



The Decline – and Fall? – of the US Empire: The Transatlantic Alliance at its Crossroads

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Abstract

The bulwark of US power projection has long been the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and its enduring ties through Europe, the purported transatlantic alliance. Born of the Spectre of communism created by the socialist revolutions of 1917-1923 and the socialist bloc's growth in power, influence, and territory following the fascist defeat in the Second World War, both former and latter provided a credible, tangible argument for the existence of this "holy alliance" and an external justification for its excesses. However, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the accession of the PRC and many other socialist countries to the global capitalist market, greater scrutiny has been leveled on the perceived unfairness and disadvantages intrinsically imposed upon this pact by US hegemony. Within a geopolitical theater where hot conflicts have spawned in the hinterlands of the Western bloc – such as the Russo-Ukrainian conflict – this work seeks to analyze and study possible developments within this near-institutional alliance.

Keywords: NATO, China, transatlantic alliance, hegemony, Thucydides's Trap

Genesis: Introduction to the European Pax Americana and a Critical Approach to its Possibilities

"Hegemony" can be understood in two broad senses: first, the mere projection of power, subsuming competing interests – national, sometimes, but mostly foreign – to the *raison d'état*; roughly, the quality of being and acting imperial. In this sense, the U.S.A. has been argued to be a "unipolar" power¹. On the other hand, hegemony in the Gramscian sense – the most used one in this work – is the cultural and ideological equivalent of the aforementioned imperial expansion: not merely occupying a territory with soldiers and fortresses, but rearranging indigenous culture, language, customs, values, and replacing it – or subjugating it – under an exported standard. An example can be seen in the Canadian Genocide of Indigenous peoples: while the campaigns of extermination against natives became less overt during the first half of the 20th century, the eradication of their language and religion in favor of assimilation into Euro-Canadian culture continued to be a core aim of the residential school system, active well into the late 20th century². Perhaps it could be argued that globalization and the Americanization of the world are, too, in this sense, attempts at hegemony: it is very likely that in every continent of the world, people are acquainted with Coca-Cola, Hollywood movies, and know a few words in the English language. Christopher Layne³ explores the roots of said *status quo*: while the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was established as a military arm of the *cordon sanitaire* against communism, with much of Western Europe serving as a sort of fortified bulwark via the installation of military bases and strategic nuclear sites by U.S. and NATO forces, a coterminous socio-economic transformation was also enacted – a hegemonic intervention, in the Gramscian sense. As Geir Lundestad posits in his eponymous work⁴, the Marshall Plan, coupled with the creation of a new security regime in NATO, had as a purpose the creation of an "*Empire by Integration*"; following this, Michael Hogan further documents the creation of the new *Americana* market, and the replication of its economic imperatives elsewhere. In other words, the inauguration of an order of affairs that not only strengthened the *cordon sanitaire* against communism, but greatly benefited the interests of the United States.

Whereas the *antebellum* militaries on the European continent varied in strength and affiliation, the *Pax Americana* was characterized by a strengthening of the capabilities of NATO to project force and the shift of a dominantly autonomous doctrine of offense-defense to one that primarily relied on the U.S.' own military and their nuclear umbrella. Still, despite the collapse of the communist bloc after the counterrevolutions of the late 20th century and the subsequent disintegration of the Warsaw Pact, the NATO apparatus clung to existence. The reliance on U.S.-managed capabilities continued all but unchanged: programs such as the Eurofighter, for example, eschewed nationally-developed jets in favor of a common NATO-provided one, which proved to

¹ See Krauthammer, Charles. "The Unipolar Moment." *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (January 1, 1990): 23. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20044692>.

² See Voce, Antonio, Leyland Cecco, and Chris Michael. "'Cultural Genocide': The Shameful History of Canada's Residential Schools – Mapped." *The Guardian*, September 10, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2021/sep/06/canada-residential-schools-indigenous-children-cultural-genocide-map>., Cooper, Anderson. "Canada's Unmarked Graves: How Residential Schools Carried Out 'Cultural Genocide' Against Indigenous Children - 60 Minutes." *CBS News*, February 7, 2022. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/canada-residential-schools-unmarked-graves-indigenous-children-60-minutes-2022-02-06/>.

³ See Christopher Layne, «It's Over, Over There: The Coming Crack-up In Transatlantic Relations», *International Politics* 45, n.o 3 (April 10, 2008): 325-47, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2008.6>.

⁴ See Lundestad, Geir. *Empire by Integration*, Oxford University Press, 1998. <https://archive.org/details/empirebyintegrat0000lund>., and Hogan, Michael J. *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947-1952*. Cambridge University Press, 1987.

be a point of tension between autonomy-focused doctrines such as the French Rafale program, developed as a direct competitor to the NATO-controlled Eurofighter.

