



PhD Thesis

Strategies of power in the 21st century: interests and identities.

Case study: The Grand Strategy of America

- Resume of the PhD Thesis -

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***„Strategy is difficult to
comprehend, and even more
difficult to do well.”***

Colin Gray, 2010, p.13



Key concepts: *strategy, grand strategy, strategic thinking, power, identity, United States of America, national interest, security, perceptions, ideologies, international order, international system, power distribution, ideas distribution, hegemony.*

Argument

In a constantly changing world requiring the practice of decision in conditions of uncertainty, strategic thinking is crucial, and strategy is a reliable tool.

In its essence, "strategy" is about maintaining a balance between goals, ways and means: in the simplest terms, the first task of a strategist is to guide the decision-making process in order to ensure security, the essential purpose of states in the international system. The most famous Clausewitzian dictum – ‘war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means’ – thus becomes a landmark for strategists.

Grasping *grand strategy* embraces a broader effort. Grand strategy firstly requires tracing the origins of a state in order to understand where it is heading to. And this is because grand strategy calls for a proactive approach aiming to guide an evolving situation towards the desired goal; it is primarily defined through the realm of the objectives a state seeks, based on its own vision regarding the place and the role it assumes in its relationship with itself and with the others.

Such an endeavour therefore must involve an integrated, coordinated *joint-forces* approach (in military terms), that combines arguments from international relations theory, history, strategic studies, etc. This effort of strategic thinking thus becomes exhaustive, embracing the Janusian thinking process: it first demands for an incursion to the origins, in order to comprehend the strategic vision of a state, understood as the dominant, relatively constant and institutionalized perception on national interests and values.

Ultimately, grand strategy requires looking towards the future, because talking about grand strategy is about change and how to best manage change. Grand strategy seeks for a desirable future, it therefore requires an all-encompassing vision and commitment.

In other words, the need to return to the foundations of **grand politics** in order to then be able to substantiate that new type of strategic thinking, as George Maior – whose call for inspired the theme of this thesis – suggestively argues:

” It would be useful to meditate on the terms of a new type of strategic thinking, which somehow combines the traditional elements of geopolitics and the classic game of power with elements regarding the increasingly complex relationship between

cognitive and material factors, between power and knowledge, which operates in an increasingly fluid and unpredictable international system” (Maior, 2014, p. 47).

INTRODUCTION: RESEARCH QUESTIONS, HYPOTHESES AND OBJECTIVES

This doctoral thesis is based on a multidisciplinary exploratory research, being thus connected both to the theory of international relations and foreign policy analysis – and this is because, as Carr (2011, p.118) concludes, “foreign policy cannot, nor it should not be separated from strategy”.

The general objective is to investigate patterns in what regards states’ (seen as unitary units) conduct of foreign policy, in terms of variables that influence strategic decision. The thesis emphasizes the importance of ideas (transposed into norms, institutions, ideologies) in determining strategic behaviour in international affairs.

Investigating the factors that influence the conduct of foreign policy has emerged as an intrinsic imperative imposed requires by the very theme of this research paper focused on the concept of strategy. Looking into these factors can enrich the vision on the best way to improve strategic decisions on security and foreign policy, in other words, what the Anglo-Saxons suggestively call *statecraft* (the art or science of state governance).

The purpose of this endeavour is to show that more attention should be paid to the role that ideas, along with structural constraints, play in shaping strategic behaviour. The structural constraints of the system – the distribution of power at a given moment in the system of international relations – play a great (determinant) role when it comes to the states’ rational calculation on what place and role they assume in relations with other actors. The system structure matters substantially when explaining state behavior, but it does not represent the exclusive variable influencing state behaviour.

The scholarly literature review has revealed the general research problem (later operationalized into several research questions), that inspired this whole approach and determined the research topic:

What are the variables influencing the strategic behaviour of states?

To what extent is the conduct of foreign policy induced by external structural forces – the material attributes of the international system – or is it determined by ideational factors (the normative structure)?

1) Is the strategic calculation of states influenced exclusively by the material structure of the system (power distribution) or, alongside with it, there are other critical variables influencing preferences?

2) How are national interests constructed? Are they postulated ex ante and stable or are they in a continuous process of definition?

3) Are state preferences and interests imposed by structural variables (capabilities distribution in the system) or are they fundamentally related to the identities of the actors, which, in turn, explain the action?

4) Are, therefore, the assumptions advanced by Realism accurate and complete when explaining the strategic behaviour of states or is it necessary to introduce additional explanatory factors into the equation?

