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The Impact of U.S. Security Policy in Restructuring the International Political Order From 2021-2025

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Abstract:

This study examines the impact of United States national security policies on the global political order during the period 2021 to 2025; a period that features an unprecedented oscillation between multilateral cooperation under the Biden administration and transactional nationalism during Trump's second term. While existing research often centers on American decline or institutional strength, no study has systematically investigated the combined structural effects of these policy changes across military, alliance, technological, and nuclear aspects simultaneously. This paper explains that the changes in the international political order, driven by shifts in military strategies, economic decoupling, technological competition, and alliance structure; have permanently altered the liberal international order. The new emerging order is characterized as multipolar which is militarily strengthened, economically integrated, normatively diverse, and institutionally fragmented. Engagement with multilateral organizations and Global South, along with fostering positive-sum technology and alliance initiatives, are key to building more stable governance structures. This paper offers an analysis-based view of the post-unipolar world order that is important for decision-makers and policymakers in crafting competitive strategies for the new international landscape.

Keywords: Doctrinal evolution, International political order, Military strategy, Power politics, Security policy, Technological competition, Transactional policy

Introduction:

The international political order that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was shaped by a broad convergence of assumptions about the role of the United States in global affairs. The assumptions that American dominance which existed through multilateral systems, alliance obligations and open market trading systems develop architecture of

international relations. The United States proved to be the main force which disrupted all of the basic beliefs which existed at that time. This research utilizes a qualitative study outline which examines the shifts in United States security policies between 2021 to 2025. The approach to methodology is argumentative and analytical with the goal of assessing the changes of American security doctrine that is altering the international political order through influencing the power structure, alliance, major wars and broadening the sphere of 'security'.

The period under examination is historically distinctive for a reason that is not immediately obvious: it encompasses two radically opposed American strategic orientations within a single half-decade. The Biden administration entered office in January 2021 explicitly committed to reversing the damage of the Trump era which includes rejoining the Paris Agreement, reinvesting in NATO, restoring multilateral consultation, and anchoring US strategy within a coalition-based competition with China. The 2022 National Security Strategy of the United States declared that the country would 'out-compete' China through institutional leadership and democratic solidarity instead of using unilateral coercion while admitting that 'the post-Cold War era is definitively over' (U.S. Department of State, 2002). The return of Donald Trump's second administration in January 2025 produced a near-total inversion of these commitments: withdrawal from dozens of international organizations, the re-imposition of sweeping tariffs, public ambivalence about NATO's Article 5 guarantee, and a National Security Strategy that abandoned the language of shared values in favor of explicitly transactional bilateralism.

The three main structural changes which occurred during this time period create significant consequences for international society. The first development involves countries using economic ties as a national security instrument which enables them to control their international relations. The CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 and the October 2022 semiconductor export controls which targeted China's artificial intelligence industry and their ongoing expansion until 2024 create a complete break from the post-Cold War liberal economic framework which viewed China's market integration as a stabilizing element (Harithas & Andreas, 2024). The international economic system undergoes fundamental changes because of allied export control cooperation with the Netherlands and Japan and the CHIPS Act restrictions which prevent recipients from developing semiconductor production facilities in China and the simultaneous changes which occur in the global supply chain networks of semiconductors and rare earth minerals and pharmaceutical ingredients. The NATO alliance together with the entire American-led collective security system has undergone its second structural transformation through these changes. The alliance experienced its most significant strength increase in three decades after Russia launched its full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022 while this event created fundamental doubts about the alliance's ability to maintain its unity over time. The European governments have created strategic autonomy projects because Trump's second-term transactional agenda created allies who shared defense costs as problems instead of making them into strategic partners while he doubted the unconditional nature of Article 5 security guarantees. The alliance has reached its highest defense spending level while it now experiences doubt about the long-term stability of its American defense commitment. Thirdly, the Global South has developed into an independent strategic force which chooses to maintain its non-alignment with both the American-led Western bloc and the Sino-Russian counter-coalition. Developing nations which the liberal international order regarded as Western-oriented countries have adopted active non-alignment because they sustain their economic relationship with China, energy partnerships with Russia, security ties with the U.S. and institutional independence through BRICS, G20 and SCO (Hammouda, 2024)

The two main research findings about the liberal international order are contradicted by the changes which have occurred. The first narrative that the order is more resilient than its critics suggest because its institutional depth and the breadth of states that benefit from it create powerful incentives for self-sustaining cooperation. The second, associated with John Mearsheimer and realist theory more broadly, holds that the order was always epiphenomenal; a temporary artifact of American unipolarity that great power competition was bound eventually to erode (Mearsheimer, 2019). The 2021 to 2025 period vindicates neither narrative fully; the liberal order has not simply collapsed: its institutional architecture persists, technical cooperation continues in dozens of domains, and no credible alternative governance framework has emerged to replace it. The emerging system does not establish a new global order under Chinese leadership or any other power since it creates a complex system that has military dominance, economic multipolarity, multiple normative frameworks and separate institutional bodies which will dominate international relations management in upcoming times. (Acharya, 2017)

Literature Review:

The Biden administration's 2022 National Security Strategy represents a major shift in American foreign and security policy which follows the chaotic Trump presidency. The academic and policy research communities regard this document as two things a strategic reset and a foundational blueprint which outlines the administration's complete national security strategy. The NSS demonstrates a dedicated move back to liberal internationalism which includes multiple nations through alliances and democratic values as essential elements of American international relations. The document gives priority to great-power competition which includes China and Russia as its primary focus area according to scholars who study international relations, but the guidance fails to provide operational details despite its correct identification of China as the era's primary systemic threat which remains vital for determining resource use and military operational methods. The national security strategy involves climate change and global health issues which depicts the evolving security framework from traditional military dangers to more non-traditional threats. Overall, NSS demonstrates its ambitious international order and democratic solidarity goals but its execution is limited by existing geopolitical conditions, available resources and the difficulties of turning strategic direction into real policy execution.

The Trump administration released its 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) on December 4 2025 which has fundamentally changed post-Cold War strategic principles. The NSS which consists of 29 pages that follow the "America First" doctrine has been identified as the first US strategy that openly rejects its previous worldwide dominance according to multiple sources. The 2025 version presents the administration's worldview through its dedication to hemispheric control, economic protectionism and specific national interest definitions which differ from Trump's 2017 NSS that used established language to hide its innovative approaches. The NSS involves a fundamental reorientation of great-power competition which shows how previous United States strategies about China and Russia required coordinated deterrence to the United States which now sees China as an economical challenge and not as an international threat. The document contradicts Trump's first-term priorities because it shows two internal conflicts about terrorism which appeared several times in the 2017 strategy now gets only few references and North Korea gets no mention at all. The NSS's security assessment of climate change as non-threatening and its establishment of immigration control as the highest national security priority shows the ideological bias instead of scientific threat evaluation. The 2025 NSS presents itself as a strategically ambitious and ideologically unified document but its operational

credibility suffers from its unconventional implementation method and its limited assessment of actual dangers and the ongoing difference between its formal policies and Trump's actual international relations decision-making process.

Salma Amjad and Ahmad Ejaz's "US Security Policy in South Asia during and after Cold War: An Analysis," published in the *Annals of Human and Social Sciences* (2024), presents a historical study that tracks the development of American security operations in South Asia through three time periods. The paper's central argument states that US security policy in the region has never been fixed but has continuously changed according to global interest shifts. The article's triangular analytical framework which uses the US-India-Pakistan relationship to demonstrate American South Asian strategy instead of analyzing bilateral relations as separate entities. The authors convincingly trace Pakistan's elevation as the "most allied ally in Asia" during the Cold War, rooted in its geostrategic utility for containing Soviet and Chinese communism and its subsequent marginalization in the post-Cold War order, as India's democratic credentials, economic ascent, and value as a counterweight to China made it the preferred American strategic partner. The paper also makes a noteworthy contribution in showing how Pakistan experienced different consequences because of this policy change which included nuclear sanctions from the Pressler Amendment and terrorism sponsorship accusations and the destruction of strategic trust. The post-9/11 section, which contains essential background information, lacks development because it fails to analyze the conflicts that exist within the "single-issue alliance" with Pakistan which the authors discovered. Amjad and Ejaz's work despite its limitations provides an essential Pakistani and regional perspective which counters the American and Indian bias that has dominated literature while showing that US South Asia policy exists primarily to support its global power goals instead of regional interests.

Research Questions:

1. How much U.S. security policy has changed from 2021-2025?
2. To what extent, the great power competition has played its role in bringing the shift in U.S. security policies?
3. Is the restructuring of the international order, driven by shifts in U.S. security policy, permanent or reversible?