In the absence of its *raison d'être*, a teleological enemy – the communist bloc – NATO was generally repurposed as an arm of the war on terror started by the U.S. in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. A "clash of civilizations," as foretold by Huntington in his eponymous work⁵, saw NATO and U.S. forces, alongside other collaborators – engage in a war on terrorism all across the world, particularly in the Middle East. The pursuit of this *mission civilisatrice*⁶ ostensibly was to eliminate the domestic threat it presented by exterminating terrorism abroad. Yet, even after the mission was declared "accomplished"⁷, interventions against terrorism or "terrorist-sponsoring states" continued. Parallel to NATO operations, individual states continued to collaborate with the United States, as was the case of "Operation Unified Protector" to enact regime change in Libya, or "Operation Shader" during the ongoing intervention in Syria.

However, far from being relegated only to the Middle East and the Global South, NATO also carried out similar operations on European soil. Indeed, its first actual engagement in an operational theater was the bombing of Bosnia during the waning years of the 20th century⁸ and the subsequent occupation of parts of what was formerly Yugoslavia by a UN-mandated watchman force. Said state, formerly seen as a counterweight to Soviet influence, was by then lacking strategic importance even before the Soviet Union had been disbanded and its successor states had transitioned to capitalism. Therefore, it is clear that considering the display of power and the capability for regime change – the NATO operation resulted in another period of "balkanization" in a historically tumultuous region⁹ – the aforementioned bombing and occupation can be interpreted in two ways: first, as a rehearsal for the "shock and awe" doctrine to be employed in Iraq¹⁰; and second, as a real example of the capabilities of a US-led intervention in post cold war Europe, unleashed against enemy states.

Layne identifies the DeGaulist ideology as one of the most relevant obstacles to the implementation of American hegemony in Europe – indeed, the *Pax Americana* was characterized by the absence of *antebellum* inter-European conflicts – while Marichal describes the Bretton Woods financial order as subsuming European policy autonomy to the organizations led by the

⁵ Note regarding this the views of Edward Said, critical of the work "*Domestic Structure and Foreign Policy*" – describing the aforementioned policy of the US – who evoked echoes of this binary worldview, hostile to "*the other*", in the preface to *Orientalism*, 25th-anniversary edition: "Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires, as if one shouldn't trust the evidence of one's eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest mission civilisatrice."

⁶ Ibid

⁷ See "President Bush Announces Major Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended," May 20, 2003. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030501-15.html>.

⁸ See Ruiz Palmer, Diego. "Two decades of NATO operations: Taking stock, looking ahead." NATO Review, 2011. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2012/05/07/two-decades-of-nato-operations-taking-stock-looking-ahead/index.html>.

⁹ Whereas the Balkan states historically were fraught with ethnic conflicts and partitioned by occupying empires, Herman goes into further depth regarding the particular role of NATO in shaping the post-war peninsula. See Herman, Edward S. "The Dismantling of Yugoslavia." Monthly Review, March 3, 2015. <https://monthlyreview.org/2007/10/01/the-dismantling-of-yugoslavia/>.

¹⁰ See Ullman, Harlan K., James P. Wade, L. A. Edney, Fred M. Franks, Charles A. Horner, Jonathan T. Howe, and Keith Brendley. Shock and Awe Achieving Rapid Dominance, 1996. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA457606.pdf>.

US¹¹. The conference and the overall plan for rebuilding post-war Europe also served to set the direction and policy which was to determine most of those within the capitalist bloc during the Cold War¹², and particularly in NATO-aligned Europe – again, the construction of the aforesaid Gramscian hegemony¹³. The years that followed were marked by the struggle between left and right-wing European independentism and the encroachment of the hegemony, with the ever-looming specter of communism presenting a credible reason that justified both the presence of military bases, the positioning of nuclear weapons and the erosion of European strategic independence. Regardless, the full spectrum of the anticommunist strategy involved not only *de jure* hegemonic policymaking, as detailed below, but the *autopoiesis* or self-maintenance of the system through all means necessary, in the event of an existing case that merited their use.

New History

In the absence of an existential opponent, such as the communist-socialist bloc during the Cold War, both public and covert operations changed substantially: on the one hand, the “war on terror” lacked widespread conventional engagements, of equally equipped military forces facing one another; on the other hand, the consolidation of hegemony in the absence of a communist rival also optimized the necessities for its conservation. J. Sakai, in “Yesterday’s world empire not expanding but crashing,” set an analogy that this *modus operandi* most closely resembled that of a special forces team – with an emphasis on surgical strikes and covert operations – rather than an imperial army¹⁴. But the ascent of the People’s Republic of China as an economic giant, dominating global trade, has drastically changed this balance: sometimes supplanting the US as a primary trade partner, the PRC emerged as a competitive alternative for European industry to engage with a singular market, hitherto only matched by the US¹⁵. The first years of the integration of the PRC into the capitalist world market were treated with cautious optimism, perhaps an echo of that previously harbored towards Russia: myriad articles were written about the imminent democratization of Chinese politics, of its compatibility with the conception of Western civilization, and its vassalage under the leadership of the US¹⁶. As the decades progressed, optimism was replaced by caution and, finally, by confrontation. While the Obama cabinet still

¹¹ Marichal elaborates on the fact that the Keynesian orientation of Bretton Woods was re-accommodated from its genesis to better suit the geopolitical ambitions of the member states. That Keynes formulated a different structure for the organizations and policies that the conference would create is sometimes noted as a factor in understanding the eventual “forceful” turn to a neoliberal monetary policy. See Carlos Marichal, *Nueva Historia De Las Grandes Crisis Financieras: una perspectiva global, 1873-2008* (DEBATE, 2010).