This paper starts from the following **assumptions**:

I.1. Identity shapes the preferences and the way states perceive the threat, acting as a variable independent from material power. In the international system, state behaviour is in itself a response to a certain environment, and the way this environment is perceived through the lens of various state identities and ideologies plays (along with the material structure of the system) a decisive role in shaping strategic choices.

I.2. States' foreign policy preferences are not only a product of material factors (system structure), but also a result of the normative context that states share at a given time. Identity is an independent variable that defines, along with material power, the national interests of state and influences its foreign policy. It is not the military capabilities themselves that pose a threat, but rather the identity of the state that possesses those capabilities and how it defines its interests and its threats.

I.3. Structural variables (constraints imposed by the system and the distribution of capabilities) do not have an exhaustive explanatory power in terms of understanding

the behaviour of states on the world stage. Ideas have an explanatory value subsidiary to rational decision. Consequently, explaining foreign policies strictly on the basis of the national interest defined in terms of power is not complete.

The **case study** that explores America's behaviour on the world stage will be built around this research topic. America is a typical case study, perhaps the most relevant, so this paper has considered that it can become an explanatory model for examining these dynamics between the variables that influence state behaviour.

Narrowing down the area of interest, the specific objective of this research is to investigate the nature and the sources (the foundations) of the American grand strategy, in order to explain the symbiosis between the material and nonmaterial factors in shaping the conduct of US foreign policy. Actually, the idea of this thesis originated from the central debate regarding the grand strategy of America and the need to strategically adapt to the renewal of power competition and the changes in the systemic distribution of power.

Inspired by the metaphor of *uncertainties* discussed by George Maier (2014), this paper brings into discussion the great uncertainties that are expected to shape world politics in the coming decades: What role will the US play in international affairs? Is US hegemony declining? How will the hegemon manage the revitalization of great power competition? What strategy best manages US exit from hegemony? What will the international order of the 21st century look like?

The subsequent objectives of this paper are:

- ✓ to foray into strategic thinking history;
- ✓ to clarify the conceptual framework;
- ✓ theoretical anchoring in the main international relations schools of thought to facilitate the analysis and evaluation of behavioural patterns on the world stage;
- ✓ to elaborate a case study that explores the American grand strategy in an attempt to elucidate the sources of the conduct of US foreign policy, with emphasis on the origin and specific content of the foreign policy ambitions assumed by this state;
- ✓ to explore the perspectives on the future world order and identifying the trends that are manifested in the international system in transition;
- ✓ to explore alternative visions of the American grand strategy;

- ✓ to plead in favour of further research that takes into consideration minor powers in the study of the grand strategy.

The research questions related to the case study derive from the main (theoretical) research topic identified at the beginning of the thesis:

- 1) To what extent is the US grand strategy abiding a realist model?
- 2) How and to what extent is the American exceptionalism shaping America's grand strategy?
- 3) What role do identity factors play in guiding the US foreign policy?

The following **variables and the causal relationship** between them were defined:

- Dependent variable: strategic behavior of states, operationalized in strategic decisions based on interests and preferences;
- Independent variables: systemic constraints and the distribution of capabilities (material variables);
- Intermediate independent variable: the distribution of ideas - cognitive variable (identity, understood as the signification given by an actor in relation to himself and others).

The following four hypotheses (plausible explanations about the relationship between the identified variables) were advanced related to the US behaviour in the international affairs:

Research hypotheses: **1.1. American exceptionalism (the belief in America's uniqueness and primacy in the international system) is not just a useful instrument explaining the American identity, but rather one of the most powerful forces behind a certain pattern of behaviour in international affairs.**

This hypothesis is based on the observation that Exceptionalism is the main foundation of the America's strategic identity and its self-representation and it represents one of the founding myths the American grand strategy is built on.

1.2. The grand strategy of America is influenced by ideological factors transposed into the political strategic culture specific to

the American space, focused on a certain vision towards a world profoundly shaped by liberal values.

International norms incorporated into the liberal international order represent the foundation of the American grand strategy.

1.3. The American foreign policy has always been an ambivalent one, a unique combination between Realpolitik and Idealpolitik in approaching the international affairs.

Although motivated by profound idealist beliefs, America's engage in international affairs has always been consistent with the tenets of realism.

1.4. The subtle interaction between Wilsonism and Realism, the union between values and national interests represents the defining feature of the American grand strategy.

Research methodology

In what regards the research tools, the topic was investigated using a set of (eminently qualitative) methods to ensure the topic's rapprochement from various perspectives. In its essence, international relations represent a subtype of social relations, often marked by turbulences – those unpredictable events – (Rosenau); this makes it harder for scholars to apply mathematical methods in analysing international relations and hinders any approach based on a linear cause-effect prediction.

