not only on China but also on European and Asian partners, and continued to impose a block on judicial appointments to the WTO Appellate Body. The Biden administration has not changed many of these policies. Working under the moniker “Foreign Policy for the Middle Class”, the US has shied away from re-engaging in what is now called the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) or other initiatives that would result in traditional free trade agreements.<sup>37</sup> There has also been scant progress at the WTO, and the administration’s decision to use subsidies to hasten the green energy transition as part of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) has drawn stark criticism from the European Union.

The Trump presidency exhibited the Republicans’ traditional scepticism of international institutions but supercharged it in both rhetoric and implementation. The president repeatedly blasted NATO and the EU and

30 Haass 2021. On the international/parochial distinction, see Cronin 2001.

31 This has been the case especially in enabling free trade and maintaining open sea, air and space commons across the globe.

32 On liberal internationalism, see Ikenberry 2012; Nye 2019.

33 On conservative internationalism, see Laderman 2018; Nau 2018.

34 Jackson 2022, 557–560.

35 Dueck 2020; Schadlow 2018.

36 Cf. Smeltz 2021; Pew Research Center 2021; Halpin et al. 2019.

37 The TPP was later rebranded as the CPTPP by the eleven remaining parties.

pulled the US out of the Paris Climate Agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA; the Iran nuclear deal) and the UN Human Rights Council. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Trump announced a withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) and refused to join the Covax initiative for more equitable global access to vaccines. Where Trump's team sought multilateral engagement, it took place in line with the administration's narrow reading of America's interests and prioritised relations between the US and key regional powers. Rejuvenating the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between the US, Australia, India and Japan was a case in point.

President Biden has had an exemplary record in holding the Western coalition together in the face of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, and he has brought the US back to most of the fora shunned by his predecessor. Yet the pursuit of interest-based built-for-purpose coalitions – a “tactical multilateralism” – has remained.<sup>38</sup> This includes upgrading the Quad to a recurring leaders' level summit and striking the AUKUS agreement with Australia and the UK, as well as further development of trilateral cooperation with Australia and Japan on infrastructure and intelligence sharing, among other things.

### Ideational trend 3: From engagement to competition

While the first two ideational trends boil down to bringing policy ends and means into line with what the US can withstand in terms of resources and public support, the final one pertains to how the US *views the international arena writ large*. In a sense, this final ideational trend transcends the other two. There is a growing meeting of minds in Washington D.C. that the world has entered a perilous era defined by “great power” or “strategic” competition, and that the US should harness its power capabilities to contend with its great power challengers China and Russia.

After the Cold War, the US resolved to engage both Beijing and Moscow in the liberal international order, whether by supporting their accession to the WTO or inclusion in informal fora like the G8 and G20, or seeking cooperation in areas like arms control, regional security and the battle against terrorism. However, by the latter years of President Barack Obama's second term, the weight of evidence against engagement had

mounted: Russia had invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea in 2014 and sought to meddle in the 2016 US presidential election, while China was growing more assertive in its neighbourhood, authoritarian at home and pursuing questionable practices to enhance its competitiveness in the global economy.

Donald Trump's obsession with the US–China trade deficit made his administration ideally placed to enact the final shift from engagement to competition in both declaration and policy. The 2017 National Security Strategy ultimately lumped China and Russia together as “revisionist powers” intent on “shap[ing] a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests”.<sup>39</sup> In the foreign policy community, the concurrent convergence around “great power competition” (or “strategic competition”, a term espoused by the Biden administration) has been swift. This development has not only been bipartisan, but most mainstream foreign policy thinkers would also likely subscribe to the notion as an apt *description* of the current state of international relations.<sup>40</sup> Many have, however, also come to treat the notion as a grand strategic *prescription* to compete with great power challengers, and do so holistically.<sup>41</sup> Great power competition thus provides a potential new organising principle for American grand strategy, with “the advantage of focusing on major threats to America's *security, economy, and values*”.<sup>42</sup>

In the realm of traditional security, the Trump-era shift to great power competition entailed growing the country's defence budget alongside selective alliance building. The administration adopted the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework to inform its policies in that region, developing the Quad in the process, and upped investments in the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), while insisting that allies invest more in their defence. However, Trump's volatility often undercut these forays as he pressed Japan and South Korea for higher financial contributions to US troop presence and even reportedly threatened to withdraw from NATO. In Biden's first two years, the military budget has continued to grow, while alliance building has been central. The war in Ukraine has allowed the United States to demonstrate its ability to both manage a heterogenous alliance and channel vast resources to Ukraine as it fights against Russia.