Theoretical Framework:

Structural Realism:

Structural realism plays a critical role in defining the dynamics of the international political order. Unlike classical realism, which attributes state behavior to selfish human nature, structural realism locates the cause of conflict and competition in the anarchic structure of the international system itself. It is the absence of a central governing authority; not the nature of individual states that compels states to prioritize self-help and survival. Within this framework, two distinct strands are particularly relevant to this study. Kenneth Waltz's defensive realism argues that states develop their military capabilities primarily to maintain the balance of power and guarantee their survival in an anarchic system, their behavior is inherently cautious and defensive. John Mearsheimer's offensive realism, by contrast, argues that the uncertainty produced by anarchy pushes states toward maximizing relative power, making "first-use" military postures and aggressive security doctrines rational strategies for survival.

These two strands of structural realism together provide a vital theoretical lens for understanding shifts in U.S. security policies. Following the end of the Cold War, the international system entered a unipolar moment defined by unchallenged U.S. hegemony. The entire

architecture of U.S. security policy in this period, from the war on terror following 9/11 to the invasion of Iraq revolved around maintaining and extending that hegemonic position. However, these policies have since become deeply controversial, not only because of the false premises on which the Iraq war was launched but also because of the mass devastation they produced across the Middle East. After 2020, the United States effectively closed this chapter through its withdrawal from Afghanistan. Yet the structural logic of anarchy has not diminished, it has intensified. From the COVID-19 pandemic exposing vulnerabilities in supply chains, to the Russia-Ukraine war and escalating conflicts in the Middle East, the anarchy of the international political structure has become more prominent than ever. The United States has responded by shifting its security posture in an increasingly offensive direction, expanding the concept of security beyond the military domain to encompass technology, cyber, and economic statecraft. Its defensive and offensive measures, from providing military support to Ukraine and Israel to withdrawing from multilateral institutional frameworks in pursuit of national interest, demonstrate how structural realist logic continues to shape U.S. security policy and is producing a fundamental alteration of the international political order through the rise of great power competition.

Power Transition Theory and the Thucydides Trap:

Power Transition Theory, developed by A.F.K. Organski, addresses the dynamics of power shifts within the international order. Historically, the world experienced multipolarity before the World Wars, bipolarity during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, and unipolarity following the Soviet collapse, which established the United States as the sole superpower. Organski identifies a critical "transition phase"; the period in which one international order is declining and another is emerging, as the moment of greatest instability and highest probability of conflict. It is during this transition that a rising power, dissatisfied with the existing order, directly challenges the hegemonic position of the dominant power, creating the structural conditions most conducive to war. This phenomenon gives rise to what is known as the Thucydides Trap, a concept rooted in the classical observation by the philosopher Thucydides that it was the rise of Athens and the fear it generated in Sparta that made the Peloponnesian War inevitable. Graham Allison formalized this concept in contemporary IR scholarship, studying sixteen historical cases of power transition and finding that twelve resulted in war, underscoring the structural danger of the current moment.

In the context of United States security policy, Power Transition Theory is indispensable for explaining the shifts of the past five years. The rise of China as a peer competitor, alongside the reassertion of Russian power and the emergence of several significant regional actors, is actively transitioning the international system away from unipolarity toward multipolarity. This transition directly threatens U.S. hegemony and has activated the structural logic of the Thucydides Trap; a rising power approaching parity with a dominant one, generating fear, miscalculation, and intensifying competition across every domain.

The Biden administration identified China as its main rival and established semiconductor export restrictions while it declared Huawei and ZTE as security threats which increased its assistance to Taiwan (South China Morning Post, 2021). The United States completed its Camp David trilateral alliance with South Korea and Japan while it enhanced the Quad partnership and established AUKUS which serves as a framework for defense ties with the United Kingdom and Australia that includes artificial intelligence and quantum computing and hypersonic missile technology and nuclear submarine operations (Nagy, 2023). The Biden administration enacted export bans on semiconductor manufacturing in 2022 and advanced AI chips in 2023 to contain China's technological growth, while the U.S. maintained its Freedom of Navigation Operations in

the South China Sea, which sees approximately \$5.3 trillion worth of cargo flow through it each year (Hashmi, 2024). China responded to the situation by establishing a new export control system which used its near-complete control over essential minerals and rare earth materials. The Trump administration's 2025 National Security Strategy complicated the situation by changing its Taiwan policy because the United States stopped using the term "oppose" to describe its stance against Taiwan Strait changes which increased regional instability. The United States developed its largest arms package for Taiwan while it faced multiple contradictory pressures which the Thucydides Trap created because it attempted to control an emerging power without starting the war which it wanted to prevent (Kurlantzick, 2026). The declining reliance on institutional liberal frameworks and the embrace of a stronger realist mindset signal that the United States has moved from being the self-appointed champion of the liberal international order to acting primarily as a great power defending its structural position.

U.S. Security Policy Before 2021:

To understand the seismic shifts in United States security policy that have occurred since 2021, it is necessary to examine the strategic foundations which American national security developed during its first three decades of existence. The arc of U.S. security policy from the post-Cold War consensus of the 1990s through the Obama administration's multilateral engagement strategy, and then through the disruptive first term of Donald Trump (2017-2020). The three different stages show how people at that time viewed the role of America in global affairs and the value of international alliances and international organizations. The two phases of this evaluation process establish the standard which we will use to assess the major changes which occurred from 2021 to 2025.

Post-Cold War Consensus:

The Soviet Union's December 1991 collapse created a major shift in international relations which brought about fundamental changes to existing world order structures. The 'unipolar moment' which Charles Krauthammer (1990) described appeared to both scholars and policymakers because it established a period when the United States served as the world's dominant superpower which had no major power competitors. Krauthammer demonstrated in his foundational essay that world power centers around the United States which stands as the sole superpower supported by its Western allied nations (Krauthammer, 1990). The United States security posture between 1990 and 1999 maintained its stability because of the existing structural framework that determined American defense strategies during this period.

The United States government used the unipolar moment to establish the liberal international order through multilateral institutions and free trade agreements and democratic norms and collective security arrangements which rested on American supremacy according to the Bush and Clinton administrations. Mearsheimer (2019) argues that only a unipolar system which has a leading state that operates as a liberal democracy can support such a liberal international order. The Soviet order disintegrated when the Warsaw Pact and Comecon both ended their operations in 1991 while American-led institutions maintained their strength through NATO and UN and WTO expansion (Mearsheimer, 2019). The George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations executed international policies which advanced liberal internationalist principles throughout the world that created opportunities for their successors to continue this work.

The National Security Strategies issued during the Clinton era established this framework which analysts classified as 'globalization as economics' because it aimed to expand democratic market economies through international trade and economic ties. The Washington Consensus,

a set of market-oriented economic policies which the United States and its Bretton Woods institutions promoted, served as the primary framework for global economic governance during this time period (Political Science Institute, 2025). The United States used its unipolar power to establish new global military dominance which allowed American forces to operate from bases throughout the world while Russia and China remained regional military powers which made United States to operate globally without facing any serious rivals.

The period's security framework developed through institutionalist theories which promoted hopefulness about future outcomes. According to G. John Ikenberry the United States established an international system based on rules which provided the nation with benefits while making weaker nations feel secure. According to Ikenberry American hegemony displays two main characteristics which shape its modern function in the world, first hegemony operates through British-style diplomatic procedures while second all United States governmental institutions share a liberal character. The institutional framework established after World War II created strong motivations for countries to work together instead of opposing United States dominance because U.S. hegemony rested on a liberal foundation (Ikenberry, 2005). The United States security strategy used this assumption as its primary basis which stated that American global leadership through multilateral institutions and military superiority provided advantages to both the United States and the rest of the world.

The post-Cold War security system design received some positive evaluations yet faced significant opposition from multiple experts. The realist scholars, who included Mearsheimer (2019), asserted that the liberal order system had built-in defects which would lead to its eventual collapse because nationalism and sovereignty issues and the return of major powers would undermine its core structures. The 1990s decade displayed various warnings which people did not acknowledge despite National Security Strategy of 2002 declaring that period as a complete victory which established freedom and democracy and free enterprise as the only successful national development path (U.S. Department of State, 2002). The United States experienced a major security shift after the September 11 terrorist attacks because they destroyed the existing positive view about national security.

The Obama Era:

The selection of Barack Obama as president in 2008 marked a planned attempt to change American defense policies which had been damaged by the excessive military actions in the Iraq War and the entire 'Global War on Terror' campaign during the Bush administration. Through his National Security Strategies which he published in 2010 and 2015 Obama established a new method for American international leadership which focused on building diplomatic alliances through multilateral partnerships instead of using military force to establish democratic governments. The 2010 document replaced the Bush administration's 2002 National Security Strategy which established preemptive military action as a standard military practice without using the phrase Islamic radicalism to describe terrorist threats. The document presented terrorism as one of various threats which could not determine how America would establish its global relationships (Garrett, Patrick, & Simon, 2010). The Council on Foreign Relations experts who studied the document discovered that its approach to terror threats created a more sophisticated evaluation while the document warning against creating unnecessary panic showed intelligent reasoning (Garrett, Patrick, & Simon, 2010). The strategy proposed closer relationships with Russia and China and India while it named nuclear non-proliferation and climate change as important national defense issues which marked a new approach compared to earlier presidential policies.