Quantitative data cannot completely capture reality, therefore it is difficult, if not impossible, to explain international relations through a rigid model of analysis in terms of great power competition and perception of power.

In the early stage of research, the ***mind mapping*** method was used, in order to identify the key concepts that helped generating the research questions, in a systematic and comprehensive manner, and taking into account all aspects relevant to the issue under debate. The theoretical section of the paper is based on conceptual analysis: clarification on the concepts of power (the foundation of international relations) and strategy (and implicitly grand strategy), the key concept of this paper.

The research further proceeded to building a **case study**, which seeks to explain the American grand strategy, focusing on the origin and specific content of the foreign policy ambitions assumed by this state.

Primary source analysis (official documents) – the latest US security and defense strategies – was aimed at investigating how a certain representation of the international order and the threat posed by the two emerging non-Western actors (China and Russia) was constructed through discourse. A part of this section was therefore dedicated to US strategic documents qualitative analysis.

In an attempt to verify this assumption, the research applied the method of document analysis, focused on the programmatic strategic documents in the field of security and defence issued by the American establishment during the Trump Administration. The research also appealed to **historical analysis**, by placing discourses in the historical and social context and their interpretation. **Data secondary analysis** has facilitated a better understanding of the political and social context in order to better understand *what is not said* through the official discourse.

The research was subsequently enriched with the results obtained by conducting **experts' interviews**. The target group was represented by experts from the Academia (domestic and international), theorists of international relations, some of them former or current practitioners in the field of security and foreign policy.

In sampling the respondents' pool, the focus was on the relevance of:

- their academic experience in strategic and security studies as well as in the field of foreign policy analysis (all the respondents have approached, in their studies, the central concept of the paper - grand strategy);
- their expertise as practitioners, some of the interviewees also having the quality of current or former representatives of the decision-making environment in matters of foreign policy and security.

The interviewees work in various fields: foreign policy experts, representatives of academia, but also practitioners of international affairs.

The data was collected by employing electronic mail (e-mail) interviews. Meho (2006) discuss the benefits derived from email interviewing: the low cost and low processing time (eliminating the need for transcription), the large number of respondents, the increased people's willingness to participate (email, unlike face-to-face interview or through other online platforms that ensure video communication,

ensures a certain comfort given by the perceived anonymity – facial expressions, race, possible disabilities not being visible), access to respondents coming from an environment considered inaccessible, marginalized, stigmatized (conflict zones), the possibility of follow-up questions.

The relevance and the novelty of the thesis

The novelty of the thesis derives from the very topic under research: strategic thinking in the field of international relations; the key peculiarity of this thesis is the fact that it is one of the few Romanian studies focused on concept of grand strategy. Therefore, this thesis aspires to fill a gap in the Romanian scholarly literature dedicated to the grand strategy.

The literature on grand strategy in Romania is quite thin and the field study dedicated to strategic thinking, respectively grand strategy, is still emerging.

The concept is scarcely defined in Romanian related literature and some of its definitions are contradictory, this fact undermines its usefulness for academics and practitioners alike (actually, the concept lacks a unitary approach, having been translated into Romanian through various terms). The thesis does not claim to be a pioneer; however, it aims to advance the knowledge in this field and to bring a significant contribution by following the conceptual trajectory of the concept of grand strategy and bringing essential clarifications.

The paper is also relevant because it addresses the research topic through a multidisciplinary approach, connected to both the theory of international relations and foreign policy analysis. A novel contribution might be brought by the case study, as the research seeks to explore two types of potential explanations for the nature of American grand strategy taking into consideration systemic variables – an explanation based on power distribution, emphasizing the conditions of the international system – and the second one focused on ideational variables.

The research thus starts from a vision focused on the third Waltzian image describing the framework of world politics (the systemic level), but it also combines specific elements derived from the units (state) level. Precisely this double perspective given by the conceptualization of the structure both in material terms (the distribution of capabilities) and social (distribution of ideas - in the sense that the actors *take*

themselves and each other into account when choosing their actions) is the central element of this work.

The relevance of this paper also derives from the **topicality** of the research topic, as it conducts an applied study focused on the American grand strategy in an era of renewed great power competition in the international system. The research was placed in the context of the current debates about an appropriate grand strategy for the United States, given the need to adapt to the new systemic environment of the 21st century.