¹² More specifically, the “metropolis” or “core” countries, as understood through a world-systems lens, are the countries that spearheaded the bulk of the mode of production and its policies. See Frank, Andre Gunder. *Dependent Accumulation and Underdevelopment*. Springer, 1979., and Wallerstein, Immanuel Maurice. *World-systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Duke University Press, 2004.

¹³ See above; also, refer to the concept of “Empire by integration” and “super-imperialism”, as detailed in the text.

¹⁴ However, if one is to analyze the invasion of Afghanistan or Iraq under a detailed lens, the criteria of “imperial army” – an occupying, combined arms force – would be arguable. However, as will be explored further, the criteria for regime change in formally allied countries wouldn’t be strictly Soviet or Brezhnevian – it would instead rely on color revolutions, covert operations such as “Gladio,” and other less visible acts, with more plausible deniability.

¹⁵ See Centre d’études prospectives et d’informations internationales (CEPII). “Base Pour l’analyse Du Commerce International (BACI).” Data set. CEPII, 2021. http://www.cepii.fr/CEPII/en/bdd_modele/bdd_modele_item.asp., United Nations Statistics Division. “United Nations Comtrade Database.” Data set. Department Of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023. <https://comtradeplus.un.org>. Software used for visualization is Datawheel’s “OEC BACI Visualizer.”, 2023. <https://oec.world/>.

¹⁶ See Suisheng Zhao, “Chinese Nationalism and Pragmatic Foreign Policy Behaviour”, and Zi Zhongyun, “The Clash of Ideas”, in Zhao, Suisheng. *Chinese Foreign Policy: Pragmatism and Strategic Behavior*. East Gate Book, 2004.

attempted conciliation and rapprochement with the PRC, Trump's term was characterized by jingoist agitation against the "unfair" trade deficit with China, as well as demagoguery surrounding the protectionism that was to be adopted as a defense against this supposed "aggression"¹⁷. Even under Biden, the US has continued the Trump era's more hostile approach towards the PRC, and relations remain tense and confrontational despite the fact that both economies are still heavily interlinked¹⁸. Indeed, the pull of the Chinese economy on the US market remains, and its pursuit of decoupling – as well as the increasing difficulty in achieving it – only serves to remark on the incredible position of economic importance the PRC occupies.

Contrary to the US, the European Union has maintained a more pragmatic approach to Chinese commerce since it emerged as a significant global partner. As far back as its early explosion as a preferential trade partner in the 2000s, Chinese investment and trade with the EU has increased at an exponential rate¹⁹. Even in the midst of deteriorating US-China relations in the second half of the 2010s, this Sino-European partnership and cooperation came to be partially arrested with the former's denunciation of human rights abuses in the Xinjiang UAR and Hong Kong SAR²⁰. This shift towards a "systemic rival" conception of Chinese growth has coincided with the appearance of similar postures from the U.S. With tensions further expanding following the COVID-19 pandemic, an announcement occurred of a "de-risking" strategy meant to distance critical European markets from the PRC – again, in synchrony with the US's decoupling efforts, despite the record development of bilateral trade, and perhaps, in parallel to the similar rise in European trade deficits with China²¹.

The crux of the current dilemma faced by these actors is situated around three areas: first, the significance of the PRC as a trade partner for both the EU and the United States, and the high cost of "decoupling" and "de-risking"; second, the geopolitical relations – and perhaps subordination – between the US and EU two actors; and third, the prospect of either one changing this relation as a response to a realignment of strategic interests. Within these areas, a question rouses itself: in the event of a realignment, what would be the response of the US towards the EU or rogue European states? Taking into account both the historical background of the affirmation of the interests in Europe and the synthesis of the previous questions – the perceptions of each actor towards the shifting trade flow metrics, alongside the commitment to upholding the post-Bretton Woods establishment – a critical analysis of the past, present, and future of Sino-European relations must take place.

¹⁷ For example, see PBS News. "Read Trump's Full Speech Outlining His National Security Strategy," December 18, 2017. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/read-trumps-full-speech-outlining-his-national-security-strategy>.

¹⁸ Regarding trade comparisons, please refer to the BACI visualizer

¹⁹ See above. Germany is the highest importer-exporter within the EU; Chinese exports to Germany in 2022 averaged 152 billion USD, whereas imports from Germany to China averaged 109 billion USD in the same year. *Ibid*.