The methodological push of the Obama administration is known to literature as 'multilateral moralism' or 'multilateral globalization'. Thus, a new National Security Strategy was put in place in 2010, which emphasized inter-agency information, sharing about America's security needs and benefiting from active partnerships worldwide. It was in this multilateral light that several critical policy goals were reached: Most recently, sunset, the administration achieved the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran in July 2015, marking the most significant act of diplomatic engagement with Tehran since the 1979 revolution. The crisis was solved with Iran accepting the PNAC multilaterally under the auspices of the approved international laws and regulations and negotiations with the P5+1 states which grounded successful engagement on one side and decades of coercive isolation on the other. Obama was considered as 'the first US president to try diplomatic engagement as a means of resolving the nuclear issue.'

Obama's vision was given flesh in the 2015 National Security Strategy, which set up 'strong and sustainable American leadership' as very important element of global peace and prosperity. Forming upon it, the document further set the course for comprehensive engagement through 'cornerstone' traditional alliances which will include "more effective partnerships with other key centers of influence" (The White House, 2010). The 2015 NSS also recognized climate change as an 'urgent and growing threat to our national security' reflecting a broadened conception of security that incorporated non-traditional, systemic risks. The strategy required two commitments from the United States which included building stronger international partnerships and leading international organizations through its work at the United Nations and other multilateral platforms. (The White House , 2015)

The strategic record of Obama contains both contradictory elements and critical assessments. The administration brought about an increase in unmanned aerial vehicle attacks against terrorist targets located in Afghanistan Pakistan Yemen and Somalia while maintaining its claim to conduct military operations without permission when essential national interests required such action. The conservative critics of the administration asserted that its policies demonstrated an excessive preference for soft power over hard power while lacking sufficient plans to address situations when adversaries choose to reject diplomatic solutions. The Asia-Pacific analysts described the administration's 'pivot to Asia' as a strategic shift towards the Indo-Pacific region which correctly forecasted China's growing power in the future (Quinn, 2015). The Obama National Security Strategy (NSS) aimed to restore American power through multilateral institutions at a time when China was rising and Russia was regaining power and the 2008 financial crisis had begun to weaken unipolar global dominance.

The Clinton administration prioritized globalization and trade according to Quinn who conducted his research at Chatham House whereas the George W. Bush administration focused exclusively on terrorist threats and weapons of mass destruction while permitting preemptive military action and the Obama administration presented its foreign policy through the 2010 National Security Strategy which outlined how U.S. military power would be restricted by operational limitations while the country would engage in military operations with allied forces. The trajectory begins with Clinton's liberal optimism and proceeds to Bush's assertive unilateralism before reaching Obama's restricted multilateralism, which creates a unified development path where each approach connects to the successes and failures of past approaches.

The Trump Disruption 2017-2020:

The election of Donald Trump in November 2016 brought a new way of thinking about strategies to Washington D.C. security policies which created a vital test that saw all established

post-Cold War international rules being violated through different policy choices. The Trump administration marked as 'anti-globalization as patriotism' because it worked to build a political system that opposed the internationalist approach which had directed US foreign policy for fifty years.

The National Security Strategy which Trump presented on December 18, 2017 received positive feedback from different political groups because it created a clear strategic framework despite its Trumpian elements which Robert H. Simpson described as the document established great power competition as the main American strategic approach which identified China and Russia as revisionist powers and excluded climate change from national security threats which Obama declared in his 2015 NSS. The 2017 NSS identified 'three main sets of challengers: the revisionist powers of China and Russia; the rogue states of Iran and North Korea; and transnational threat organizations, particularly jihadist terrorist groups' as actively competing against the United States (Cordesman, 2017).

The Trump administration showed a pattern of institutional conduct that deviated from established strategic documents. The first-term alliance strategy of Trump maintained three core principles which established its primary preference for bilateral deals instead of international agreements and its focus on diplomatic relations that require financial payments instead of partnerships based on shared values and its need to handle differences between American interests and those of its allies. Trump's transactional diplomacy included three main components which included demands for higher financial commitments from allies and requirements for trade balance between nations and pressures for partner nations to make decisions which matched American preferences. The approach which analysts believe originated from Jeffersonian principles about military engagement produced major disturbances which affected both NATO and other alliance systems.

The 2017 NSS according to Carnegie Endowment analysts proved Trump's intention to transform the international order which existed after 1945 by rejecting all international standards which the United States should follow through international law and multilateral agreements and military alliances and shared values (Acton, et al., 2026). Trump ended American participation in the Paris Climate Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Iran nuclear deal which he called "the worst deal ever" in 2018. The United States withdrew from the agreements because it preferred bilateral negotiations but this decision established a new approach that broken from post-Cold War American international leadership which used international institutions to establish its authority.

The Trump 2017 NSS analysis showed two conflicting elements which emerged because the text of the document did not match the actual way the administration executed its policies. The 2017 strategy of CSIS showed that the United States acknowledged alliance value when it stated 'allies and partners are a great strength of the United States' but Trump treated alliances as business contracts which needed to be renegotiated (Cordesman, 2017). The result was a potential fifth scenario for alliance weakening: 'a dramatic shift in the foreign policy style of U.S.' itself, independent of external adversarial pressure or domestic changes in allied states.

The international order experienced deep and enduring changes because of the Trump administration. The 2017 strategy established great power competition as its primary focus which created 'clear implications' that affected all regional theaters of war by transforming Africa, the Indo-Pacific, and Europe into competitive digital arenas. The period showed American foreign policy could change sharply between presidential terms which created unpredictable American international commitments that had supported liberal order stability. The Carnegie Endowment (2026) reported that the U.S. foreign policy 'Obama-Trump-Biden-Trump swings'

which began as irregular events had developed into a 'recurring pattern' which forced 'most of the world to hedge by diversifying away from the United States (Acton, et al., 2026).

The period before 2020 saw the United States security policy starting to lose its post-Cold War framework until its complete disappearance. The United States security policy developed through three phases starting with 1990s liberal triumphalism which ended at 2015 when Obama restricted multilateral relationships while pursuing diplomatic solutions and Obama succeeded him with the implementation of his transactional approach. The international system underwent structural transformations that existed because of China rising and Russia revising its borders and middle powers growing their military power and this development made international power dynamics shift between 2021 and 2025.

Key Changes (2021-2025):

The time frame of 2021-2025 represents one of the most significant periods which affects United States national security policies since the conclusion of the Cold War. This chapter studies Biden administration's complete multilateral reestablishment together with Trump's second version of 'America First' doctrine through its examination of multiple security elements which include doctrinal development, military capabilities, alliance partnerships, technological advancements, economic factors and nuclear deterrence systems. It demonstrates how individual presidential administrations follow different strategies while the entire time period shows common patterns which include competition with the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the main focus and countries using technology and economic resources as defense mechanisms and nations adjusting their alliance connections in a multipolar world.

Doctrinal Evolution:

The United States security policy experienced its most fundamental transformation between 2021 and 2025 through doctrinal change which abolished the post-Cold War internationalist consensus and established a new framework based on great power strategic competition. The Trump administration announced its National Security Strategy in 2017 which established this strategic shift, the Biden administration issued its National Security Strategy (NSS) in October 2022 to confirm this strategic shift which began with the declaration that 'the post-Cold War era is definitively over' (The White House, 2022). This single sentence represents one of the most significant doctrinal admissions in modern American strategic history because it shows that the United States main power recognizes the liberal international order it created after 1991 is no longer the system which governs world relations.

The Biden 2022 NSS established a strategy which functions through three interconnected strategic moves that include national strength building through extensive investments and international alliance development and economic rule establishment across technology, cyber and trade domains. The strategy identified two structural challenges confronting the United States The first challenge involved major powers competing to establish the successor order of the post-Cold War period The second challenge required international cooperation to handle various transnational issues which included climate change, pandemics and food insecurity. The document identified China as the 'only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and increasingly the economic diplomatic military and technological power to do so'. The evaluation of Russia as an 'acute threat' followed its invasion of Ukraine while its actual danger level was assessed to be declining.

The 2022 NSS introduced a vital structural change because it established a new approach to handle international relations with domestic policy matters. The document explained that we established an absolute boundary between our international relations and our internal affairs

because our domestic power and international presence function as one united system. The United States established domestic industrial policy links to national security strategy through the CHIPS, Science Act of 2022 and Inflation Reduction Act while breaking away from traditional market-liberal economic practices that treated economic matters as distinct from security matters. The 'domestic investment' element identified as one of three main aspects of the NSS which included great power competition and climate change while it showed that America needed state involvement in essential industries to compete with China. (Juul & Malik, 2022)

The Biden and Trump second-term administrations share the same fundamental principles although their public statements present different perspectives. Both administrations accepted the 2017 NSS's foundational framing of China and Russia as 'revisionist powers.' Biden pursued competitive relations through coalition-building, institutional leadership and rule-shaping activities while Trump rejected international law, multilateralism, alliance commitments and common values during his second presidential term. The second Trump NSS stripped all reference to democracy promotion and instead pursued a transactional, interest-maximizing approach that de-ideologized the competitive relationship with China and treated alliances primarily as burden-sharing arrangements.

