

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY UNDER PRESIDENT TRUMP: THE MIDDLE EAST, EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AND BLACK SEA REGIONS

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Introduction

The current phase in international relations can be best characterized by one word—transition. The Post-Cold War order is rapidly disappearing, creating strategic ambiguity for all actors. The U.S. hegemony is over or close to over despite the fact that militarily Washington will be safely far out of reach for several decades to come. However, the growing national debt, the looming crisis in the Social Security and Medicare systems, uncontrolled migration, growing populism and partisan fighting does not bode well for the future of U.S. dominance. At the same time, no nation, be it China, Russia, India or Brazil, has the necessary resources or will to compete for the new world hegemony.

The absence of a world hegemon means that no state has the power to enforce the implementation of key international rules and norms. Regardless how one perceives the international principles—as balanced or biased—the rule-based order at least provides a minimal level of stability since the actors involved on the international stage have a clear understanding what may and may not be done. However, since the late 2000s the situation has changed. We are increasingly facing an international security architecture where key actors may easily break the norms and rules, and this will eventually bring us to a situation upon which no rules can be based.

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The election of President Trump sent shock waves through the United States' political establishment and surprised international relations pundits worldwide. Despite the apparent growth of the right-wing populist movements in different parts of the world, the culmination of which was presumably the BREXIT referendum held in June 2016, few if any could imagine that a real estate developer and reality TV star had any chance of defeating one of the most respected representatives of the US political establishment. The November 2016 elections had widespread implications on both American domestic and foreign policies.

President Trump's decision to denounce globalism created a situation where the so-called "vertical globalism" (Western-led efforts to spread a liberal international order all over the world through the promotion of democracy and a market economy) might be transformed into a "horizontal globalism" based on regional integration models covering vast territories of Europe and Asia, Africa and Latin America.

In this paper we will analyze President Trump's foreign policy in several key geographical areas and its implications. However, in order to better understand the significant changes in U.S. foreign policy ushered in by President Trump and make predictions for future developments, it is worth starting with an examination of Trump's foreign policy perceptions as well as of the ongoing debates within the foreign policy establishment itself.

Conceptual bases of American foreign policy prior to the election of President Trump

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War ushered in a plethora of studies arguing that a new era had arrived characterized by the United States' uncontested hegemony and the universal spread of the

liberal international order. If Francis Fukuyama was talking about “the end of history”, Zbigniew Brzezinski put forward the idea of the “American primacy and unipolar moment” in his famous book *The Grand Chessboard*.² Of course, not all intellectuals analyzing international relations viewed the future through such excessively rosy lenses. Samuel Huntington published his seminal work *The Clash of civilizations* in 1996, warning about a dawning era of conflicts based on civilizational differences. However, in general the U.S. foreign policy establishment, called “the Blob”, had rosy perceptions of the upcoming universal spread of the market economy and liberal democracy.

Thus, America’s Cold War era grand strategy of deterrence was replaced by the grand strategy of “liberal hegemony”, and U.S. policymakers have converged around the premise that Pentagon planners set forth in 1992—that the United States should maintain a military superiority so overwhelming that it would dissuade allies and rivals alike from challenging Washington’s authority.³ This strategy was first articulated in President Clinton’s national security strategy (“A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement”) published in July 1994.⁴ One of the key pillars of that strategy was the idea of “democracy promotion”. This idea remained central in updated versions of the strategy published in February 1995 and February 1996. Alongside the fight against terrorism, democracy promotion was among President George W. Bush’s

² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (Basic Books, 1997).

³ Stephen Wertheim, “The Price of Primacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, March–April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-02-10/price-primacy>.

⁴ “A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement,” <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1994.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-121219-500>.

2002 and 2006 key strategies for national security.⁵ Not all pundits were overwhelmingly supportive of that idea, however. Samuel Huntington, for instance, was adamantly opposed to a crusading form of democracy promotion as a core component of U.S. foreign policy. He argued that the principal responsibility of Western leaders was not to attempt to reshape other civilizations in the image of the West, which was beyond their declining power, but to preserve, protect and renew the unique qualities of Western civilization. He was certainly among the minority.

NATO and EU enlargement in the late 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s seemed to bring closer this dream of an entire planet governed by liberal democracies under the leadership of the uncontested U.S. hegemony. Meanwhile, the 9/11 terrorist attacks delivered the first blow to these ideas. Then came President George W. Bush's disastrous decision to invade Iraq, which unleashed chaos in that country and sent a wave of destabilization across the Middle East.

However, the real harbinger of the fundamental changes in the international security architecture was the 2008 world financial crisis. This was coupled with the astonishing economic rise of China and the growing assertiveness of Russia. Even before the 2008 economic crisis, Russian President Vladimir Putin shocked the Western audience in his February 2007 Munich Security Conference speech, which overtly criticized the U.S.-led unipolar international order. Meanwhile, resentment against globalization was slowly and steadily growing among the United States' so-called blue-collar workers. The incomes of middle-class Americans had not been growing in real terms since the late 1970s and the income gap was

⁵ "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," two versions: September 2002 and March 2006, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2002.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-121337-027> and <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2006.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-121325-543>.

widening between rural or core America and the cosmopolitan coastal cities.

All these developments brought about a clear understanding that the U.S. hegemony or “unipolar moment” had either disappeared or was on the way out. Fareed Zakaria was among the first to articulate this idea in his essay, “The Future of American Power”, published in *Foreign Affairs* in 2008 and in his book, *The Post American World*, published later that same year.