²⁰ See "Products Made With Forced Labour to Be Banned From EU Single Market | News | European Parliament," n.d. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240419IPR20551/products-made-with-forced-labour-to-be-banned-from-eu-single-market>., and Neumann et al, "JOINT MOTION FOR a RESOLUTION on the New Security Law in Hong Kong and the Cases of Andy Li and Joseph John | RC-B9-0238/2024 | European Parliament." Regarding the Chinese response to this "lawfare", see Times, Global. "China Expresses Strong Indignation Over European Parliament's Resolution: Chinese FM." <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202410/1321061.shtml>., and Ho, Kelly, and Kelly Ho. "Security Law: EU Parliament Calls for Sanctions on Hong Kong Leaders; City Slams' Hypocrisy With Double Standards." Hong Kong Free Press HKFP, April 26, 2024. <https://hongkongfp.com/2024/04/26/security-law-eu-parliament-calls-for-sanctions-on-hong-kong-leaders-city-slams-hypocrisy-with-double-standards/>.

²¹ See Center for European Reform, "How should Europe handle China? Annual 2023 report" (CER, February 2024), <https://www.cer.eu/about/annual-report/2023>.

Silken frays in the alliance: the Chinese market

An initial acknowledgment must be that the relationship between the EU and the US towards the PRC is, despite their many similarities, fundamentally different. For the EU, access to Chinese markets and economic flow is all but invaluable: core members of the union are individually bound to the PRC as significant trade partners, with the previously mentioned trade deficit constituting a considerable motivation for the optimization – rather than the erasure – of said trade. The figure of "de-risking" itself can be contrasted with "decoupling" to further explore some of these nuances: while the timing of both can be traced to the jingoist policies of the Trump administration and the continuation of its policies under Biden, the implication of "de-risking" is to conserve key strategic ties with Chinese industries rather than seeking to isolate national industries from Chinese ones – a tacit purpose of "decoupling" is the establishment of another *cordon sanitaire* that cuts the PRC from strategic resources in the hands of the US and its allies in the metropolis' core²²²³.

In that regard, a distinction must be made between the collective NATO intervention policy, or that of the US and the coalitions which it spearheads, and those of individual NATO-aligned states. For example, the French state has engaged in interventions and covert operations across their former colonies, particularly in the so-called *frana frique*, via support for mercenaries and paramilitaries involved in regime change and genocide, often with outcomes favorable for French interests²⁴. The scope and forms of these operations differ greatly: on one hand, "small scale" interventions consist of limited deployment and direct action, most commonly taking place through the acting of military advisors and sponsored paramilitary gangs – again, such as the French involvement in African conflicts, or their counter-insurgency intervention in Papua New Guinea. Contrary to this, "medium scale" and "large scale" interventions necessarily require manpower and logistics that are hardly affordable by an individual EU state, demanding the participation or coordination of either organizations such as NATO or the sponsorship of the US as a joint partner. Examples of the former are the limited bombing campaigns and occupation of territory that took place in former Yugoslavia – medium scale being arbitrarily used only to describe the overall scale of the strategic operation – while the latter is better visualized in the invasion and destruction of Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the posterior creation of a puppet regime²⁵. Suffice to say,

²² Refer to the provided EU and U.S. documents detailing their foreign policy.

²³ The "EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (EU-China CAI)" and the report "EU-China – A strategic outlook" both present reticent perceptions of Chinese influence, yet equally reticent are the appraisals that such caution justifies arresting the burgeoning trade. Contrast the nature of the text with the one in American presidential speeches at the time, such as the provided one from the Trump administration.

²⁴ Far from the anachronistic French Foreign Legion, the soldier of fortune era – of mercenaries fighting communism and socialism on African soil – saw figures such as Bob Denard act in the best interests of the French Foreign Policy. Still, perhaps the highest profile case – in Africa, at least – involved French state involvement in the Rwandan Genocide, as exposed by an independent Rwandan commission in 2008 and by several survivor associations in 2024; see "France slams Rwandan genocide accusations." *France 24*, 2008. <https://www.france24.com/en/20080807-france-slams-rwandan-genocide-accusations-rwanda-france>., and *AfricaNews*. "France Accused of 'Complicity' in Rwanda's 1994 Genocide." *Africanews*, October 25, 2024. <https://www.africanews.com/2024/10/25/france-accused-of-complicity-in-rwandas-1994-genocide/>. Also see Hill, Dave. "The Lies and Secrets of French Imperialism | MR Online." *MR Online*, October 17, 2023. <https://mronline.org/2023/10/18/the-lies-and-secrets-of-french-imperialism/>., and Hill, Dave. "How France Underdevelops Africa | MR Online." *MR Online*, September 1, 2022. <https://mronline.org/2022/09/02/how-france-underdevelops-africa/>.

²⁵ This is understood as a regime backed by a foreign military which majorly follows said backer's dictum. See Research Unit for Political Economy. *Behind the Invasion of Iraq*. NYU Press, 2003.

expensive occupations such as the maintenance of an occupation force in Afghanistan are hardly achievable by individual EU states – the US is involved in some of the world's most expensive counter-insurgency operations and arms development programs, which in no insignificant way contributes to its undeniable status as a superpower. So to say, although each individual NATO-aligned state can effectuate relatively autonomous operations and tactical actions, coalition-based interventions have overwhelmingly been strategically determined by a "leader" – either NATO or at the direction of the US.

