

## THE CHANGE OF SECURITY STRATEGIES OF CENTRAL EUROPE IN CONTEMPORARY CRISIS: BETWEEN COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL APPROACHES<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In our contribution, we would like to discuss the impact of contemporary risks and threats on the change and development of strategic security culture. Geopolitical impacts, the policy of powers, and the national interests of small states modify the structural quality of the balance of power in contemporary international relations. In our analysis, we would like to present a view of the future development of relations between powers in Europe, regions, and states from the perspectives of cooperation and confrontation. Security is a mutual value of European states, and the redefinition of the importance of soft power, negotiations, conflict prevention, and transformation processes could be an opportunity for small states to strengthen their own position in diplomacy and inspire each other. The key question we would like to answer is: What is the future role of a small state in diplomacy? Based on historical accounts, it is argued that within the transition of the world order from a unipolar to a multipolar system, the European continent will assume a more decisive balancing position for the US. Focusing on Central Europe, this paper concludes that the US may need to exercise a theory of containment, dwarfing other great powers advancing their interests on the European continent. The aim of this article is to analyse the significance of the European continent in the foreign policy of the United States of America (US). The emphasis is put on the developments that have taken place in the close partnership between the US and the European continent since the end of the Second World War. Furthermore, historical accounts summarise that the European continent is internally inconsistent and destined to succumb to the objectives of other great powers regardless of its geostrategic potential. The conclusions of the

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review point out that, if the US decides to disengage from the European continent, it will also have to disengage from other parts of the world. Under such circumstances, the US's standing as a great power may deteriorate to the point that it cannot be restored, at least not in the near future.

**Keywords:** power, world order, geostrategic region, Cold War, Europe.

## Introduction

The collapse of the bipolar world order in the 1990s provided an opportunity for the United States of America (US) to gain a leading position in a subsequent unipolar international system. However, current world affairs are defined by a continuum of the establishment of a multipolar system in which selected great powers intensively promote their interests, for example, through proxy wars or by exploiting other powers and regions in order to gain a maximum share in the undergoing power realignment. Such a change in the distribution of power may also be considered positive for re-establishing the balance of power that existed, for example, during the Cold War. With the current great powers in place, namely the US, Russia (RU), and China (CN), either a multipolar or even a bi-multipolar international system is more viable than a Cold War-style bipolar or successive unipolar system.

To counterbalance the growing influence of Russia and China, the European continent would need more robust capabilities. Without efficient capabilities in place, it would be deeply dependent on massive US support. Likewise, the European continent has significant importance for the US to counterbalance RU and CN in other parts of the world and on the European continent. In such a situation, where the great powers see themselves in a zero-sum competition for global influence, having control over a geostrategic region such as the European continent may contribute to gaining a contested power share. The US, with its power potential (economic, political, and military), is thus one of the most influential powers that can fundamentally determine the balance of power on the European continent, which multiplies the US power that it uses elsewhere. Within US foreign policy, the European continent has long been perceived as a key region, especially since the end of the Second World War (WWII). In agreement with Teixeira, the US has constantly focused its strategy on acquiring and maintaining its leading great power status over its rivals, first in North America, then on the European continent, and, finally, globally. In order to succeed, the US has employed a strategy called containment, which was most vivid during the Cold War. The

strategy consisted of security and strategic treaties, limiting access to natural resources, and safeguarding the military, economic, and technological supremacy of the US (Teixeira, 2019, pp. 174–175).

Europe is defined geographically as a continent and regionally as Western, Central, or Eastern Europe. From a geopolitical point of view, Central Europe (CE) is the territory that divides or connects, depending on one's point of view, the geographical region of Eurasia with the rest of the world. CE is a territorial process and has never been, and probably will never be, a unified geopolitical power due to the diversity of ethnicities, religions, or interests of state actors on the continent. The geopolitical subconscious of CE, as a divider between East and West, is given by the historical growth of colonialism as well as the expansion of powers such as Germany, Russia, or, later, the US. CE can be perceived on two levels: as a geostrategic space and, at the same time, as a focus of tension. In the first case, geostrategic power claims to use force to achieve its interests in the given space, and in the second case, it is an imaginary neuralgic point that affects the behaviour of geostrategic power when it wants to advance its interests within the region.