On the methodological side, the fact that I managed to interview a series of national and international experts (recognized specialists in the field of strategic studies) has made a consistent contribution to this research. Studies dedicated to grand strategy are tributary to the Anglo-Saxon world, wherein the United States is a trend-setter; therefore, integrating the views of renowned experts in this field from the United States is likely to bring added value to the present thesis.

In an ambitious attempt, the present thesis aims to substantially contribute to a field that is still an emerging research area in Romania – strategic thinking – in an effort to provide a theoretical anchor for practitioners. I strongly believe that the great mission of the grand strategy is to "guide a nation seeking security in a complex and insecure world."

"Above all, strategic theory is a theory for action," wrote Bernard Brodie, the great American strategist. Last but not least, the present approach is a plea that invokes the need for a better correlation between the field of foreign policy decision-making and the Academia. Therefore, theory and practice cannot be separated one from each other, theory should be a tool used to explain a given reality, while practice should be based on the conclusions of these explanations.

Research Limitations

With respect to methodology, one first research limitation regards the primary documents analysis, namely the restricted access to several programmatic documents within the American, out of security reasons.

One methodological limitation of the research regards the option for the e-mail interview, for reasons related to the difficulty of obtaining the consent of experts to

participate in an in-depth interview, which would ensure the observation of nonverbal behaviors and collect spontaneous responses. The main impediment was the very reputation of the experts who were contacted for an interview; despite being an essential criterion in sampling, it is exactly their reputation the reason for their diminished willingness to accept participation in an in-depth interview (being overload with tasks).

On the other hand, several studies (Kenneth D. Bailey 1978/1982, apud Chelcea, p.126) have identified a number of challenges associated with the in-depth interview method, including: higher cost and time, lack of standardization in asking the questions (limiting the possibility to compare the data) and the difficulties in getting access to the interviewees. It was exactly these challenges that leaned towards the option of conducting the interview via email.

Even if it is thought that an email interview cancels the direct interaction with the respondents, the feedback received from the interviewees has gone beyond the formal framework and I dare believe (hope) that they came closer to in depth discussions. And this is because, in some cases, the interaction turned into a dialogue with multiple follow-up emails (containing follow-up questions and answers). On the other hand, the email interview ensured standardization in what regards building the questions and limited the risk that the answers become distorted.

The added value of the work on the anticipatory dimension stems from the penetration into the realm of strategic foresight studies or prospective studies, by investigating the future of America's grand strategy for decades to come. A future prospective study based on horizon-scanning processes involves conducting a collective effort in a structured manner, within an organized framework (workshop), in which analytical scenarios can be debated, evaluated, tested.

Such an ambitious goal requires complex methods and techniques based on group observation, such as *brainstorming* or the Delphi method. Bringing experts together would ensure sharing experts' opinions and vision; this team effort would then provide a multifaceted approach of the research topic through the contribution of each member. A group is always a reservoir of ideas.

Beyond research: new directions

The present study aims to generate future debates that will contribute to the development of that new type of strategic thinking, invoked at the beginning of the thesis. During this enquiry, a series of new research questions have arisen in order to guide innovative research directions that will inspire a future analytical approach:

- ✓ Are minor powers capable to pursue a grand strategy?
- ✓ Can we talk about a grand strategy for Romania?

Therefore, a first direction considers the prospects for minor and medium powers to draw and implement a grand strategy. The central argument is that as the distribution of power becomes more diffuse, the role of minor and medium-sized powers becomes more and more relevant. Moreover, the security of a state is primarily influenced by the security environment of the subsystem in which it operates.

The second proposal, of an empirical nature, will be dedicated to exploring national perspectives for pursuing a grand strategy.

This interest also derives from a biased perspective springing from a sense of national pride. Although the observation that the grand strategy operates at the systemic level has been raised to the rank of conventional wisdom, I believe that grand strategy analysis may also apply with respect to international relations subsystems.

SYNTHETIC PRESENTATION OF DOCTORAL THESIS

The introductory part of this paper aims at a brief foray into strategic thinking, necessary to clarify the concept of grand strategy. Determining the scope of grand strategy remains the greatest challenge from a conceptual point of view. Therefore, it has been considered, from a methodological perspective, that it is useful to define the content of this notion from the perspective of the output-input dichotomy, which generates two different research agendas:

- ✓ the grand strategy as result;
- ✓ the grand strategy as process.

John Lewis Gaddis sees the grand strategy on a continuum spectrum that has, at one end, the military domain (the process of allocating military resources to the highest levels of command in a major war), and, at the other end of the spectrum, the politics itself (seen as the process of defining the objectives of a state on the international stage and engaging its material and intangible resources in pursuing these objectives).