In that regard, that the EU does not initiate medium and large invasions or interventions is almost certainly an uncontested fact²⁶: whether by inability or unwillingness to devote resources for such a deployment, even strategic operations such as the intervention in Somalia, that encompassed a large number of EU members, required the explicit support and cooperation of the US. The relevance of this fact is invaluable for understanding one of the main differences between the EU and the US regarding their approach towards strategic threats and geopolitical risk scenarios. Most significant to the subject of this work, it is widely understood that the US perceives the affirmation of Chinese sovereignty over the territory of Taiwan through military exercises – the so-called "One China Principle" – or rapprochement and institutional reform with formerly occupied territories, such as the Hong Kong SAR, as military and structural threats towards the US's hegemony in Asia²⁷; perhaps even more worrying from their perspective, would be the massive growth and astonishing performance of the Chinese economy, and the development of greater military capabilities by the People's Liberation Army – events that are individually of sufficient concern to the formerly unopposed US as to ponder their classification as existential threats^{28,29}.

While the EU identifies the PRC as a systemic rival and economic competitor³⁰, the embracing of de-risking can only be partially attributable to the pressures of the US: after all, the similarities in modes of production and ideological systems shared between both, imply that many of the same factors that justify hostility for Chinese development, save for upholding hegemony,

²⁶ As stated before, the Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya invasions involved a "Coalition" composed of several countries, while the operations carried out in Syria mostly involved cooperation between different states – often with the U.S.A. French operations in Mali and Syria, while independent, can't be compared in scope to the previously mentioned ones.

²⁷ Refer to the provided EU policy documents. Equally, circa 2022, presidential statements about this were understood as a move away from inertia and "deliberate ambiguity" (Sacks, David). "What Biden's Big Shift on Taiwan Means." Council on Foreign Relations, May 24, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/what-bidens-big-shift-taiwan-means>.

²⁸ On one hand, a compelling argument against this appraisal and in favor of a rapprochement is the refusal of the US regime to concretely act on any policy that would ensure a "hot response" – whether on an operational or strategic level – by the PRC. On the other hand, an even more valuable argument in support of this view is the pursuit of decoupling, so to speak; while the economic sabotage against Chinese industry implies that the US "must shoot itself in the foot," the prerogative is that an analysis has been effectuated *a priori* with the sole conclusion being such a self-damaging policy is a sufficient trade-off in order to arrest the development of a potential geopolitical rival.

²⁹ Equally, a holistic understanding of the bipartisan continuation of anti-Chinese foreign policy, alongside the enacting of the "decoupling", the sharpening of military bases in Asia, and the cordon *sanitaire* against microchip manufacturing, make it sensible to understand that this stance has been elevated to a strategic rivalry – which is, protection against a threat to the aforementioned world order and the *status quo*. See United States Department of State. "The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China - United States Department of State," October 12, 2023. <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>. also, see note 14.

³⁰ Refer to the provided EU policy documents and US presidential statements.

can be understood as equally adverse for these two entities³¹. Yet, as has been said before, the gravity of the Chinese investment in the EU does not justify a calculus such as the one in the American regime regarding decoupling; further, the absence of the EU's status as a unified superpower – and the consequent hegemony such characteristics provide – present the possibility that such an absolute decoupling is unfeasible in the first place. Much as with the collusion regarding invasions and interventions, the adoption of a complete decoupling from the PRC by the EU would necessarily merit the coordination and support of the US – indeed, its implementation in the first place would probably require the utmost pressure from the US towards the European Union³².

The Shadow of the Specter

Finally, another aspect that can't be overlooked when discussing the geopolitical alliance between the US and the EU is the shared perception of the Russian Federation as a security threat. An important parallel is the relation between Russia and the European Union: the EU is highly reliant on Russian energy imports, particularly natural gas – a feature not shared with the US.

While the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact historically were conceptualized as an existential threat to the Western European regimes and, in general, to the "capitalist bloc," the relations between Russia and the EU can be said to have only developed to the current antagonism during the color revolution in Ukraine and Russia's subsequent intervention in the Crimean Peninsula. With the conflict between the latter only explosively escalating in 2022, though it can be argued that the comparatively low-intensity conflict waged between Ukraine and the separatist regions in the Donbas – Donetsk and Luhansk, among others – consisted not only of a military precedent but also a theater of operations that shaped the policies of the EU and the US towards Russia. In yet another relevant analogous sequence of events, the response towards the Russian Federation was initially of containment: sanctions were immediately imposed on Russia, a fact complicated by the EU's energy dependence, creating a state of siege that failed – much as it would again in 2022 – to deter the continuation of further military actions³³. It was only in the wake of the "Special Military Operation" that armed involvement was first considered, yet an active role by NATO through the intervention and deployment of its armed forces was generally accepted to be an unacceptable escalation, likely to elicit an armed response by the Russian Federation – and perhaps, by its close strategic partners³⁴.