Force Posture/Military Strategy:

The United States military strategy and force posture underwent their most important changes from 2021 to 2025 because the 2022 National Defense Strategy designated China as its main strategic challenge. The NDS, released on October 27, 2022, alongside the Nuclear Posture Review and Missile Defense Review; marking the first time in departmental history that all three major strategic reviews were published simultaneously; outlined four core defense priorities: defending the homeland paced to China's multi-domain threat, deterring strategic attacks against the United States and its allies, deterring aggression while being prepared to prevail in conflict, prioritizing the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific followed by the Russian challenge in Europe, and building a resilient Joint Force and defense ecosystem (Carney & Hoff, 2022)

The defense planning process used NDS to identify China as the primary strategic threat to U.S. military operations which established a major official change from 2017 NSS, which designated China as a revisionist power. According to the NDS China represents the most comprehensive national security threat against the United States, because its aggressive efforts try to change the Indo-Pacific region and international system to benefit its authoritarian rule (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The document described how the People's Liberation Army (PLA) developed its military power through rapid improvements in traditional warfare methods together with cyber operations and space warfare and electronic warfare and information warfare capabilities and how the PLA expanded its military bases around the world.

The United States implemented substantial military adjustments throughout its forces in the Indo-Pacific region and Europe to achieve the NDS strategic vision. The AUKUS agreement together with the Quad partnership and trilateral cooperation frameworks with Japan and South Korea advanced 'integrated deterrence' through its definition which describes integrated deterrence as military efforts that span all combat fields and operational areas and battle scenarios to create complicated challenges for their opponents. The United States and United Kingdom announced the AUKUS agreement in September 2021 which committed both countries to provide Australia with nuclear submarine technology (Markowski, Wylie, & Chand, 2024). The AUKUS agreement together with the Quad represents a new constellation which operates without formal treaty alliance obligations while implementing a security strategy through its incremental advancements in Indo-Pacific protection systems.

The United States expanded its military presence throughout Europe during February 2022. According to the NATO Madrid Summit fact sheet from 2022 the United States sent more than 20000 additional troops to Europe which increased its total military personnel to about 100000 for European defense operations (The American Presidency Project , 2022). The United States executed its largest military base movement in Europe since the Cold War by establishing a permanent V Corps Headquarters Forward Command Post in Poland and sending additional Brigade Combat Teams to Romania.

The changes in their stance showed that they wanted to rebuild trust in Article 5 deterrence which suffered during the Trump administration because of unclear statements about NATO obligations. The NDS confirmed that 'undersea, hypersonic, and autonomous systems' function as essential components for future military capabilities which the United States military plans to implement during the 'mid- to long-term' period. The second Trump administration's 2026 National Defense Strategy introduced further evolution, emphasizing 'homeland defense' and Indo-Pacific deterrence 'by denial' along the First Island Chain-a geographic line running from Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines-as the primary organizing concepts for force deployment. The strategy directed U.S. forces to 'build, posture, and sustain a strong denial defense along the First Island Chain' which identified Beijing as the 'pacing challenge' that needed geographic focus. The 2026 NDS established a pattern of U.S. military withdrawal from Europe which reflected the Trump administration's view that allied nations should handle their own defense responsibilities while creating doubts about America string deterrent capacity to protect multiple theaters.

Alliance Management:

The period between 2021 and 2025 showed extensive changes to U.S. security policy which included changes to alliance management practices. The Biden administration began its presidential term with a dedication to restore alliance relationships which had been damaged during Trump's first presidential term according to the President's statement that 'America is back.' The following four years delivered exceptional historical results through NATO expansion and new Indo-Pacific security arrangements together with increased military responsibilities from allied nations, yet the transatlantic alliance suffered ongoing difficulties because of Trump-era structural problems.

The most important development for alliances during this time period occurred when NATO added Finland and Sweden as new members who had maintained their neutral status during both the Cold War and post-Cold War periods. Both countries submitted formal NATO membership applications in May 2022 following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine which began in February 2022. Finland became the 31st member of the Alliance on April 4, 2023, the 74th anniversary of the North Atlantic Treaty's signing, while Sweden acceded as the 32nd member on March 7, 2024, following the resolution of objections from Turkey and Hungary (NATO, 2024). The dual enlargement process created 800 additional miles of NATO border that extended into Russia which changed Northern European strategic relations and established the largest Alliance expansion since seven Eastern European countries joined NATO in 2004.

Allied defense spending underwent substantial increase during the Biden years. The White House Fact Sheet on the 2024 NATO Washington Summit documented that the number of NATO allies meeting the 2% of GDP defense spending benchmark rose from nine when Biden took office to twenty-three by 2024-itself a dramatic increase from the three allies that had met the threshold in 2014. The dual forces of Russia's Ukrainian aggression and American military pressure turned European allies into defensive partners for this conflict. The NATO's 2023 Vilnius Summit had further strengthened the commitment by stressing that '2% of GDP be seen as a

minimal spending requirement and that in many cases, expenditure beyond 2% of GDP will be needed' (Belkin, 2024). The Biden administration implemented Indo-Pacific alliance strengthening through the development of new security partnerships which operated in combination with their existing alliance partnerships. The Quad; comprising the United States, Japan, Australia, and India was elevated to leader-level summits and expanded to include maritime domain awareness initiatives and technology cooperation. The AUKUS agreement restructured the U.S.-Australia alliance relationship around the transfer of nuclear-powered submarine technology while trilateral cooperation between the United States Japan and South Korea deepened in response to both Chinese coercion and North Korean missile development. The 2022 NDS explicitly identified the Quad, AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific partner network as expressions of the United States' 'greatest global strategic advantage'; its alliance and partner relationships.

When Trump came back to the presidency in 2025, he created new challenges for alliance relationships through his structural changes. The Trump's second-term NSS document framed European allies not as strategic partners sharing values and security interests but as problematic actors who required domestic reform through its critique of EU migration and regulatory policies which it claimed violated 'political liberty and sovereignty' (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2026). The 2026 NDS moved forward its transactional approach by requiring European and Indo-Pacific allies to handle 'primary responsibility for their own defense' while their defense budgets needed to reach new heights.

Tech & Economic Security:

The period from 2021 to 2025 witnesses its most important security policy transformation when the United States begins using technological tools and economic measures as weapons for its national defense purpose. The current shift marks a complete break from the post-Cold War liberal economic framework which considered market ties with China to be a means of achieving political stability and shared economic development. The Biden administration established national security status for 'critical and emerging technologies' which included microelectronics and advanced computing and biotechnologies and clean energy technologies and advanced telecommunications according to its 2022 National Security Strategy.

The 2022 CHIPS and Science Act served as the main legislative element which brought about this transformation because President Biden signed it into law on August 9 2022. The Act established a budget of \$52.7 billion for federal subsidies which would support semiconductor research development and manufacturing expenses with \$39 billion dedicated to building semiconductor fabrication plants (PwC, 2023). The CHIPS Act established a unique restriction for federal funding because it stopped recipients from growing their semiconductor production capacity throughout China and all nations that the United States considered to be national security threats which created a new safeguard that redirected worldwide semiconductor production away from Chinese resources (Shivakumar, Wessner, & Howell, 2023).

The Biden administration introduced its most extensive U.S. export restrictions in more than thirty years which complemented the CHIPS Act on October 7 2022. The Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) of the Department of Commerce established total export bans to China for advanced logic chips and artificial intelligence processors that include Nvidia's A100 and H100 graphics processing units and semiconductor manufacturing equipment which produces advanced node chips (Dorsey, 2022). National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated in September 2022 that securing every advantage in force-multiplying technologies which included AI represented an obligation to protect national security (The American Presidency Project, 2024). The control measures became stricter during October 2023 and December 2024 while the United

States and its allies established export control systems through diplomatic talks with the Netherlands and Japan which began in early 2023 to implement technology denial methods that differed from traditional one-sided control systems.

The official documents together with analytical documents demonstrated their strategic reasoning through their description that semiconductors and AI technologies which they referred to as 'critical to future economic competitiveness national security and global leadership' together with China's 2014 national semiconductor industrial policy which established an explicit goal to achieve world-leading semiconductor industry status throughout the integrated circuit supply chain by 2030 (Sutter, 2025).

The Trump administration's second term continued and, in some respects, accelerated the technology competition with China, imposing additional chip export restrictions in March 2025 and blacklisting dozens of additional Chinese entities from trade in semiconductors and advanced strategic technologies (Shivakumar, Wessner, & Howell, *The Limits of Chip Export Controls in Meeting the China Challenge*, 2025). The broader conceptual framework which people refer to as economic statecraft or geoeconomics represents a basic transformation of how economies interact with each other which affects how countries protect their national security interests. This doctrinal shift has profound implications for the international political order, as it signals to both allies and adversaries that the United States regards economic dominance in strategic technologies as inseparable from military deterrence.