Due to the scope of the work, and without claiming to be exhaustive, the CE region will be assessed mainly in the context of its development after WWII. CE is an area with geopolitical implications that, to a degree comparable to the AUKUS security pact (Economist, 2021) concluded in September 2021 between the US, the United Kingdom, and Australia, illustrates the policy of balance of power and balance of threats in practice. In the above context, CE can also be perceived as a shatter belt, a buffer zone, and, in certain situations, a critical access point (chokepoint, gateway). The geopolitical character of CE can be defined from a traditional perspective, where CE is a bridge between East and West. Another perspective is that of a neutral belt, which dates from the time of the bipolar division of Europe. The third perception comes from a powerhouse role, which was in place during the Austro-Hungarian Empire's fight against the Ottomans. Additionally, a geopolitical turning point perspective could emerge based on differences between a highly developed part of Europe and its opposite on an issue, such as the migrant crisis in 2015. Finally, a regional powerhouse perspective would emerge in the case of a division of Europe into political regions, and CE could be of interest to, for example, Germany. The stability of CE is historically dependent on the geopolitical interests of the great powers and can, as in the past, fundamentally influence the future arrangement of the world order and the decisions of the current great powers, the US, RU, or CN.

This paper uses a descriptive-analytical approach to define the role of the European continent and its central region in great power politics, to review its short history and political geography, and to demonstrate the correlation between the power politics of the US and the European continent. For this reason, the findings of the paper contribute to answering the question of the roles of geostrategic regions in the power politics of great powers, in consonance with Cohen, who stated that a geostrategic area must be large enough to have certain world-affecting potentials and functions. Furthermore, geostrategic regions embody the interconnectedness of large parts of the world in terms of location, flow, trade direction, and cultural or ideological ties. Although it is a single-feature region whose purpose is to contain regions where energy can be applied, it is a multi-feature region in its composition. Control of strategic land and sea lanes is often critical to the unification of geostrategic areas (Cohen, 2017, p. 348).

The data used in the correlation review consists of systematic reviews of library resources, monographs, review articles, research papers, etc. No new data was gathered for finalising this paper. There is a rather low amount of information about the role of the European continent, its central role in the power politics of the US, and its impact. In line with Nourbakhsh et al., its impact and developments have not received much attention in the media, even though they have changed tremendously in recent years (Nourbakhsh, 2020, p. 777). The interesting part of the paper might be, as stated by Ružicka, “that the heightened engagement between the US and CE countries has had its greatest impact not on the US or even individual countries of CE, but on CE as a regional idea” (Ružicka, 2010, p. 64). The focus on the European continent and CE, and the reason for their pivotal role in US power politics, is important not only because the topic is understudied but also because of their transcending potential impact on the emerging multipolar international system.

### **The European continent and the United States of America**

In the context of the next decade, the European continent<sup>2</sup> will certainly play an even more crucial balancing role in US power politics than it has so far, thus helping to maintain US great power status. This is due to the

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, the term European continent excludes Belarus and European Russia in order to differentiate between a geographically defined region and an area identified by US power politics.

fluctuating distribution of power, when, for instance, China (CN) is expected to achieve a full-fledged great power status (political, economic, and military power combined) and Russia (RU) will probably continue to seek to increase its influence in its near abroad, which is a norm of great power behaviour. Besides, the balancer status of the European continent within the framework of the US power-political scheme of the will certainly have a transcending impact in clarifying and redefining the demarcation lines of future spheres of influence amongst current (US, RU) and future (CN) great powers. The outcome of such a great power landscape may also have a significant impact on defining a new level of interactions among such powers, which may either evolve into favourable or hostile relations. The important role that the European continent has played in US power politics since the 20<sup>th</sup> century is indisputable. Without a doubt, the current state of world affairs is unlike anything the US was used to during that century. Just for comparison, Europe in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was stigmatised with German fascism more than today's Russian aggression in Ukraine, and Asia was more threatened by expansionist imperial Japan than today's Chinese assertiveness and the discomfort of its re-emergence as a major military power in the region.