³¹ This is to say, while the EU can't be said to share the same fears of regional threats to military bases in Asia and Oceania, nor be pressured by military allies such as South Korea and the Taiwan regime, it can be said to share some of the distress stemming from the Chinese dominance of the global market, and an increasingly outperformed supply chain. Refer to the BACI-supported trade comparison, as well as the provided policy documents.

³² This means that, logistically, a complete replacement of a trade partnership would need to be enacted, as the economic vacuum stemming from decoupling would be all but catastrophic for the European market. Alternatively, in the unlikely event of a turn to the PRC and even more unlikely political and – fancifully, military – closeness, American interests would certainly be protected in the fashion hitherto exhibited by the regime. Either scenario would involve a large-scale operation carried out by the U.S.A., individually unattainable by any European country.

³³ See European Council. "Timeline - EU sanctions against Russia," 2024. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/timeline-sanctions-against-russia/>. To be noted that, at the time of writing this work, the Special Military Operation in the Ukraine is still ongoing.

³⁴ Evidence of the unacceptability of direct intervention is the fact that, despite the Biden regime providing ample financial and military support for Ukraine, no operation such as the one in Syria or Lebanon came close to being carried out.

As of today, the involvement of the EU and the US in the Ukrainian conflict remains an arguably low-scale operation, with high-value flagship assets such as the M1 Abrams tank, air defense systems, and high-end precision munitions deployed to the Ukrainian battlefield in support of Zelensky's regime alongside the provision of technical support and military advisors – and allegedly, deniable armed support. However, there is a notably an absence of direct operations against the Russian Federation: a fact that serves as evidence that a maximum threshold of contingency, hasn't yet been breached. In other words, the refusal to carry out a direct attack against Russia or in support of Ukraine signifies that the EU and the US still seek to avoid an escalation that would merit a military confrontation with the Russian Federation and its possible allies.

The Decline of American Soft Power

Having identified the previous elements of the dynamics between the European Union, the United States, and NATO, it is prudent to proceed to the discussion of the future likelihood of the organization continuing its teleological role in future conflicts with "existential threats," or, alternatively, of either disbanding or transitioning into an increasingly inert entity. First, it is necessary to posit that an existential threat in the immediate future of the EU and the American regime, extrapolating from current events, could only realistically be found in either the Russian Federation, the PRC, or both.

That Russia could be considered as such an enemy beyond the aforementioned actions in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict consists of a highly contestable argument. This is to say; besides the possibility of a "low scale" military threat on certain objectives deemed as valuable by the EU and American regimes, the Russian Federation lacks the geopolitical gravity to present a challenge as a competitor towards the EU – much less for the American regime, barring the use of nuclear weapons. Despite the close dependence of European industries on Russian gas, the impunity of terrorist attacks on vital supply lines such as the Nordstream pipeline serves as evidence that geopolitical alignment with the American regime maintains a much higher priority than the preservation of supply lines with an increasingly "discreditable" trade partner³⁵. While the Sino-Russian alliance serves as an opponent on a geopolitical-strategic level, due to the assemblage of Chinese economic power and the ability of the Russian Federation to defend its territory with its legacy nuclear arsenal³⁶, the Russian economy in itself does not present the challenge to the hegemonic order that its Chinese counterpart does; therefore, can't be classified as a multi-dimensional strategic rival in the same sense as the PRC – or, in other words, an existential threat.

In this way, the People's Republic of China represents a much more realistic possibility: not only are many of the grievances that the EU and the US share in regard to China due to mutual similarities in ideology and mode of production, but the historical record shows that the members of NATO have submitted to the dictum of the US when designating enemies to be targeted

³⁵ That the Nordstream pipelines were demolished by Ukrainian special forces would still be considered as an action by proxies for the benefit of the American regime, yet Hersh's investigative journalism alleges a common-sense explanation – that the Americans themselves crippled the energy supply of Europe. See Harris, Shane. "Ukrainian military officer coordinated Nord Stream pipeline attack." *The New York Times*, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/11/11/nordstream-bombing-ukraine-chervinsky/>, and Hersh, Seymour M, "How America Took Out the Nord Stream Pipeline | MR Online." *MR Online*, February 9, 2023. <https://mronline.org/2023/02/10/how-america-took-out-the-nord-stream-pipeline/>.

³⁶ See Kempe, Frederick. "The US Confronts Two Global Threats: China-Russia and Itself." Atlantic Council, October 7, 2024. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/inflection-points/the-us-confronts-two-global-threats-china-russia-and-itself/>.

collectively or individually. The relevant particularity, in this case, is, of course, the nature of the aforesaid enemy, as far from having the meaningful yet limited aptitudes of states such as the Ba'athist Iraq or consisting of technologically and economically outmatched countries such as Afghanistan, the PRC presents a truly formidable presence in the global market, even without accounting for the military power of the People's Liberation Army and the existence of an advanced and ever-developing Chinese technological industry.