39 Trump 2017, 25.

40 For a seminal discussion on the genesis of the great power competition concept, see Wyne 2022.

41 See e.g. Wright 2017; Colby & Mitchell 2018; Kroenig 2020; Brands & Cooper 2021.

42 Nye 2021, emphasis added.

38 Freeman 2021.

The most profound change has occurred in the economic, trade and technological realms. Trump's term in office was marked by the erection of unprecedented tariffs on Chinese goods, pressuring allies to forgo the use of Chinese components in their 5G networks, as well as upping the use of sanctions against Russia (partly in reaction to congressional pressure). The Biden administration has not shifted course on China tariffs and has used sanctions prominently in coordination with allies and partners to isolate Russia from the global economy and financial systems after 24 February 2022. Biden's agenda also includes massive investments in the domestic economy (\$2 trillion), and the US has placed unprecedented export controls on semiconductors, trying to restrict China's ability to acquire and develop such technology. This has implications for US allies, as illustrated by the recent deal between the US and the Netherlands to restrict the export of chip printing equipment to China, which potentially undercuts EU unity in the process.

In addition, there is a strong ideological component to great power competition. While Trump's record in promoting values was mixed, the administration did sanction Russians for human rights abuses and election interference. His administration also slapped sanctions on officials over China's crackdown on Hong Kong and determined that the repression of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang constituted genocide. The Biden administration has doubled down on this ideological component of the competition. For Biden, the role of like-minded allies is key in what he views as a struggle for the future of the international order. Beyond reinvigorating NATO and continuing the Trump-era commitment to the Quad, the US has elevated the role of the G7 as a "steering committee of the world's advanced industrial democracies"<sup>43</sup> and put together the first ever Summit for Democracy in December 2021.

The fact that great power competition is understood holistically does not, however, mean that there is broad-based agreement among grand strategic debaters or policymakers on how to proceed. In terms of geographical prioritisation, some argue that choosing between Europe and the Indo-Pacific is a false choice because the "[the United States] is rich and powerful enough to secure its interests in both theaters", and a US pullback from either would fundamentally threaten the US-led alliance system and the international

order.<sup>44</sup> Others advocate an "Asia First" approach. For them, focusing on Europe mis-diverts scarce resources from the true great game of the 21st century between Washington and Beijing.<sup>45</sup>

On the political level, the bipartisan meeting of minds is also currently stronger on China than Russia.<sup>46</sup> For instance, according to the Biden administration's recent security strategy, "the PRC [People's Republic of China] is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it".<sup>47</sup> The National Defense Strategy (NDS) includes a similar clear temporal ranking of the two challengers: China is defined as a "pacing challenge", while Russia is deemed an "acute threat".<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, there is still disagreement over the extent to which it is wise for the US to decouple its economy from China's, given the potentially seismic implications for US relations with allies and the global economy.<sup>49</sup> Finally, doubling down on the democracy/autocracy distinction will, according to some, serve as "a truly grand strategy of fortifying the democratic world against the most serious set of threats it has confronted in generations".<sup>50</sup> Others disagree and regard it as hypocrisy considering the United States' own democratic travails and lack of pragmatism when it comes to engaging non-democracies in strategically vital relationships.<sup>51</sup>

The great power/strategic competition constructs have also been criticised for their sheer open-endedness. Most discussions of great power competition fail to define what the competition is meant to achieve: is the objective an acceptable competitive equilibrium with China and Russia, or the collapse of the regimes in both Beijing and Moscow? While the former is difficult to achieve, pursuing the maximalism of the latter could lead to tragic consequences: ubiquitous competition could (inadvertently) spiral into a direct great power war.<sup>52</sup>

44 Michta 2023; see also Kroenig 2022.

45 Walt 2022; Colby & Skylar Mastro 2022.

46 Blake 2023.

47 Biden 2022, 23.

48 U.S. Department of Defense 2022, 2.

49 Bateman 2022, 37–43.

50 Brands 2021.

51 Goldgeier & Jentleson 2020.

52 Ashford 2021b; Wyne 2022, 45–65.

43 Biden 2022, 17.

## SHIFTING PARAMETERS OF US GRAND STRATEGY

But in what direction are these ideational trends pulling US grand strategy as a whole? The movement from primacy to restraint points to a realisation – albeit a creeping one that has unfolded since the early years of the Obama era<sup>53</sup> – that the superpower’s resources are finite given the perceived changes in the international environment and growing doubts regarding its domestic ability to bear the costs of the current global military and alliance posture. A restrained US would not necessarily be more “isolationist” when it comes to other components of international engagement, but the military foundations of its post-Cold War hegemony would erode through neglect and downsizing.<sup>54</sup>

The shift from internationalism to parochialism means the US is increasingly weighing the costs and benefits of international cooperation and institutions in relation to domestic interests. This is, again, impacted by how analysts and policymakers on both sides of the political aisle read domestic political trends and reflect upon how eager their constituents are to support the international order, especially in the realm of trade. However, such calculation is also present when it comes to what kinds of multilateral forays serve US objectives – the Quad and AUKUS are illustrative of built-for-purpose minilaterals that provide flexibility and focus on areas of core US interests, making them possible templates for future multilateral initiatives.