The end of the Second World War (WWII) marked the beginning of what is now defined as the US century, signified as a unipolar system led by the US. It is derived from the fact that by 1950, the US had reached an unrivalled global leadership position, which at that time was based on a gross domestic product (GDP) comparison. The GDP of the US in 1950 was 3.4 times that of the Soviet Union. However, the US century, crowned by its global rise to become by far the most powerful major power, is highly likely to reach its end. It is being counterbalanced by the economic and population rise of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas. US foreign policy over the past 75 years has been heavily based on a world economy led by the North Atlantic region, namely Western Europe and the US (Sachs, 2018, pp. 31–41). The collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact brought an end to the Cold War in the 1990s and spurred the spread of democratic systems in Central Europe (McCormick, 1998, p.172). According to Herring, the end of the Cold War and economic development on the European continent facilitated the emergence of the US as a leading great power beyond the most extravagant imaginations of its first president, George Washington (Herring, 2008, p. 917).

However, these changes have not been completely peaceful. The wars that have been fought during the US century include the wars in Korea and

Vietnam, the Persian Gulf War, military interventions in the former Yugoslavia, and invasions of Afghanistan or Iraq. Furthermore, the current state of great power politics does not seem to resemble either a peaceful path of economic globalisation or a peaceful acceptance of democratic theory principles and an unconditioned willingness to follow liberal institutionalism. It rather looks a lot like a scene where power politics are intensely exercised by great powers. As a result, it proves that great powers such as the US have never abandoned the possibilities of exploiting power politics and power balancing, and the topic has stayed permanently on their everyday agendas.

It would be rather unfortunate not to explain the term power politics, which has different connotations, even if the scope of this paper is not about reviewing the term or confirming a new meaning for it. Thus, Professor Martin Wight's statement on power politics fits the framework of this paper, as reported by James: "Power politics means the relations between independent powers. It refers to the activities of states in relation to each other that arise out of discord" (James, 1954, p. 307). Hence, according to Mearsheimer, power politics is a reckless and dangerous enterprise. In addition, its overall objective is to maximise one's share of power, which is usually achieved at the expense of other powers. This relentless quest for power means that great powers tend to find ways to change the distribution of power in the world to their advantage. If they have the required skills, they will take advantage of these opportunities. In short, great powers are preparing to attack. But a great power not only seeks to gain power at the expense of others, but it also tries to thwart opponents who want to gain power at the expense of others. Thus, one great power will upset the balance of power whenever trends favour another great power (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 17).

Within US foreign policy, the European continent has long been perceived as a key region, with particular emphasis since the end of WWII. The balance of US foreign policy towards the European continent has remained essentially unchanged over the past century. The European link has undeniable security dimensions, as it is the European continent that acts as a balancer for the US in other parts of the world or against other powers (Khol, 1997, p. 19). In consonance with Sachs, the tensions vividly present among the current great powers (US, RU) and the emerging ones (CN) are symptomatic of the passing of the old order led by the US and the emergence of a new one.

Within the realistic school of thought of international relations, a great power is always assessed as a threat to other weaker powers; however, this

does not apply to the relationship between the US and the European continent, where the European continent has played the role of a weaker power. Hence, it is within the framework of the current power contest between the current great powers (US, RU) and an emerging one (CN). It is only a matter of time before the unipolar power system led by the US dissolves. Therefore, power balancing never seems to be out of fashion in international politics, not even at the beginning of the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is therefore legitimate to ponder whether the US century shall survive or will be counterbalanced by a Russian or Chinese century.

Since the end of WWII, the US has promoted the development of a close partnership with the European continent, also known as the transatlantic relationship. This relationship is determined by the status of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU) and by extensive political and economic ties with most of the countries of Western and Central Europe. The US considers the transatlantic relationship to be a key pillar of US national security and economic policy (Archick et. al., 2020). In addition, the extensive economic ties that the US has with the EU countries are proven by historical statistics of total trade in goods and services. According to Akhtar, Fefer, Johnson, and Swarzenberg, the latest statistics show that total trade in goods and services grew at an average of about 5% annually from 2010 to 2019. In 2020, total US-EU trade in goods and services decreased by about 30%, reflecting global trade and economic trends associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the United Kingdom's exit from the EU. In 2021, the trade statistics show an increase of 17%. By and large, the EU remained the largest trading partner in 2021 for the US (Akhtar et al., 2022).