Nuclear Posture:

The period between 2021 and 2025 demonstrates how U.S. nuclear posture evolved because of the conflicting goals of political leaders who wanted to change nuclear policy and the existing military nuclear system. The Biden administration established its primary nuclear policy through its 2022 Nuclear Posture Review which the administration released together with the NDS on October 27 2022. The analysis of this document shows how American nuclear strategy developed through both new changes and existing limitations which shape present-day practice.

President Biden had entered office with an explicit commitment to narrowing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy. In 2020 Biden had stated that 'the sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal should be deterring and, if necessary, retaliating against a nuclear attack'. The 2022 NPR formally retreated from this commitment. The administration reached its conclusion after the document underwent what it called a 'thorough review of options for nuclear declaratory policy; including both no-first-use and sole purpose policies' which found that both approaches 'would result in an unacceptable level of risk in light of the range of non-nuclear capabilities being developed and fielded by competitors' (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The NPR maintained its objective to establish a sole purpose declaration which they planned to achieve through developing their security and political and technological capabilities.

The NPR established nuclear weapons employment rules which maintained existing practices without introducing new changes. The document stated that the United States 'maintains a very high bar for the employment of nuclear weapons' and affirmed the traditional negative security assurance that the U.S. would not use or threaten nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states party to and in compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The NPR maintained its original nuclear weapons employment policy which allowed for nuclear weapons to be used as a deterrent against non-nuclear threats that would create strategic damage.

The 2022 NPR includes two strategic decisions through its programmatic choices which require special focus. The NPR initial determination about the nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) which the Trump administration proposed became unnecessary because

military officials already possessed the low-yield W76-2 submarine-launched warhead and the arms control negotiation value with Russia remained uncertain and the estimated cost exceeded \$30 billion. The NPR maintained the W76-2 low-yield warhead which Trump introduced despite Biden's earlier criticism of this weapon during his 2020 campaign because he believed it would increase America's nuclear weapon usage. The W76-2 retention decision was a major shift away from Biden's pre-presidential promises according to military officials who established operational needs (Kimball, 2022)

The environmental conditions which shaped the NPR results established two nuclear threats which were developing at an increasing pace. Russia's attack on Ukraine created a nuclear threat environment which increased the potential for nuclear weapons to be used during regional wars to their highest level since the Cold War because Putin made ongoing nuclear threats which needed America to establish credible deterrence against "limited nuclear use within a regional conflict" which the NPR considered to be "high U.S. priority" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The NPR described China's nuclear buildup as an "unprecedented nuclear expansion" because China had developed from "minimum deterrent force" to "nuclear peer status" which changed the entire deterrent balance of power (Harvey, Miller, Payne, Roberts, & Soofer, 2022). The NPR required the United States to work together with its Indo-Pacific allies who included Japan, South Korea and Australia through their extended deterrence dialogues which enabled the US to send strategic bombers and dual-capable aircraft and other nuclear weapons into the Indo-Pacific region (Kimball, 2022).

The United States committed to complete nuclear triad modernization through the nuclear posture review which mandated replacement of all land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and nuclear-capable bombers with new systems, complete nuclear command control and communications systems. The NPR established arms control commitments through its willingness to quickly design a new arms control agreement which would take the place of New START when it expires in February 2026 because this commitment distinguished itself from the Trump 2018 NPR which showed little concern for arms control agreements. The Biden administration failed to reach a nuclear arms control agreement with Russia which resulted in the nuclear arms control system entering its most dangerous condition since the Reagan administration because both Russia and China continued to build their nuclear weapons stockpiles. (Kristensen & Korda, 2022)

The 2021-2025 timeframe established a nuclear posture that modernized its systems yet maintained its existing strategic framework by keeping its triad system operational and showing unclear deterrence thresholds and its nuclear strength reduction goal which remained unachieved and its arms control program which received political support faced operational difficulties due to adversarial non-cooperation and domestic political limitations. The current security situation requires a cautious approach but the existing posture prevents us from creating stable conditions which would establish enduring nuclear order because this theme will appear again in the next chapter which studies how these changes affect international political systems.

Restructuring the International Political Order:

The period from 2021 to 2025 has seen increasing structural pressure on the liberal international order which operates through multilateral institutions and rules-based norms and open markets and U.S.-led security agreements that began after 1945. The preceding chapters have shown that U.S. security policy changes spread through international relations systems because they changed how great powers compete, shifted alliance expectations, increased the

strength of revisionist challengers, reduced the effectiveness of multilateral institutions and created strong movements toward strategic independence for countries in the Global South.

Great Power Relations:

The United States security policy changes between 2021 and 2025 brought about their most transformative impact through the establishment of a new great power competitive framework, which replaced Cold War security methods with continuous competition across all military, technological, economic, and ideological fields. The United States presents its most pronounced transformation through its deteriorating relationship with China and Russia, both of which have reached Cold War peak tensions and threaten to destabilize the international liberal order that both nations had previously joined to various degrees.

The United States and China relationship began its 2021 to 2025 period as the world's most important bilateral connection and it ended that timeframe with deeper adversarial ties which now define their connection more than all previous years since their 1979 relationship normalization. The National Security Strategy of the Biden administration which published its 2022 report identified China as the sole nation which aims to reshape international order and possesses both military and technological power to accomplish this goal. The United States operationalized this approach through three methods which included enforcing semiconductor export controls in October 2022 and implementing CHIPS Act national security guardrails which prevented China from joining funded supply chains and through its ongoing military support for Taiwan which included an \$11.15 billion arms package that was revealed in December 2025 as the largest package in history which included High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, Army Tactical Missile Systems, self-propelled howitzer, drones and missiles (Institute of Applied Geopolitics, 2025)

The most dangerous point of conflict between the United States and China occurs in Taiwan. The China's military operations in the Taiwan area have increased since Xi Jinping assumed power and the Chinese government used gray-zone operations as their standard military strategy, which expanded its use during crucial situations like Pelosi's 2022 Taiwan visit and Taiwan President Lai Ching-te's 2024 inauguration (Grossman, 2025). The greatest threat to stable deterrence is 'not a lack of credibility or capacity to impose costs, but rather putting China's leaders in a desperate situation where military gambles would become attractive'; a structural risk heightened by accelerating economic decoupling and the abandonment of strategic ambiguity frameworks (Yoder, 2025).

Western nations increased their pressure on both China and Russia which led to a deeper relationship between the two countries that now creates a strategic partnership which poses the greatest threat to the liberal international order. China imported gold from Russia for a record sum of \$1.9 billion during the first eleven months of 2025 which represents a ninefold increase from the previous year. The complete transition to ruble-yuan trading demonstrates China's efforts to establish economic protection against Western sanctions while decreasing its necessity to use US dollars for international transactions (Li, 2026). The relationship between the United States and Russia reached its lowest point since 1962 when Russia began its complete military invasion of Ukraine. Russia has stopped participating in arms control negotiations which included discussions about nuclear weapons and strategic stability because it would not reopen any strategic contact points with the United States. The economy of Russia did not collapse as Washington expected because the Biden administration introduced extensive financial and trade sanctions that turned Putin into a pariah at Western events while he established a military-focused economy and began exporting energy to China and India (Stent, 2025). It was reported that by January 2024, authorities had imposed more than 16000 restrictions against Russian

citizens and organizations, which established Russia as the most sanctioned nation worldwide while 70 percent of its banking sector assets faced international sanctions (Luck, 2025). Russia experienced economic growth during wartime because its GDP expanded while interest rates increased to 21 percent for inflation control and the country faced ongoing workforce shortages which produced economic damage that persisted through time.

The United States and China experience deepening competition while the United States and Russia establish complete diplomatic separation which leads to an international system as reverse globalization because countries choose to break their economic ties which existed before through decoupling, sanctions and changes to their supply networks. The liberal international order depended on the belief that countries would develop better relationships through economic ties but the period between 2021 and 2025 showed that this belief could not remain in practice.

Allies & Partners:

The period from 2021 until 2025 forced American partners and allies to make major adjustments because of changes in U.S. security policy which resulted in strengthening some alliances but increasing doubts about how long America would maintain its partnerships. The period under review has produced divergent outcomes across different alliance constituencies; with European allies experiencing a combination of strategic reinvigoration through the Ukraine response and structural concern about Trump's second-term transactionalism, while Indo-Pacific partners have deepened security cooperation while simultaneously hedging against U.S. strategic unpredictability.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine initiated by Russia in February 2022 represented the strongest NATO alliance enhancement since its establishment which occurred because of leadership from the Biden administration. NATO expansion to include Finland and Sweden two states which maintained military neutrality for decades brought an essential shift to Northern European strategic dynamics which increased NATO border territory by 800 miles while eliminating the neutral zone that Russia had established (NATO, 2024). The government of Germany announced its first military expansion since World War II through a special defense fund worth €100 billion which would help the country achieve its 2% defense spending commitment. The German-Russian relations following the invasion experienced a severe decline because Germany started prioritizing Ukrainian support over its long-standing Russian Ostpolitik (Stent, 2025). The European Union committed to complete cessation of Russian gas imports by 2027 through its 2025 pledge which declared that all Russian gas imports would end by 2027 (Quillen, 2025). The G7 countries together with their partners had frozen Russian Central Bank assets valued at 285 billion while government sources estimated that sanctions had blocked Russia from accessing 450 billion since February 2022 according to UK House of Commons Library 2026 (Mills, 2026).