The grand strategy can thus be defined as the architecture that orients and shapes the foreign policy of the state, based on a vision regarding the role and place that a state assumes on the international stage. It reflects the level of ambition of a state in the international system.

At the same time, I tried to provide my own work definition for the concept of grand strategy.

Grand strategy = a conceptual roadmap guiding the foreign policy decision-making process.

Based on an all-encompassing vision of a state's strategic conduct in international affairs, which reflects the level of ambition in the international environment, the grand strategy encapsulates the military stance and foreign policy objectives that a state seeks to attain; grand strategy employs all (available but also potential) resources and it provides guidance in order to advance those security-related objectives in the foreign sphere.

A grand strategy focuses on a state's security strategic interests – the most important and lasting interests of a nation – and it prescribes the way to defend or to fulfil them; however, a grand strategy will not be limited to national security.

In order to pursue national interests, the elements of power (capabilities) without a strategy are as meaningless as a strategy in lack of capabilities.

Grand strategy becomes therefore a conceptual umbrella covering an entire process (continuous) – involving both theorists and practitioners; this process takes place in several stages: defining the role of a nation in international affairs, starting from the major questions in the field of international relations (*why, how and for what purposes do states use national power?*) and orienting the foreign policy decision-making process by identifying the goals and engaging the available means.

The sine-qua-non requirement for implementing a successful grand strategy is the congruence of two great defining variables in the international system: power and ideas (values).

The next section aims at the theoretically anchoring the approach in the main schools of thought in international relations theory. This research approach embraces the principles of realism, as a paradigm that best captures the permanent competition for power among states. The thesis started by taking Kenneth Waltz's perspective based on the third image that can explain international politics, the systemic one, and by thus embracing Realist views on the great powers behaviour in the international system.

I realized during research, especially in the case study section, that, at least for the United States, structural variables (based on the constraints of the international system) are not sufficient for a comprehensive analysis of American foreign policy behaviour. The constraints imposed by the system (in terms of shifts in capabilities or power distribution) cannot fully explain the variations in states' visions on their own interests. The thesis revealed the necessity for further causal variables from different levels of analysis into the equation, such as, the need to incorporate factors from the second unit level (the state image).

Being aware that the productivity of any academic approach derives from a unifying (integrative) perspective and not from a restrictive one, I leaned towards an approach that emphasizes complementarity, weaving specific arguments to the ontological rational-constructivist debate. The present approach proposes to overcome the artificial barriers between major theories of international relations and to exit from the paradigm of the competing ontologies.

Thus, the research combines systemic analysis (structural theories that explain states' behavioural shifts primarily through variations in international structure view) with structuralist paradigm inspired by constructivist methodology (which emphasizes, among other things, the variations in state motivations).

The research therefore proposes a cluster of arguments that together can best explain the formation of interests and patterns of state behaviour in international affairs. The motivation for combining multiple levels of analysis is the belief that such approaches that are not limited to analysing the international structure and take into account the nature of individual states and the impact of state identity on the

formation of preferences can contribute to a better understanding of state behaviour. Realism remains the foundation of the assumptions that guide this entire approach, being of a substantial value, but it does not own sufficient explanatory power in itself.

The empirical **research** explores the American grand strategy, focusing on the origin and specific content of the foreign policy ambitions assumed by the United States. **The case study** based on the analysis of the behaviour of the United States of America in international affairs aims to penetrate the strategic calculation made by the American political decision makers.

The main assumption of this section is that United States' pattern of behaviour in international affairs intertwines variables that take into account the union between national interests and identity factors; the US foreign behaviour is determined both by the polarization in the system of international relations and the strategic culture of the state.

In an attempt to elucidate the sources of the external behaviour of the United States of America, this paper proposes a comprehensive approach to better understand the political trajectory of this state in the international system. The interpretation of America's grand strategy intertwines arguments derived from structural realism with internal variables, with emphasis on the analysis of the marriage between national interests and the influence of identity factors.

The realistic presumption that states behaviour in the international system is determined by the distribution of capabilities in the system is complemented by socio-cultural explanations specific to the constructivist paradigm (with emphasis on a state's strategic identity and its role in defining national interest and elaborating the foreign policy).

Indeed, with respect to America, the intertwining of ideology and national security interests blurs the line between domestic and systemic factors that influence strategic behaviour. And this is because the American grand strategy is the result not only of a rational choice, but it is also influenced by ideological factors transposed into the political culture specific to the American space, which emphasizes the attribute of exceptionality. Liberal ideology has shaped the way policy makers define US interests, as well as their perceptions of threats to those specific interests. Liberalism has imposed a certain logic to the grand strategy of the United States, by perceiving the

American interests in an expansive manner and adopting an ideological, de-territorialized definition of security interests.