The expansion of NATO, especially after the end of the Cold War, also confirmed the continued strong US interest in the European continent, as the question was not whether to remain but how to continue to be the most influential power on the continent (Porter et. al., 2018, p. 27). This proves that a continent on which a great power gains its influential power status acts as a power multiplier that can be exploited in other regions or continents of the world. According to Katsy, Sacko, and Khudoley, this paradigm applies to the European continent because a politically stable and secure Europe is paramount to US security and enables the US to advance its interests in other parts of the world (Katsy et al. 2008, p. 127). In addition, the US political, economic, and security interests on the European continent can be viewed in terms of the benefits that accrue to the US from these relationships, including:

- Maintaining stability and peace in Europe is crucial to containing competing powers, especially RU and CN.
- NATO and the EU are critical pillars in the maintenance and development of the international order that was established under US leadership after WWII, and they strengthen the credibility of US global leadership, including in international community institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation.
- The US involvement on the European continent increases the level of deterrence against influence that RU or CN may wish to exert on the continent.
- Promoting the development of political and security stability in the Balkans and jointly addressing the aggression of RU in Ukraine.
- Security challenges and threats, such as terrorism, cybercrime, cyberattacks, hybrid threats, or the spill-over of instability in the Middle East in the form, for example, of uncontrolled migration (such as the European migrant crisis in 2015 or the recent one that was orchestrated by the Belarusian and RU regimes in 2021), cannot be effectively addressed in isolation in a transatlantic relationship.
- Intense cooperation based on long-standing trust is not possible with other state actors in the areas of armed forces and intelligence information sharing.
- The interconnection of mutually beneficial economic links that are integrated and interdependent in many areas. The economic result is the generation of about \$6 trillion a year in foreign subsidiaries of business entities and more than 16 million jobs through direct employment or through third parties.
- The US and the European continent thrive on the economic prosperity of the transatlantic relationship, which accounted for about nearly half of global GDP in 2018. The economic balance creates significant global economic influence and enables the US to establish critical global rules and norms (Archick, 2022).

Most of the world's human population, energy and raw material resources, and economic activities are located mainly in Eurasia. In response to this reality, US foreign and security policy over the past several decades has been directed at preventing the emergence of a domination by one or more powers in Eurasia that would overwhelm US power in the region. Consistent with this goal, for the US to be able to conduct sustained, large-scale military operations in Eurasia, it must have significant numbers of



forces and supplies deployed at forward permanent military bases, particularly on the European continent. Consequently, the permanent presence of US forces on the European continent reflects its importance in the given calculus, confirms strategic foreign policy priorities, and portrays the ambitions of the role the US still intends to play in the world of great powers (O'Rourke, 2022). According to Šimčková, the US foreign policy priority in the Eurasian region, for instance, focuses on ensuring security, which will create conditions for a politically open society, which in turn will provide conditions for economic development (Šimčková, 2010). According to Edström and Westberg, the US is advocating balance-of-power strategies to prevent any power other than the US from dominating Eurasia (Edström, 2022, p. 102).

Historically, it can be argued that the 20th century was more tilted in favour of the US than any other century. For instance, the US was on the winning side after the end of WWII and became the sole victor of the Cold War, in which the European continent played a decisive role. To begin with, both milestones took place on the European continent, which, in consequence, gave the US decisive status in the international political arena. In addition, it was the European continent that played a crucial role in enabling the US to gain and exert supremacy of power globally in the 20th century based on the economic results generated. Simultaneously, it was and still is the European continent that has acted as a forward base for the major US military units to be able to deploy their forces in other parts of the world. However, it is a real paradox that the European continent, acting without the support of the US, does not currently have the potential to independently play the role of an influential global power on its own. This is probably due to the diversity of interests of European state actors, even though economic indicators predispose it to great power status. On the contrary, given the complicated and ambiguous evolution of great powers' relations, the European continent still plays a crucial role in the effective exercise of the US balance of power in the world.

The deliberate effort the US invested in establishing the international world order after WWII under its leadership was to safeguard constitutional democracy in Western Europe, North America, and Japan. It was a grand US strategy designed to counterbalance the Soviets, but in essence, the US was working on its niche construction. Such as Owen defined: "For any population of organisms, the environment selects for certain traits; the organisms can also shape that environment (construct a niche) so as to favour themselves in some way; and the reshaped environment can then