The Trump administration returned to power in January 2025 which created a situation that generated instability within alliance relationships that required allied unity during that particular period. The National Security Strategy for Trump's second presidency depicted European allies as problematic partners who needed to reform because they failed to fulfill their responsibilities as shared order guarantors. The administration established public uncertainty about its Article 5 obligations while Trump showed dissatisfaction with Ukraine military assistance and his willingness to negotiate terms that would stop Russian territory expansion, this situation caused immense concern among allied nations regarding the stability of American defense commitments. The European Union defense initiatives accelerated because France's long-standing support for EU defense integration achieved political support while Germany

increased its defense budget commitments under Chancellor Merz and the European Commission introduced its inaugural European Defense Industrial Strategy (Vinjamuri, et al., 2025). The structural paradox occurs because U.S. demands for allied defense sharing create better defense systems for its allies while the U.S. keeps its allies uncertain about American command.

The Indo-Pacific region shows a similarly complex situation. The AUKUS agreement and the Quad's elevation to leader-level summits and trilateral U.S.-Japan-South Korea cooperation have created stronger security ties between their main partners. The 2026 NDS demands for allied burden-sharing in the Indo-Pacific, while reinforcing the logic of collective defense, risks straining relationships if partners perceive U.S. commitments as conditional on financial concessions. India was identified in the 2022 NDS primarily through the lens of its utility in countering China rather than as an independent partner of consequence has responded by deepening its multi-alignment strategy; expanding defense cooperation with the United States while sustaining energy imports from Russia and maintaining its strategic independence within BRICS (ISDP, 2022). The patterns indicate that U.S. security policy shifts create partial deepening with structural hedging in allied relations establishing strategies that are less stable than the post-Cold War period.

Adversaries & Revisionist Powers:

The main argument of the liberal international order asserts that American power established a rules-based system which international organizations used to restrict aggressive states while teaching authoritarian regimes to act like responsible major powers. The United States security strategy changes between Biden's coalition-based deterrence and Trump's transactional nationalism that created a situation where revisionist countries use inconsistencies of Western policy to achieve their goals while American strategic competition has made them stronger instead of weakening them.

Russia's military invasion of Ukraine marks the most important European land dispute since 1945 because the conflict continues even after Western countries imposed extreme sanctions and provided military support to Ukraine. The Biden administration used two different strategies to support Ukrainian military operations through extensive military and economic assistance while building a diplomatic and sanction network to isolate Russia which resulted in Ukrainian resistance but failed to make Russia withdraw. Russia has adapted its economy by redirecting energy exports to China and India which required the establishment of new financial systems and the acquisition of dual-use items through intermediary nations while the country transitioned to military production for its war efforts (UNSC, 2025). The strengthening economic relationship between China and Russia has resulted in historical trade ties and joint efforts to decrease their reliance on the United States dollar and this partnership represents an adjustment to Western economic restrictions which will last longer than the current Ukrainian conflict.

The 2017 Trump National Security Strategy identified Iran and North Korea as "rogue states" which both exploited the inconsistencies present in American foreign policy during the 2021 to 2025 time period. After the United States withdrew from the JCPOA treaty in 2018, Iran increased its nuclear program activities and the Biden administration's attempts to restore the agreement ended without a resolution. North Korea conducted its most extensive testing of ballistic missiles through multiple launches while it expanded military ties with Russia which included Pyongyang providing artillery shells and troops to support Russian operations in Ukraine (UNSC, 2025). The adversaries in this structural dynamic have proven that they can maintain their revisionist goals despite incurring substantial costs because they have access to great power nuclear protection or Russia possesses its own nuclear deterrent system.

The Trump's second presidential term policies enable China and Russia to reshape multilateral institutions according to their national interests because he created crisis management forums that now stand empty. The institutional system through which major powers adapt to hostile situations represents an important aspect of international relations because revisionist nations now use procedural restrictions of the liberal order to pursue their objectives of undermining fundamental international rules which they maintain through official membership in international organizations (Kalout, 2025). International relations now operate under competitive multipolarity because international power dynamics have changed to create disputes among major nations while existing multilateral systems still function as international governance structures.

Multilateral Institutions & Norms:

The United States security policy changes have resulted in various structural changes that have damaged the international liberal order. The United States has destroyed its multilateral institutional framework which it developed and controlled since 1945. The United States has disabled multilateral institutions which it considers ineffective through its active disengagement. The great powers use multilateral platforms to compete against each other while they maintain their institutional operations. The internal reform processes which institutions need for their ongoing existence have reached a state of complete stalemate. The shared understanding of international rules which established multilateral institutions as legitimate entities has suffered complete breakdown.

The Trump administration's second-term approach to multilateral institutions has been the most explicitly disruptive. The Executive Order of Trump on February 4 2025 which he called 'Withdrawing the United States from and Ending Funding to Certain United Nations Organizations and Reviewing United States Support to All International Organizations' directed a complete suspension of American involvement and financial aid to the UN Human Rights Council, UNESCO and UNRWA (Ng, 2025). United States withdrew from sixty-six global organizations during this period-a pattern characterizing what scholars have begun to call 'America Alone' rather than 'America First' (Thakur, 2026). In 2025, Trump had executed actions which has weakened institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the World Health Organization by reducing their financial support and neglecting their international systems and choosing to establish temporary bilateral agreements which resulted in transactional nationalism.

The World Trade Organization serves as an essential example which demonstrates how multilateral institutions experience deterioration through their institutional process. The multilateral trading systems lost their functionality during different US presidential administrations by showing that 'through Obama's cautious retrenchment, Trump's overt confrontation, and Biden's selective protectionism' the United States has 'progressively withdrawn support from the very multilateral mechanisms Washington once designed to uphold' (SAIS Review , 2026). The Biden administration's CHIPS Act and Inflation Reduction Act which received domestic approval breached WTO subsidy regulations by offering government backing to national businesses thus implementing a protective trade practice which resulted in the decline of free-trade standards that the WTO existed to maintain. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and the Trade and Technology Council with the EU operate as multilateral initiatives which establish norms between countries that share similar values while they avoid using public international assemblies which need broad support to make decisions (Secen, 2025).

The United Nations Security Council has become increasingly dysfunctional as a tool to uphold the principles of the liberal international order. The Security Council has been unable to

punish Russia for its Ukraine actions because Russia uses its veto power while China has blocked security resolutions about Myanmar and North Korea's nuclear program. Security Council Report 2025 shows that the Council has lost its ability to handle Ukraine-related matters because those duties have been transferred to three other institutions which function as a Security Council workaround and reveal its permanent structural limitations (UNSC, 2025). The U.S.-led liberal international order has suffered from two main sources of damage because specific presidential administrations operated from that time period and China emerged as a new power while countries from the Global South and their particular interests encountered problems with U.S.-dominated international systems that they viewed as hypocritical and democracies achieved increasing economic disparity which resulted in a rise of populist movements through Russian military actions and the United States adoption of nationalistic policies and chaotic international relations after Donald Trump assumed his second presidential term in early 2025 (Vinjamuri, et al., 2025).

The process of multilateral institutions losing their fundamental purpose through erosion processes presents its most important effects through its normative aspect. The situation with arms control norms has experienced a severe decline because the New START Treaty reached its expiration date in February 2026 without any future framework while Russia used nuclear threats during the Ukraine conflict to break the Cold War nuclear coercion norm and both China and Russia have refused to participate in strategic stability talks that would establish trust between the countries. The Trump withdrawal from the Paris Agreement has caused climate governance norms to suffer because it weakened the multilateral progress achieved through the 2015 agreement while it demonstrated to other countries that major powers will only fulfill their international duties when they find it convenient. The United States has used human rights standards to fight its enemies but has chosen to ignore those rights when dealing with its allies which has created double moral standards that Global South countries use to challenge the legitimacy of the liberal international system. The changes in U.S. security policy have diminished multilateral institutions and international standards which now face permanent decline.

The Global South:

The U.S. security policy changes between 2021 and 2025 have merged with the ongoing international system transformation because they have brought about fundamental changes to international relations. The Global South has developed into an independent international power that controls its own diplomatic activities while refusing to accept Western leadership and the United States-China power struggle. The emergence of this new power system represents the most important shift in international relations since the beginning of the international liberal order because it shows that the United States can no longer maintain its status as a global leader with a broad coalition backing its democratic values.