On the other hand, the American foreign policy has always been ambivalent, characterized by a unique mixture of *realpolitik* and *idealkpolitik* in approaching the international affairs, in other words, a foreign policy based on the calculation of power and national interest *versus* a foreign policy guided by moral principles and standards.

The goal of the grand strategy of the United States was to create a world order (systemic rules) in line with the American liberal ideology, consisting of states that adhere to American core values – an order that provide significant advantages of relative power in relation to possible strategic competitors.

And it is precisely the subtle interaction between Wilsonism and realism, the intertwining of national values and interests that represents the defining feature of the grand strategy of the United States of America. Therefore, “it is very difficult to make a clear distinction between idealism and realism in American diplomacy and foreign policy. They are constantly intertwined, blended in seeking that synthesis between principle and power, between morality and geopolitics, between the ethical and the strategic dimension from which the material of international politics is formed” (Maier, 2005).

At the same time, making predictions on the future of the American grand strategy, given the return of the global competition for power specific to the times we live in, is another ambitious objective assumed by this approach. In recent years the central debate on rethinking America's grand strategy has been revitalized, with an emphasis on the necessity of the adaptation of foreign policy to the challenges posed by changes in the systemic distribution of power and the prospects of preserving America's primacy.

Strategic history cannot escape the iron tragic law, according to great powers aspiring to become hegemony are doomed to lose; therefore, the primacy of the United States cannot be immune to this law. In response to major changes in the security environment, the US administration is re-evaluating its global military posture, a process primarily determined by the need to adapt to strategic rivalry between the US and two revisionist states: China and Russia.

For now, the main threat coming from Russia or China to the United States (and especially to the West) is not so much military in nature as it is primarily in the form of promoting an alternative to Western influence that could affect the US freedom of action and its ability to shape the international affairs.

The threat stems primarily from the fact that the rivalry with China and Russia is forcing the US to fight on two simultaneous fronts in the same fight against authoritarianism. There is an incredible synergy in what regards the strategies of the two US rivals, both of them focusing on strengthening autocracy at home and weakening democracy abroad. Strategic confrontation is accompanied by the technological competition, that is why preserving the technological supremacy in front of the main competitors (China and Russia) has been assumed as a national security objective.

What role should / is desirable, therefore, for the USA to assume in international affairs?

The final part of this thesis, perhaps the most ambitious one, stems from an intimate goal and pleads for a future research focused on minor powers in the study of the grand strategy. Starting from an essential dilemma among the scholars of grand strategy who wonder whether minor powers are capable to build and follow a great strategy, the final section is dedicated to incipient **exploration of national prospects for pursuing a grand strategy**.

CONCLUSIONS

The main findings of this thesis suggest that:

- ✓ With respect to America, state identity plays a much more important role in explaining its grand strategy comparing to other great powers. Identity factors (ideas, ideologies, attitudes embedded in the state strategic culture) play an essential role, along with power politics, in US strategic calculus.
- ✓ The American grand strategy is the descent of liberalism, the continuation of almost two centuries of building a liberal international order that actually favors the US power. This marriage between projecting the American power and spreading the liberalism in the world is deeply rooted in the tradition of American foreign policy; it constitutes the "strategic culture" of America.

- ✓ States' strategic behaviour is therefore determined by both international constraints (the system structure) and non-material variables. Identity shapes the preferences and the perception of threat, acting as a variable independent from the material power.
- ✓ State behaviour therefore depends on the capabilities, but also on state *positionality* (the way in which states position themselves in the system in relation to their competitors). And the position is given by their domestic political structure, as well as by the desires, motivations, which in turn depend on the ideational structure (values, culture) that forms the socio-political system.
- ✓ Realism alone is not enough to explain how ideas affect the American strategic calculus in promoting national interests or the intention lying behind a certain foreign policy decision.
- ✓ The realistic vision towards the world, which best captures the permanent interstate competition, can be enriched by wearing the ideational *lenses*, which can provide additional explanation of the way national interests are formed and defined, offering essential clarifications on the latter component of threat: intent.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

What variables influence the strategic behaviour of states?

Systemic constraints have the greatest impact on states' strategic behaviour; however, the actions of states are not determined solely by the system structure. Yes, the structure of the system acts as a pressure force, but it is not solely responsible for the reaction of the units. Structural constraints shape the states' foreign policy decisions in the international system, but they do not determine them. Moreover, the distribution of capabilities does not represent an exclusively systemic variable, because it depends, in the first instance, on the factors at unit level, being the result of internal processes within the states.