select for a different set of traits in the population. By analogy, states' environments can select for certain traits, including domestic regimes. A domestic regime endures as long as the balance of power within the state favours its adherents; regime change will happen when that balance changes sufficiently" (Owen, 2021, p. 1417). Democracy on the European continent and in Japan was decisive for the US to succeed in its grand strategy, that is, to become the leader in a unipolar world order. Therefore, it was not out of altruism but out of the principle that by helping to build strong democratic states on the European continent and in Japan, it would help to secure its own democracy. The main drive for establishing a unipolar world order under US leadership was based on historical accounts. Most of the US population, before the 1930s, thought that the North American continent needed to be protected from the European continent and the great powers' rivalries that were taking place on that continent (Owen, 2021, p. 1422–1423). According to Herring, such a stance was supported by the experience of 1774, when the colonists were drawn into the continental wars because of their connection with England. The notion was that there would have to be no European hostility if there were no ties to the European continent. For the time being, it was more desirable to cut the new continent off from England and thus secure peace and friendship with the rest of the European continent. The generation of that time believed that they were the chosen people to disdain established practices and considered themselves the harbingers of a new world order, establishing governance and trade that would appeal to peoples worldwide and empower them to change the course of world history. They saw themselves as having the power to start the world all over again (Herring, 2008, p. 11–12).

According to Owen, however, the non-interference stance cost the US dearly, and the traumas of the 1930s and 1940s "taught the Americans that no democracy was an island and that in the modern world, the survival of this form of government and way of life that they cherished required deliberate changes in the way democracies related to one another and to the rest of the world" (Owen, 2021, p. 1422). The aftermath has cost the US approximately \$130 billion (in 2020 dollars) in the form of aid that was materialised in the Marshall Plan for Japan and the European continent to rebuild economies and employment.

Consequently, it would be another repetition of the painful experiences of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries for the US if it were to lose its superiority over the European continent in the future, as the power struggle between the current great powers (US, RU) and an emerging one (CN) is intense. Not

only would it have to pay dearly, but it would also have to withdraw from other parts of the world, such as Asia and the Middle East. Under such circumstances, the US would find it difficult to regain its status as a leading power in either a unipolar or multipolar world order.

As reported by Archik, Belkin, and Akhtar, Mix, cooperation between the US and the European continent has been and is seen as crucial for the US, and its rationale is being reinforced once again, particularly in relation to balancing power against current and emerging powers. Historically, the transatlantic relationship has been based on a commitment to world order that was achieved after WWII through alliances with like-minded democratic partners (Archick et. al., 2022). US support for a strong partnership with Europe is largely based on the belief that US leadership in NATO and close US-EU relations promote US security and stability and multiply US global power and financial influence. Despite periodic US-European tensions, particularly due to the US unilateral approach to security challenges and changes in the security environment since the end of the Cold War (e.g., in Afghanistan and Iraq), the US continues to assess the transatlantic partnership as strategically important and supportive of US economic, political, and security interests.

The strategic importance of the transatlantic partnership was also confirmed at the NATO Summit that took place in Madrid (Spain) on June 29-30, 2022. Belkin defines it as follows:

- Bolstered defence posture of NATO countries in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine.
- Increased support for aspiring NATO members, Ukraine, Georgia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- NATO enlargement to Finland and Sweden.
- Larger forward presence of US combat forces on the European continent.
- The new regional command and control headquarters of US forces on the European continent (Belkin, 2022).
- More pre-positioned equipment and weapons, including heavy weapons systems, in Europe.

As a result, it is a well-supported argument that the US gained its full-fledged great power status right after WWII and continued to build on it during the Cold War. This is due to the economic and military power it exercised, which, combined with its global presence and the alliances it built, was unparalleled by any other great power alliances in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Owing to the historical experience of non-interference in

European business, which caused the US to pay dearly, it shows that the European continent has become a traditional region of interest for the US, which has been gained not through historical connotations but rather via economic and military power. Such a gain is based on a fluctuating distribution of power in international politics, such as defined by Kagan, where great power status is not based on heritage law but is acquired through the usage of economic, military, and political power to ensure the security, prosperity, and independence of an actor or region (Kagan, 2002, p. 16). Such a fluctuating distribution could be compared to the great power status of the United Kingdom and France, which they once held and lost in favour of the US. Hence, if a great power cannot enforce its sphere, it is doomed to exist as an isolated and fragmented actor. As a result, the European continent becomes genuinely attractive not only to the US for what it offers economically but to other great powers as well, especially in the role of a decisive balancer in a balance of power strategy.