The BRICS grouping has emerged as the most institutionally significant expression of Global South strategic autonomy during the 2021-2025 period. The emergence of 'BRICS+' as 'one development that embodies the rise of the Global South in the 2022-2025 period,' noting that the grouping has expanded to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, with five new members and nine new partner nations joining between October 2024 and mid-2025 (Heine, 2025). The research project from Tufts University called Rising Power Alliances found that BRICS currently represents '41% of the world's population and 31.5% of global gross domestic product and 16% of global trade' which provides the alliance with sufficient power to contest all of Washington's geopolitical and economic objectives (Papa, 2023). Trump announced his intention to implement 100% tariffs on BRICS countries in November 2024 after their leaders spoke about de-dollarization whereas he later warned about an impending 10% tariff increase

for countries that oppose America in July 2025 which demonstrated that Washington regarded BRICS as a fundamental threat to dollar dominance and American control over international institutions (Darnel, Garcia, Stibor, Monyae, & Adhinegara, 2025).

The 2021 to 2025 period saw Global South states adopting a foreign policy approach of active non-alignment and multi-alignment because these countries established diplomatic relations with multiple great powers while maintaining their national interests without selecting sides in the U.S.-China conflict. States that use hedging between major powers as their main method to establish economic ties with Western nations through OECD membership and free trade agreements while their relations with China continue through BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiative. President Lula of Brazil accused the United States of 'encouraging the war' during his 2023 visit to China while Brazil advanced its OECD accession talks and hosted the G20 conference which focused on development instead of geopolitical matters and chaired BRICS+ in 2025 (Heine, 2025). On the other hand, India's actions demonstrate its international relations approach as New Delhi established defense ties with the United States through the Quad while it imported record amounts of Russian oil which reached thirty-three times its December 2021 level and it participated in diplomatic activities with Iran and China through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. (Chivvis & Breiner, 2024)

The strategic autonomy of Global South countries leads to legitimacy loss for the liberal international order according to its fundamental structural effects. The emerging powers shows that Global South leaders have rejected Western alliance membership after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and they have condemned Western policies because they view them as double-faced which shows their belief that Western nations apply rules of the liberal international order only against their adversaries while protecting their own and allied nations from such rules. The Chinese Foreign Policy describes United States actions as an attempt to use India against Chinese power in the Global South while its actual effect has made Global South countries see the United States as treating them like tools instead of treating them as real partners (Minghao, 2024). Global South uses diplomatic method of multi-alignment because they conduct business while choosing not to support Western military agreements through both non-alignment and Western military agreements. The liberal international order system shows progressive de-universalization through its current operation, which serves as a Western-defined exclusive system instead of functioning as a universal international system. More than half of the world's population resides in countries that have selected strategic autonomy instead of aligning with other powers.

In conclusion, the United States security policy changes between 2021 and 2025 show their deep and widespread effects on the international liberal order. Great power relations have transitioned from competitive engagement to systemic rivalry with China and comprehensive estrangement with Russia, which shows that the economic interdependence theory fails to explain great power behavior. The United States and its allies face relationship challenges because their shared threat perceptions create stronger ties while their doubts about American trustworthiness create obstacles. Western nations have experienced substantial territorial gains through revisionist adversaries who use their adaptive abilities to exploit Western policy inconsistencies and pursue territorial expansion while undermining core liberal order values. Multilateral institutions have been progressively degraded through a combination of deliberate withdrawal, reform paralysis, and competitive instrumentalization. The Global South has developed into a self-governing actor that chooses to establish multiple diplomatic relationships instead of joining Western military alliances. The current developments show that the liberal international order is undergoing a fundamental transformation which changes it from a

universal system controlled by the United States into a system where American power exists but no longer functions as the central organizing force which it held during unipolar times.

Critical Analysis:

The period of 2021-2025 includes three main aspects: the post-Cold War era established military doctrines which the United States government operated until the second Trump administration and Biden administration through their military strategies, international alliances, technological methods and nuclear defense systems. The subsequent shifts through international power dynamics, international organizations and relationships with allies and rising powers from the Global South developed through these changes.

Restructuring of the International Order: Permanent or Reversible?

The most significant analytical question which needs to investigate whether changes to the international liberal order which occurred in this period are completely reversible or whether these changes constitute permanent structural changes which will continue to exist under future American governmental policies. Allied governments together with multilateral organizations and developing nations need to understand this question because it determines their proper approach to strategic changes. The evidence, assessed through multiple dimensions, shows that the answer exists between extremes: some parts of the change can be reversed while other parts have reached a point which makes reversal highly difficult and some parts have developed self-sustaining patterns which will continue to exist regardless of U.S. governmental actions.

The argument for partial reversibility rests on multiple factors. The United States maintains its essential resources which enable it to sustain worldwide leadership operations. America remains the most powerful among the historical great powers; 2024 military capacity indices show the United States holds a 24 percent military advantage over China which exceeds the 8.8 percent Cold War U.S.-USSR power disparity (Hzaine, 2026). The U.S. dollar remains the dominant global reserve currency; the American alliance network, while strained, has in key respects been strengthened; and U.S. technological leadership in critical sectors including artificial intelligence, advanced semiconductors, and defense systems remains significant. The future administration dedicated to multilateral re-engagement will have the ability to access international organizations from which Trump withdrew while reinvesting in arms control talks with Russia and China as well as rebuilding American foreign policy through the institutional structures of the liberal order.

The oscillation of U.S. foreign policy which US presidents practice through their different ruling periods shows that government agencies can change their policies according to established laws. The Biden administration restored multiple policies which President Trump had implemented during his first presidential term. The existing precedent shows that organizations can restore their operations after previous shutdowns.

The reasons which prove that structural systems cannot undergo transformation present greater strength through key areas of evaluation. The United States has suffered permanent damage to its commitment reputation which institutional re-engagement efforts cannot restore within a short period. Security experts revealed that only one third of Taiwanese participants who completed the survey in 2023 trusted the United States. European and Indo-Pacific allied countries must establish strategic autonomy through their defense systems because of Donald Trump's second presidential term which will make European defense systems and independent deterrence systems and multiple supply chains permanent military assets. The study showed that most global countries will start to reduce their dependence on the USA because this behavior provides them with better strategic security (Acton, et al., 2026).

The Sino-Russian strategic alignment which grew stronger because of Western sanctions now creates a permanent power imbalance which neither party can reverse through their choice of United States presidents. The economic relationships between Russia and China show two major patterns which China uses to establish its financial system while protecting itself against Western economic pressure. The strategic importance of these assets will continue until the United States decides to change its foreign policy approach. The Chinese technology sector will become more independent through its semiconductor development program because of U.S. export controls which China developed to counter these restrictions.

The self-reinforcing characteristics of multilateral institutions lead to their normative breakdown because these institutions face major challenges to their restoration process. The WTO's Appellate Body which the United States paralyzed by blocking judicial appointments beginning in 2019 and continuing through both Trump terms; cannot function without American cooperation, but its dysfunction has normalized alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and bilateral trade arrangements that reduce the institutional incentive to restore the WTO's authority (SAIS Review, 2026). The concept of 'zombie multilateralism' defines as the existence of international organizations that maintain official status but lose actual power to enforce their decisions perfectly matches the current situation which multiple international frameworks face (Klingebiel, 2026). The evidence supports the conclusion that the liberal international order which existed at the end of the Cold War has reached a point of no return.

The Nature of Emerging Order:

The analysis needs to define the current order which has emerged after the unipolar period because the liberal international order from that time does not exist in its complete form but also has not reached complete dissolution yet. The body of evidence which this research study has compiled demonstrates that the emerging order can be understood through the concept of multipolar world order, developed to show how multipolarity combines with ongoing multilateral norms, regional institutional developments and middle power acquiring more influence.

The emerging order will have no single nation as a hegemon, or cluster of powers, on the other hand, globalization is not disappearing but taking a new, eastern turn. The United States maintains military superiority because its worldwide military presence exceeds what any other country can achieve which determined that American defense strength dominates international military capabilities despite political control declining. China has become the main trading partner for over 120 countries while the BRICS organization controls 31.5 percent of global economic output and 41 percent of the world's total population and the New Development Bank and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank provide developing countries with alternatives to Western financial systems (Papa, 2023). The SCO security system and BRI development framework and BRICS+ financial system creates new governance systems which compete with Western multilateral structures yet they do not establish replacement systems but create separate pathways that weaken universal Western multilateralism.

The unbalanced multipolarity accurately defines the current international relations because it shows how US-led hegemonic power declines while essential liberal internationalism principles stay in international political systems (Aryal, 2025). This formulation is consistent with the empirical record because international organizations continue to function after Trump withdrew from them and global trade maintains its rules after the WTO Appellate Body stopped operating and the NPT regime with its associated safeguards system remains active despite arms control treaty violations. The existing frameworks continue to exist but their authority has changed because these frameworks now determine how great powers act and how disputes get

resolved. Power Transition Theory, provides a further structural dimension: China has entered the 'parity zone' relative to U.S. power; defined as approximately 80 percent of the dominant state's capability, a threshold that historically correlates with periods of heightened systemic instability (Hazine, 2026). Chinese power parity with Russia and Global South power assertion and US strategic uncertainty creates a transitional system with conflicting power structures and multiple international standards and divided institutional systems.