Therefore, internal factors must also be taken into account, which are exogenous to neorealist theory. Some states increase their power or fail because of unit-level internal processes (processes that depend on the domestic structure and functioning of the state: the quality of institutions, economic growth rate, political stability, technological change, etc.). States react not only to security concerns but also

to internal pressures, and along with the distribution of capabilities, the type of political system can play a significant impact on state behaviour. Other variables, such as leaders' perceptions, are added to domestic factors mentioned above.

In order to fully understand the strategic behaviour of states, we need to search beyond the core of Realism and take into consideration the role of normative structures.

It is therefore necessary to introduce non-structural variables (such as identity, norms) into the equation, in order to understand or even predict the strategic behaviour of states; in other words, it is necessary to inject a certain dose of the social into the materialistic world of realism. In studying the strategic behaviour of the state, it is therefore necessary to mix realist and liberal explanations, simultaneously with the incorporation of certain constructivist assumptions. The culture of world politics is largely the creation of its most powerful members, which is why realists are right when they emphasize the importance of power in international affairs. But this is ultimately about the power of ideas. Military power and ideational power represent two vital dimensions for measuring power. There will always be a sociocultural context that can explain the political context.

In theory, states are unitary and rational actors (this is the fundamental postulate of realism). The states are identical and act like billiard balls. In reality, the states are not identical units. Ideas play a relevant role, along with the possession of power, because in the absence of a mental representation, power remains inert, and states do not have a motivation to use it.

There are other environmental factors that shape the behaviour of the state (strategic culture). Although there is no legal authority in the system, there are rules that guide behaviour and set expectations, and all these rules function as an informal "constitution" for the world order. In addition, states differ from each other in what regards the position in the international system, the ideologies, culture and strategic history. Strategic decisions are also filtered through national identity, an ideational critical variable left aside by the neorealists. Strategic identity may explain why the behaviour of states varies even under similar conditions.

Strategic behaviour therefore depends on states' capabilities, but also on their *positionality* (the way states position themselves in the system in relation to their competitors). And the positionality is determined by their domestic political structure,

as well as desires, motivations, which in turn depend on the ideational structure (values, culture) the foundation of states' socio-political systems.

Therefore, the objective conditions do not represent the only independent causal variable. Ideology, institutions, domestic political system and interdependence are factors that can play a key role, along with power politics, in the strategic calculations of states.

What is the future of the liberal order and US hegemony?

The extent the US will continue to assume and identify their national security with a world order that is the product of American ideas and practices – the liberal international order – represents the crucial factor the future of the world order depends.

Max Weber (1978) emphasized that tradition offers legitimacy and it represents an argument for preserving domestic political order. This argument can also be extrapolated to the international order; in other words, although the configurations of interests that led to the creation of the international liberal order are changing, regimes can resist. And this is because, in the international system, states cooperate building one or more societies. The international system thus differs from the international society. And this is primarily due to that sense of community that develops among states, a community built around common cultural ideas and values.

The systemic structure tends to encapsulate and reflect and favor the interests of the most powerful actors in the system. The world order is defined by its most powerful members, it is transposed into a body of norms and ideologies embodied in institutions that give birth to a culture that forms the context in which the states interact. The world order is thus becoming a political and cultural construct based on a body of established rules, arrangements and norms that guide the relations among states. A world order must, however, be the product of common cultural values, shared by all its members, and not imposed or mandated by law. These rules must naturally stem from the cultural predisposition and historical experience of the members and be acceptable and accepted within their own societies.

The sine-qua-non condition for implementing a grand strategy of success is the congruence of two important variables in the international system - power and ideas

(values). Hence the answer to the question: ***What type of grand strategy should the United States advance?***

This thesis argues for an approach that combines principles of realism and liberalism, in support for advancing a strategy firmly embedded in the liberal international world order. The grand strategy of America is the descent of liberalism, the continuation of almost two centuries of building a liberal international order that actually works in favour of the US power. American decision-makers have consistently made use of liberalism as a convenient narrative tool in projecting power, often invoked as a defining criterion for distinguishing rivals from allies.

This marriage between projecting the American power and spread of liberalism in the world is deeply rooted in the tradition of American foreign policy; these two directions constitute America's "strategic culture" or its "operational code." International norms embedded in the liberal international order are the foundation of US strategy; consequently, the central pillar of US foreign policy becomes *the pursuit of national greatness closely linked to the promotion of freedom*.