### **Geopolitical interests of the United States of America in Central Europe**

Geopolitically, CE is a strategic area, of which the eastern part is also NATO's eastern flank. That area also determines the geopolitical pivot point for the US in relation to access to Asia, especially in terms of eliminating threats to the US, for example, originating from Russia. Since the end of WWII, US interests in CE have also been aimed at preventing a closer rapprochement between CE and RU, which could, according to US interests, undermine security stability in CE and in Europe in general (Tchakarova, 2017). Since the end of the Cold War, CE has been in a process of geopolitical restructuring, the final state of which depends largely on the US and to a large extent on the EU (Cohen, 2017, p. 359). In terms of geopolitical interests, the entire CE is important to the US. If the different geographical units of CE are evaluated, its north-eastern part is particularly important, since three critical areas of US geopolitical interests – the Baltic States, the northern states of the European continent, and RU – intersect there. Instability in any one of these areas affects all three US geopolitical interests (Brzezinski et al., 1999). Moreover, the Baltics are the only area in the northeast where a military confrontation between the US and Russia is realistically possible at any time. Therefore, US interest in the Baltic region is high, especially to mitigate potential conflicts in the area and promote its stable economic and political development. At the same time, the Baltic region is also of

geopolitical interest to Russia, given that the region directly affects its security interests. According to Balogh, regions that do not have a fixed meaning, for instance, such as CE, are empty signifiers for great powers, “i.e., notions that mean little per se but that can be filled with almost any content, for instance, to legitimise pragmatic political purposes”. In accordance with the prior, the interest of the US in CE is obvious in that it supports the US-led liberal international order against, for instance, RU and CN. Simultaneously, CE confirms once again its role that Mackinder defined as a sanitary cordon (Balogh, 2017, p. 192).

This is, however, with the modification that the current cordon is not between Germany and RU, as it was originally designed after WWI, but a cordon preventing the advancement of other great power interests in CE (e.g., RU or CN). In retrospect, since the end of WWI, it is possible to define US geopolitical interests in CE as the goal of preventing the domination of the European continent by a hostile power whose efforts would deny the advancement of US interests in the region, especially in the economic and military sectors.

As a friendly power, the US has supported the EU since its inception. The EU was supposed to provide coherence and the ability to resolve potential power issues in relation to the Mackinder sanitary cordon. However, the acceptance of the role of the EU from the US perspective has a limit, and that is when the US, from time to time, uses individual EU member states to its advantage in balancing power, especially in situations where the EU competes with NATO. Since the end of the Cold War, US geopolitical interests in CE have had the following characteristics:

- Helping to maintain the status of a so-called European power under all conditions in order to strengthen strategic confidence in CE with the possibility of promoting its own interests on the European continent.
- Preserving the best that history has to offer, particularly in the area of defence cooperation in the form of NATO, with the aim of avoiding the withdrawal of its member states from NATO.
- Preservation of the settled power-political issue in relation to Germany after WWII.
- The erasure of the CE states from the so-called European geopolitical chessboard was due to the causes of the two World Wars and the Cold War.
- Ensuring that Ukraine, the most important state bordering CE, does not fall under the influence of Russia.

- Redeployment of NATO military forces and assets from Germany and their increased concentration along the eastern borders of CE (Hunter, 1999, pp. 9-10).

The above-listed geopolitical features are based on the traditional role of the US in the post-WWII world, often not explicitly articulated by US officials, which is to prevent the emergence of regional powers in Eurasia. The above reflects the US view of geopolitics, which always has two paradigms:

Given the size of Eurasia's population, resources, and economic activities, a regional power in Eurasia would represent a major concentration of power and could threaten vital US global interests.

Eurasia lacks the capacity for self-regulation in terms of preventing the emergence of regional hegemony, which means that Eurasian states cannot be relied upon to prevent the emergence of regional powers by their own actions and may therefore need the assistance of one or more non-Eurasian powers to be able to implement such actions effectively (O'Rourke, 2021).

Consequently, CE can potentially act as a balancer and help advance US interests in various regions of the world, such as Eurasia, linking Asia and Europe via economic land routes. For this reason, the economic sea routes on which the US achieved its leading position in a unipolar system may become less attractive. To illustrate such a role, Maró and Török give the example that there are two main land routes that connect Asia with Europe: the Trans-Siberian Railway and the New Eurasian Continental Bridge (one of its routes, the Central Belt, would pass through CE). The latter of these land route connectors will make it possible to create a New Silk Road, which, if finalised, could affect 64% of the world's population (4.4 billion people) and cover 30% of the world's GDP (\$21 trillion) (Maró et. al., 2022, pp. 7-10).