In this regard, the possibilities of the future of trans-Atlantic relations between the European Union and the American regime can be divided into three main scenarios: first, the continuation of the *status quo* even under increasingly perilous conditions – in this sense, implying the collusion of the majority of NATO members with the American regime, including during the outbreak of hostilities against an "existential enemy"; second, the breakdown of NATO to the extent where it impacts its operational capabilities, and the consequent "cooling" of trans-Atlantic relations; and third, the addition to the previous scenario of the EU adopting a non-aligned stance, or – unlikely as it might be – reorienting its stance towards a favorable position with the PRC. The ramifications of each scenario and the possible policies that it would present for the EU bloc can now be explored alongside the previously exposed background.

Possible alternatives

In the first scenario, it is impossible to avoid the distant looming specter of a *hot war* if geographically distant as the worst case. Should the worst not come to pass, the bondage of the EU's foreign policy to the yoke of US hegemony demanding participation in a *cold war* can already be assumed, much like the invasions against Iraq and Afghanistan and the *cordon sanitaire* imposed on the Soviet Union – after all, maintaining the *status quo* of NATO and the trans-Atlantic alliance is to remain committed to mutual military aid and geopolitical alignment. In the former scenario, the risk of experiencing a highly destructive retaliation through conventional forces or weapons of mass destruction would by itself balance the incentive to remain neutral or inert for the European Union – a policy that would consist *de facto* as a breakup of the aforementioned *status quo*. As for the latter, the principal hindrance lies in the adoption of a decoupling strategy opposite to de-risking: a necessity of partaking in the siege of an existential enemy via economic sabotage and isolation is to coordinate the compatibility of such policies – the Soviet Union, for example, did not hold substantially different relationships with most of the NATO European members than with the US, at least for most of the Cold War. The clear disadvantage for such an alignment is loss of access to vital energy markets, as is partially the case regarding the current sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation, or the severing of considerable investment and trade flow with the PRC in the hypothetical dawn of a new *cordon sanitaire* – certainly, far more devastating for European interests than the mere enmity with Russia.

The second scenario circles around either the erosion of the European Union, with Chinese-aligned regimes choosing to retain their present economic configurations rather than submit to a change in EU policy, or the adoption of inertia as a policy in the event of a confrontation between the American regime and one of its existential enemies. In other words, the first possibility is a repetition of the Brexit affair enacted by regimes such as Orban's Hungary or Iohannis' Romania. Tied in with the third scenario regarding the adoption of non-aligned or pro-Chinese policies by either the European Union or the breakaway states, both represent the highest-risk scenarios, save for the aforesaid possibility of anchoring involvement into a *hot war*.

Further elaborating on the maintenance of the US's hegemony in the world, a core tenet was the sanctioning of terrorism and mass murder, and the use of covert direction action as measures to prevent either the expansion of communist or socialist influence³⁷ or as means to ensure the perpetuation of regimes favorable to the interests of the US³⁸. However, far from being relegated to the Global South, similar covert operations were enacted on European soil: Ganser details the relevant inception of "Operation Gladio" as a U.S.-led program that funded and trained extremist terrorist groups to act as storm-troopers opposing communist influence or groups unfavorable to the regime's interests³⁹, while NATO itself – and institutions of the US such as the CIA – repurposed former nazi war criminals as covert operations personnel⁴⁰, most infamously through "Operation Bloodstone." In the presence of the credible possibility of a given political party acceding to power and, presumably, initiating a rapprochement with the existential enemy – the Soviet Union – the endemic practice of cover operations by the US or NATO-aligned forces – such as false-flag terrorism, assassinations, or overt regime change – would have been enacted⁴¹ even on western countries; a possibility remaining as a realistic – and historically backed – last resort. During the Cold War, a Western European administration overtly favorable to communism, or outright aligned with the Soviet Union would have been subject to the motions of covert operations and violence, something that Daniele Ganser alleges was rehearsed during the "Years of Lead" in Italy, to smother the Italian Communist movement⁴². While the ascent to power of European parties or blocs ideologically aligned with the PRC is currently unlikely, as is the widespread adoption of communism or socialism in the countries that compose the core of NATO and the institution's global economic liberalism, the pressures of an unrivaled economic flow – or the reactionary rapport between conservative European parties and their Russian counterparts – makes a geopolitical realignment towards the East a credible possibility⁴³. In the event of a sufficiently hostile *cold war* – between the US and its allies and another teleological enemy – a return to the extreme policies of the previous century, which even considered sympathy as sufficient evidence of rapprochement, could not be disparaged as unrealizable.

As such, a sensible conclusion is that the policy approach that minimizes the chances of 'low scale' or 'medium scale' intervention by the American regime and simultaneously minimizes the damage to the European Union interests and political or economic infrastructure is the third scenario: non-alignment without an overt closeness towards the existential enemy nor the initiation

³⁷ See Bevens, Vincent. *The Jakarta Method: Washington's Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program that Shaped Our World*. Hachette UK, 2020; in particular, chapter "Around the world."

³⁸ See Johnson, Chalmers. *Blowback*. Editora Record, 2000., and Galeano, Eduardo. *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*. NYU Press, 1997.