While great power competition might at first blush appear to subsume restraint-oriented ideas, this might not necessarily be the case, at least when one looks at the entire global footprint of the United States. Great power competition can certainly function as a rallying cry to direct the minds of US policymakers and the public towards global engagement, but the current framing of the debate suggests a “China First” approach in the medium to long term. In other words, regardless of whether one looks at the security, economic or ideological challenge, Russia is the smaller player, and this is so despite the fact that the US is currently investing huge sums of money in arming Ukraine and fortifying European allies. Insofar as this Indo-Pacific framing becomes the accepted orthodoxy, Europe and the Middle East, not to mention Latin America and Africa, will by definition garner less attention from the US in the coming decades. As

for parochialism, great power competition might yet prove an accelerant, as illustrated by the recent attempts by the US to push its Asian and European allies to partake in the semiconductor squeeze on China.

The convergence of the three ideational trends in US grand strategy might thus ultimately produce a more resource-aware superpower, one which is willing to forgo the views of allies for domestic and great power political exigencies on a more regular basis. This may prove to be the case whether the US is dealing with global challenges like climate change or pandemics, or engaging in competition with great power rivals.

## CONCLUSION: FUTURE IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPE AND FINLAND

What, then, should the US’ European allies and partners, and Finland in particular, make of these ideational trends in US grand strategy in the coming years? As already alluded to, all three pull the US in a direction where the concerns of transatlantic allies in matters ranging from security and economics to international cooperation become more peripheral for the superpower. Even if a complete US withdrawal from the European continent remains unlikely, a gradual diminution in the role of Europe in American strategic thinking over the long term remains on the cards.

For Europe, the policy prescription flowing from all this is rather straightforward, yet fraught with difficult national decisions. While Russia’s war of aggression has underlined the outsized security role of the US on the continent, in the medium to long term, it is unrealistic for allies to expect the US to take on the brunt of the responsibility for Europe’s defence. It is therefore incumbent upon Europe to not only replenish the stock of weapons that have been sent to Ukraine, but also enhance its capabilities with vigour.<sup>55</sup> Such an approach would sell well both on the right and the left of the American political spectrum and might ultimately help keep the US involved in European security affairs in the future.

This renegotiation of the “transatlantic bargain” requires keeping in mind that while American transatlanticists will be critical of any whiff of duplication,<sup>56</sup>

53 Quinn 2011.

54 For an analysis of the US alliance network and its costs and benefits for maintaining the US’ global hegemonic role, see Norrlof & Wohlforth 2019.

55 Bergman et al. 2022.

56 On the transatlantic bargain, see Sloan 2020. According to Binnendijk et al. 2022, an apparent paradox has long plagued attempts to reform the transatlantic alliance: “Europe has wanted autonomy without providing adequate defense resources, while the United States has wanted greater European defense contributions without diminishing NATO and U.S. political influence”.

some autonomous European capabilities in critical areas will be necessary to hedge against an unlikely substantial US withdrawal. European allies should also be willing to make their capabilities available in the Indo-Pacific theatre to the extent that this is useful for the US and rational for Europe. This would demonstrate that Europe remains on board in a broader coalition of democracies that supports an open global order. However, Europeans should keep reminding the US of the virtues of free trade and multilateral frameworks as central to excelling in a more competitive global environment and keep the US abreast of its concerns regarding too drastic a decoupling from China. In this way, Europe would acquit itself as an actor as opposed to a bystander or object in a world of great power competition.<sup>57</sup>

From Finland's standpoint, this entails few changes to the posture it has assumed as an aligned but not-yet-allied partner of the United States. The backbone of Finland's defence continues to be its large conscript force and a high commitment to defend the country in the event of an attack. These are propped up by Finland's willingness to invest in capabilities of the future, as manifest in the purchase of

sixty-four F-35A fighter jets announced in December 2021. The country thus remains a security provider in the Nordic-Baltic region, and its NATO membership will only enhance this role: arguing that Finland is willing and able to share responsibility within the alliance is not difficult. However, this does not mean that Finland should rest on its laurels. In particular, a case should be made to the US that while Finland is ready to help further afield, its comparative advantage is in operating within its own region.

More broadly, the US-Finland relationship has been deepening for the entirety of the post-Cold War era, while the broad support for Finland's NATO membership on both sides of the political aisle illustrates that the country continues to be held in high regard in Washington D.C.<sup>58</sup> Going forward, Finland's traditionally pragmatic approach towards Republican and Democratic administrations should allow it to address even difficult questions regarding, for instance, trade with the US in the coming years, while also facilitating cooperation on technologies of the future. Meanwhile, Finland's model of societal resilience makes it an ideal ally as the US seeks ways to bolster the democratic community of nations in an age of uncertainty. /

57 Simón 2019.

58 The vote in the Senate ratifying Finnish and Swedish NATO membership on 3 March 2022 was 95 for, 1 against.

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