Hence, the CE region may contribute a focal point in the containment theory of the US, possibly dwarfing the New Silk Road Initiative of CN. Thus, in comparison to the Marshall Plan mentioned above, whose impact was regional, the New Silk Road Initiative is intended to have a global impact. The geopolitical interests of the US in the CE are manifold: economic, military, and political. When considering the economic front, Germany's economy is the largest not only within CE but also on the European continent. The GDP index for 2021, for instance, came to a figure of 3.57 trillion euros. Compared to other leading economic powers, this is the fourth highest GDP in the world, right after the US, China, and Japan. Similarly, the military aspect of NATO's eastern flank is equally important, especially with the worsening security situation in Ukraine. In reaction to this situation, the US is increasing its military presence along the entire NATO's eastern

flank to 100,000 personnel troops by the end of 2022. Politically, the CE region consists of some of the countries that were once part of communist Europe. Their political liberation has been a major achievement of US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. Broadly speaking, the CE concept confirms the notion that it is not just an economic project but has a much wider security aspiration for the US.

## Conclusion

The anticipated turbulent development of international relations in the next decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially due to the affirmation of the increased global influence of RU and CN, indicates that the US will have to coordinate and revise its various foreign policy vectors. The European continent has always played a force multiplier role for the US power potential from a global perspective. In the post-Cold War world power architecture, the European continent has been and still is of indispensable importance to US foreign policy, providing a vital fulcrum for the pursuit of US interests globally. The role of the European continent as a balancer of US interests in other regions of the world is indisputable, and therefore security and stability on the European continent are also unmistakably key pillars of US national security and economic policy.

As reported by Archick, Belkin, Akhtar, and Mix, cooperation between the US and the European continent has been and is seen as crucial to the US, and its rationale is being reinforced once again, particularly in relation to balancing an increasingly assertive RU and CN (Archick, 2022). Historically, the transatlantic relationship has been based on a commitment to the post-WWII world order through alliances with like-minded democratic partners. US support for a strong partnership with the European continent is based largely on the belief that US leadership, for example in NATO, and close US-EU relations promote US security and stability and multiply US global power and financial influence elsewhere. Despite periodic tensions between the US and the European continent, particularly over the unilateral US approach to security challenges and changes in the security environment since the end of the Cold War, the US continues to view the transatlantic partnership as strategically important and supportive of the US economic, political, and security interests.

However, these differences have never altered the basic concept of US foreign policy towards the European continent. The relationship between the US and the European continent has always been asymmetrical. The US

has global interests and unparalleled economic and military power. In many cases, however, the US needs the European continent as a diplomatic and economic power and as an additional security factor outside the continent.

The anticipated turbulent evolution of international relations in the next decade of the 21st century indicates another confirmation that CE, despite the diversity of interests of powers within the region, has historically always played a multiplier of power potential from a global perspective. Since the post-Cold War world power architecture, the European continent has had irreplaceable importance for the European geopolitical vector of the US, which is also a crucial fulcrum for the advancement of US geopolitical interests in CE as well.

As a result of its geolocation, CE has always been in danger of being defined by the imagination of someone other than the CE states. CE represents a geostrategic region whose internal inconsistency, together with the conflicting interests of geostrategic powers, predestines it to be a zone of turbulence. CE can also be seen as an entry space or a point into another region, which in the geopolitical vectors of a power may imply the need for an uncompromising approach to control it economically, politically, or militarily. Thereby, it can be assumed that in the event of an armed conflict coming from the East or the West, CE would serve as a space where the main clashes of forces on the European continent would take place. The geopolitical significance of the CE region derives from its international status, as it is not a political organisation but a region based on cultural proximity and power interests. The significance of CE is determined by geographical determinism, which makes it vulnerable to the actions of geostrategic powers. CE cannot be compared to its geopolitical status of, say, 40 years ago. There are two decisive historical moments that have taken place in the CE region: the eastward expansion of NATO and the economic integration of the EU states. CE is no longer just a sanitary cordon that divides the antagonistic blocs of East and West. The changes taking place in CE confirm that it is a concept of fluid change in the context of prevailing geopolitical conditions. The history of CE is inseparable from the great themes of European and world history, and US foreign policy towards the European continent is also inseparable from its overall policy or global strategy. In the past, when the US attempted this separation, it ended in bad policies and worse results, such as the outbreak of WWII or the division of the CE region into Western and Eastern zones.



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