This transitional system is described as 'partially institutionalized restructuring' which maintains its existence between two extreme states of total disaster and complete restoration (Trivedi & Jaiswal, 2025). The previous chapters have demonstrated multiple structural elements which shape this hybrid system. The first is competitive institutionalism: the new system introduces multiple institutional frameworks which exist alongside each other because states choose to participate based on their current interests instead of following established international rules. The second is technological fragmentation: the semiconductor decoupling and AI governance divergence create two separate technological systems which operate like a 'splinternet' because they contain distinct digital networks, separate chip supply chains and different AI safety standards. The third is regional security pluralism: while the liberal order which existed before established a single security framework based on UN Charter principles which protected territorial integrity and rejected aggression, the current system operates through security arrangements which differ across regions because AUKUS and the Quad protect the Indo-Pacific while NATO expands its European defense system and the SCO operates in Eurasian territory. The United States maintains its position as the strongest global power, yet it has stopped fulfilling its duties as the international order's sustaining hegemon.

Future Implications:

The existence of a multipolar international system which combines elements of institutional structure with multiple power centers that lack clear superiority creates serious consequences for international security, global governance and international cooperation efforts to address worldwide problems. The stability implications of the emerging order are deeply concerning. Historical analysis of power transition periods; particularly those in which a rising challenger approaches parity with an established hegemon, consistently identifies elevated conflict risk. The Power Transition Theory demonstrates that a balanced system is inherently belligerent and the China-U.S. relations today match the conditions which create 'Thucydides Trap' dynamics. The Taiwan Strait remains the most acute flashpoint: the systematic escalation of PLA coercive operations (Chen, 2025) and warned that the combination of economic decoupling, military competition and abandonment of strategic ambiguity risks creating conditions in which Chinese leaders might rationally calculate that a military gamble is preferable to managed decline (Yoder, 2025). The erosion of arms control frameworks and the failure to negotiate a New START successor; increases the risk of miscalculation in a crisis by removing the stabilizing information that arms control verification regimes provide. Russia's use of nuclear threats as diplomatic tools in Ukraine and North Korea's ongoing ballistic missile development activities together undermine the post-1945 order's nuclear use restrictions.

The new international system creates difficult challenges for developing countries which want to implement clean energy systems, pandemic response systems, financial system stability and unrestricted international trade. The multipolar systems create five specific dangers which include reduced global public good supply, proxy warfare, regional military operations, economic split and increased weapon development (Trivedi & Jaiswal, 2025). The Paris Agreement withdrawal which Trump announced during his second presidential term together with the

climate multilateralism withdrawal created the largest global public good shortage of that time period because climate change which Biden identified in his 2015 National Security Strategy and 2022 National Security Strategy as a national security threat creates expenses for the global system which only multilateral governance can resolve.

The international order faces its most innovative structural challenge when it needs to establish governance systems for emerging technologies which include artificial intelligence, advanced semiconductors, biotechnology and cyber capabilities. The technology competition through the CHIPS Act, the October 2022 export controls and the progressive tightening of semiconductor restrictions through 2024 and into 2025 has produced a bifurcating technological ecosystem. American and Chinese AI systems and chip architectures and data governance frameworks now develop according to national and alliance boundaries. The technology decoupling will create a high-tech divide which endangers innovation ecosystems (NYCFPA, 2025). This divide will lead to disrupted global tech standards which will harm U.S. technological supremacy and international AI progress. The emerging order lacks any multilateral framework that governs AI safety, autonomous weapons systems and military algorithmic decision-making. Military decision-making will face catastrophic results if military organizations implement AI-enabled capabilities without establishing proper normative and arms control frameworks.

The legal and normative systems which shape the liberal international order through their essential standards face the most important structural changes. The liberal order existed because countries would restrict their sovereignty rights to gain advantages from a system which operated through established rules that provided both predictable outcomes and approaches to handle competitive situations. The 2021-2025 period has witnessed the progressive erosion of this normative compact from multiple directions simultaneously: Russian territorial revisionism in Ukraine; Chinese legal expansionism in the South China Sea; American unilateralism in trade, technology, and institutional disengagement; and Global South normative pluralism that increasingly disputes the universality of Western liberal values.

The analytical situation shows serious problems but it does not indicate complete negative results. The new multipolar system under development shows its remaining capacity to enable cooperative work. No other country is as yet emulating Trump's reciprocal tariffs or supporting his contempt for multilateralism (Acharya, *The decline of the West and the rise of 'the Rest' will lead to a new world order*, 2025); a finding which shows that international rules-based cooperation still exists as a genuine commitment despite current challenges. The EU actively maintains its multilateral governance system through its ongoing activities. The G20 continues to function as an economic coordination platform which includes BRICS chairs India (2023) and Brazil (2024) and South Africa (2025) who promote their developmental priorities. The operational partnership between nuclear safety and aviation standards shows that international cooperation systems maintain greater strength than people expect from them. The international order for the next ten years needs to find ways for these remaining cooperative relationships to create formal power structures which can operate without US hegemony.

Conclusion:

Between 2021-2025, U.S. security policy changes produced results which deviated from the expectations of both its creators and its opponents. The United States maintained the Washington Consensus for thirty years after the Soviet Union collapsed, which anticipated that China would moderate its political behavior through its entry into global trading, leading to a gradual alignment with the rules of the liberal order. The period 2021 to 2025 buried this assumption decisively. The CHIPS and Science Act's semiconductor subsidies, the October 2022

export controls targeting China's artificial intelligence supply chain, and the progressive tightening of those controls through 2025 are instruments which the United States uses to prevent China from acquiring technological capabilities. The government of the United States has shifted its understanding of how economics and security interact through this new strategic framework which expresses that military power depends on vital technology control. The United States will not be able to reverse supply chain infrastructure and allied export control system design which works with the Netherlands and Japan after the legal framework establishes these systems. The practice of decoupling creates an independent political economic system which develops its own political power.

China's strategic Posture has experienced fundamental structural changes throughout its development. The export controls have failed to stop Chinese technological development because they made Chinese officials spend more money on domestic semiconductor production, artificial intelligence work and systems. The Sino-Russian partnership has increased beyond previous levels because they established record trade volumes and they decided to use ruble-yuan settlements and China imported 1.9 billion dollars' worth of gold from Russia during the first eleven months of 2025 (Institute of Applied Geopolitics , 2025). American competitive strategy has caused the two powers to develop closer ties; this major unintended outcome which creates difficulties for determining the deterrent capabilities needed to support the National Defense Strategy 'pacing challenge' framework and the nuclear posture review extended deterrence obligations to Indo-Pacific allies.

The alliance dimension of the period's legacy displays a fundamental contradiction which will shape both transatlantic and Indo-Pacific security relations during upcoming years. NATO has achieved its highest operational strength which brought 800 new miles of Russian border, 23 out of 32 members now satisfy the 2% GDP defense spending requirement, and Germany has completely transformed its military operations since World War II. But the European governments now consider American security guarantees to be conditional because of Trump presented Article 5 commitments with public uncertainty and his administration supported a Ukraine peace deal that would maintain Russian control over occupied territory. On the other hand, the Global South established its non-alignment position which made the liberal order failed to prove itself as a worldwide system of rules because Brazil organized the G20 with a focus on development, India expanded its security ties with the Quad while purchasing high quantities of Russian oil, and more than half of the world's population chose to maintain strategic independence from Western powers. The BRICS expansion provides institutionalized evidence which proves this refutation.

This research paper finds that the post-cold war international political order has been structurally transformed, not rhetorically which makes it irreversible in several domains. The shifts in U.S. National Security Policy are bring change in military postures, economic policies, technological race and alliances globally. Economic interdependence has emerged as a security concern for major powers that is now promoting policies of de-coupling and de-risking. Alliance architecture has been strengthened and politically challenging through the rise of U.S. bilateral transactional policies. The normative architecture of international political order has been permanently altered by the global south through multi-alignment. Shifts in U.S. NSS has brought adaptations among revisionist powers like China and Russia that has outpaced western coercive strategies.

What, then, is the international order that emerges from this period? The present international system does not resemble the unipolar liberal international order from the past nor does it resemble the Cold War bipolar system. The system functions as a multipolar order

which shows military power distribution towards American dominance while economic power is shared among multiple regions, various groups contest authority and institutional structures operate as separate entities instead of reaching a common goal. This has made United States to develop a durable doctrine for multilateral competition in which technology as a positive-sum agenda, credible security guarantees and successor of nuclear arms control are essential. Allied states need to shape their strategies as a permanent feature of multipolar world in which institutional responsibility and deterrence frameworks go side by side rather than a substitute for transatlantic alliance. Multilateral institutions should construct governance framework for Artificial intelligence and autonomous weapon system urgently before wide proliferations in the absence of agreed norms. Engagement with global south is need to reconceptualize in order develop safer governance partnership rather than a geopolitical instrument. Non-traditional security threats like climate change are required to get on the priority list of major powers to combat future devastations before its too late.

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