In conclusion, I strongly believe that **preserving the liberal international order is or it *should* be the ultimate goal of the United States**.

During the Trump Administration, however, the advocates of internationalism have faced a difficult task: to explain *why the liberal order matters*. Why should the United States balance the great autocratic powers, such as Russia and China, and not the emerging democratic powers, like India and Brazil? Why is economic liberalism relevant? Why should the United States invest in international institutions such as the UN and NATO? The restrictive definition of security, seen exclusively as protection of the national territory against invasion, denotes an excessively narrow and outdated vision. That is why America's goals in the world cannot be limited to self-protection.

Certainly, the interests of the states have not disappeared, nor has the systemic competition. In a world dominated by hostile, illiberal powers, it has become an objective reality that, on its own, the US cannot handle the challenges that a changing, globalized and deeply interdependent world brings. America becomes vulnerable itself.

Convergent identities protect national security to the same extent as a dominant military power. The current distribution of norms (ideas) is favourable to the United States. Notwithstanding, with the emergence of illiberalism, this will no

longer be the case. The United States should advance its leadership in world affairs, including within the network of alliances; and they should do that, not because the US is in imminent danger of invasion or in order to balance the Eurasian rivals for hegemony, but to invest in promoting the culture of liberal order in key regions of the world. The deployment of military forces abroad, especially in the southern part of the eastern flank, is necessary to deter Russia's aggression more effectively.

In other words, the security of American interests depends not only on the distribution of power in the international system, but also on the extent other actors rally the liberal ideology spread by America. Hence the corollary (legacy of the Wilsonian vision) that the United States can enjoy security only in a world made up of states that adhere to rules that mirror American core values.

Shared conceptions on identity thus play a role as relevant as the one of the material forces in determining strategic behaviour. Identity shapes preferences and the way states perceive the threat, acting as a variable independent from the material power. Ideology often seems to have priority in defining interests. Hence the importance of **security communities**, seen as “a group that has become integrated, where integration is defined as the attainment of a sense of community, accompanied by formal or informal institutions or practices, sufficiently strong and widespread to assure peaceful change among members of a group with ‘reasonable’ certainty over a ‘long’ period of time” (Deutsch, 1957, p. 5).

The decision to join a security community is based on motivations related to common interests (evaluated on the basis of cost-benefit analysis), but also on the basis of ideological or socio-cultural factors, namely the shared values and ideals. Strategic affinity (the convergence of strategic interests) is even greater when states share common values and norms. Security thus becomes a value with a positive-sum outcome, a situation in which all parties benefit from.

Pursuing the American goals and interests becomes inseparable from pursuing the perennial democratic values creating certain community of interests that tends to revolve around the liberal order or the "West" - democracy, the rule of law, market economy, human rights.

In conclusion, protecting the liberal international order contributes to the protection of the American interests, the consecrated power that has created this order. These pillars reflect a lasting coherence of the grand strategy of America, and

the entire logic of US foreign policy is based on protecting the values of the liberal international order. The core of America's grand strategy is given precisely by the way in which this relationship between interests and values is conceived. The national security of America is intrinsically linked to the objective of building and preserving a culture that sustains the liberal international order - which requires a much greater American involvement in the world. The protection of American supremacy must be achieved in synergy with the protection of the liberal international order. The continuity and persistence of these values becomes the main pillar of the American grand strategy.

Proponents of *retrenchment* fail to appreciate the crucial role that norms, institutions, ideology and culture play in providing security. Their focus on the formal structure of the international system leads them to argue that all states are guided by a similar logic following the rational actor model, regardless of domestic politics, the beliefs of the political leaders, the presence or absence of democracy or other factors.

Those advocating for a restrained role for the US in the world have a far too narrow vision. They lose sight of the fact that the American power and the liberal order are mutually constitutive; that the liberal order forms the outer perimeter of American security and that advancing the liberal order in key regions of the world is a cost-effective strategy for the United States.

Defenders of a grand strategy of *restraint/ retrenchment* underestimate the power of ideas and ideals that have built the transatlantic community. Or the real source of the power of the transatlantic community – as a security community – stems precisely from the democratic principles and values encapsulated into this community.

Therefore, **America will never withdraw from the international system and they will never give up on their hegemonic leadership.** The US remains the dominant power globally. From this perspective, the debate on isolationism vs. internationalism becomes completely useless, and the essential debate should revolve around one single question: *In what ways should the US pursue its great internationalist strategy: unilaterally or multilaterally?*

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