³⁹ See Ganser, Daniele. *NATO's Secret Armies: Operation GLADIO and Terrorism in Western Europe*. Routledge, 2005.

⁴⁰ Adolf Heusinger is often seen as the highest profile case, as a nazi employed as Chairman of the NATO Military Committee; however, Simpson details a wider panorama of this practice. See Simpson, Christopher. *Blowback: America's Recruitment of Nazis and Its Destructive Impact on Our Domestic and Foreign Policy*. Open Road Media, 2014.

⁴¹ See above.

⁴² Op. Cit.

⁴³ Most risible, Tucker Carlson and other entertainers employed by the Murdoch dynasty's News Corporation: the platforming of Vladimir Putin and other "anti-American" figures in platforms supervised by the American regime signify a marked shift from earlier rhetoric. Equally, Donald Trump's well-known chauvinism and jingoism serve as unequivocal measures that the so-called "Overton window" has shifted from a relatively "civil" – yet nonetheless hegemonic – approach during the Obama cabinet to a far more demagogic "populist" discourse – which, unsurprisingly, remains hegemonic.

of de-risking or decoupling. Overall, the best long-term strategy for the preservation of EU interests and independence could only be achieved in a highly improbable coordination across the principal members, and an enduring dialogue with the existential enemy in question. In the absence of such vital requirements, the policy of inertia remains the most realistically achievable preferential alternative in a non-confrontational, geopolitically sensitive formulation. Which is to say, maintaining a neutral approach to the encirclement of the existential enemy without initiating a rapprochement – staying on the sidelines – can ensure a continuation of the benefits regarding trade and investment, in the case of the PRC, or energy supplies lines from the Russian Federation. The costs of such a stance could be a reduction in support from the US and a minor cooling in relations; however, it would be hard to spin such a policy as an untenable geopolitical shift that threatens the hegemonic order. The European Union could thus feasibly ensure that its material interests remain sufficiently secure while equally avoiding the erosion of its independence and self-determination at the behest of the US⁴⁴.

Despite this, a truism in policy analysis is that no matter the model employed and the quality of the studies carried out, an exponential prediction – the foretelling of what is to come based on what currently is – consists of something simply impossible by human standards. This is to say, the uncertainty of human factors cannot be accounted for even if policy recommendations are followed and geopolitical phenomena, cause, and effect, are correctly understood through material theories; the calculus in question does not rely on an exclusively logical approach – on this topic, hegemony can be seen as a significant prerogative, as discussed above. This is why a pivot in US policy towards *Ultima Ratio Regum* - war - cannot be fully discarded, as until it lacks the capabilities to do so, the enforcement of its hegemony will remain a priority considered as an extension of its national security. Further, the nature of said hegemony can also be put into question: a traditional conception of imperialism, whether dogmatically Leninist or rooted in historiography, could not explain the current globalized world order, which sees both universal trade and the *Pax Americana* between a superpower – the US – and many other great powers. However, parallel to the exposed structure of US hegemony, the concept of super-imperialism has been developed: a system that primarily relies on financial exploitation, debt dependence, and coercion to vassalize states to the global hegemonic order⁴⁵. However, this does not imply that this definition is exclusive, as more "physical" elements of imperialism – such as military occupations – and the figures of unequal exchange are still practiced, as discussed before, if on a different, more controlled scale⁴⁶. In this framing, the continuation of hegemony is rooted in the continuation of super-imperialism: the implication of preventing the adoption of communism was protecting the super-imperialist *status quo*⁴⁷, derived from which the aggression against a similar systemic rival would be rooted in similar causes – today, represented by a multipolar and post-hegemonic world order.

In this sense, the existence of NATO guarantees the ability of the US to project power overseas – the first line of defense well outside the heartlands of the regime. As long as the US

⁴⁴ Regardless, inertia is not realistic. Such a policy, if sensible and perhaps even favored by European decision-makers, wouldn't be – and cannot be – permanent, more so if there exist teleological obstacles for it, as is subsequently discussed.

⁴⁵ See Hudson, Michael. *Super Imperialism - New Edition: The Origin and Fundamentals of US World Dominance*. Pluto Press, 2003.

⁴⁶ See Smith, John. *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century: Globalization, Super-Exploitation, and Capitalism's Final Crisis*. NYU Press, 2016

⁴⁷ Contemporary views of a proto-concept of "super-imperialism" were developed during the Bretton Woods era. See Baran, Paul A., and Paul Marlor Sweezy. *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order*. NYU Press, 1966.

hegemony exists, the perpetuation of NATO is all but guaranteed, and as long as NATO exists, its survival and maintenance will be all but reliant on all means, *exitus acta probat*, even against the best interests of its non-U.S. members, and certainly, against the interests of the non-elites citizens and residents in these territories⁴⁸.

⁴⁸ Regarding this, the theory of the "imperial boomerang" serves as an enriching addendum. For example, see Chapter 2 of Aimé Césaire's "Discourse on Colonialism".

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