The beginning of this shift coincided with the election of President Obama in November 2008. During the Obama era, American foreign policy made some efforts to concentrate its focus on Asia and decrease its involvement in the Middle East. In October 2011, then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton published the essay “America’s Pacific Century” in *Foreign Policy*, arguing that the future of politics would be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq.⁶ In line with this shift, U.S. forces left Iraq in 2011, and Washington, in cooperation with other four permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany, signed a nuclear deal with Iran in 2015. However, the so-called Arab Spring and the conflicts and chaos which followed in Libya, Syria and Yemen, as well as the establishment of the Islamic State caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq in summer 2014, brought the Middle East back to the forefront of the American foreign policy agenda. Simultaneously, the Ukraine crisis in 2014 triggered a confrontation between Russia and the West, compelling the United States to re-evaluate its European strategy and increase its military presence in Europe through the European Reassurance Initiative which was initiated in

⁶ Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, October 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

June 2014 and later renamed as the European Deterrence Initiative.⁷ Thus, despite some deviations from the Clinton and George W. Bush era, “liberal hegemony” remained the cornerstone of President Obama’s foreign policy.

President Trump’s foreign policy: offshore balancing in action?

President Trump was elected pushing forward his “America First” agenda. After assuming office, Trump made clear his disdain towards multilateralism and arms control agreements. Under his leadership, the United States withdrew from the Paris Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, and cancelled participation in the INF and Open Skies treaties. In December 2017 President Trump published his National Security Strategy, which was followed by the National Defense Strategy in 2018. The main idea circulated in these documents was the notion of great power competitions as the main defining feature of the international relations. Many experts argue that President Trump has no foreign policy doctrine and his actions are based on his naïve perceptions of geopolitics as a business where actions are made on the basis of transactional logic. However, President Trump, albeit inadvertently, rejected the “liberal hegemony” strategy and some of his actions are close to the new grand strategy of offshore balancing.

The term was initially used by Christopher Layne in his 1997 article, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America’s Future Grand Strategy”, published in *International Security*.⁸ The same author articulated

⁷ “European Deterrence Initiative,” Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), February 2020, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2021/fy2021_EDI_JBook.pdf.

⁸ Christopher Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America’s Future Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 22, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 86-124,

this idea further in his 2002 article “Offshore Balancing Revisited” published by *The Washington Quarterly*.⁹

However, the key developers of the strategy are the political scientists Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, who published their seminal article “The Case for Offshore Balancing” in the July/August 2016 issue of *Foreign Affairs* several months before Trump’s election.¹⁰

Stephen Walt then articulated this strategy further in his 2018 book, *The hell of good intentions: America’s foreign policy elite and the decline of U.S. Primacy*. Here, Walt harshly criticizes the “liberal hegemony” strategy pursued by the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations, arguing that that flawed strategy is the main culprit for the strategic mistakes and failures of American foreign policy after the end of the Cold War. Walt argues that the best option for the United States is to pursue “Offshore balancing”. The key pillars of that strategy are to eschew trying to remake the world in America’s image and to focus on upholding the balance of power in three key regions: Europe, East Asia and the Persian Gulf. The strategy relies primarily on regional actors to uphold local balances of power and commits the United States to intervene with its own forces only when one or more of these balances are in danger of breaking down.

Key patterns of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East

President Trump inherited the chaotic Middle East. Syria, Yemen and Libya were embroiled in their respective civil wars and were teetering on

https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/43144/Layne_Christopher_From_Preponderance_1997.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

⁹ Christopher Layne, “Offshore balancing revisited,” *The Washington Quarterly* 25 no. 2 (2002): 233-248, <https://doi.org/10.1162/01636600252820252>.

¹⁰ Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing>.

the brink of becoming failed states. Iran had increased its influence in Iraq and Syria and de facto established a “Shia crescent” spanning from Iran via Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Meanwhile, Turkey had transformed itself from a U.S. client state into an assertive regional power seeking to dominate the Sunni Muslim world through its affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite U.S.-led coalition efforts, the Islamic State was still controlling huge swaths of Syria and Iraq, and Russia had returned to the Middle East after some twenty-five years of absence. Let us briefly discuss President Trump’s policy on Iran, Turkey and Syria.

Iran

President Trump’s decision to pull out from the Iranian nuclear deal has significantly increased tensions in and around Iran. The return of this de facto “regime change” policy had profound implications on Iran and the Middle East. The assassination of Major General Qasem Suleymani by an American drone attack in January 2020 and Iranian retaliation strikes against U.S. troops deployed in Iraq brought the U.S.-Iran confrontation to a new level. Meanwhile, the Iranian economy is in steep decline with the sharp devaluation of the Iranian rial, and persistent large-scale protests in different regions (December 2017-January 2018, November 2019 and January 2020) have put additional pressure on the Iranian government. The rising prices of consumer products, water shortages and problems related to mismanagement are fueling the protests. The decision of some European companies, like Total and Maersk, to cease their activities in Iran has also exacerbated the situation. The U.S. strategy against Iran has multiple layers, and the economy is only one of them.

Washington is actively taking steps to cultivate an anti-Iranian regional alliance, putting Israel together with Sunni Arab powers led by

Saudi Arabia. The Tel Aviv-Riyadh cooperation is altering the decades-long security architecture of the Middle East. This cooperation will have a long-term impact on the Palestinian issue and the legitimization of Israel within the Arab world. Syria is one of the battlefields in the American struggle against Iran. The United States is effectively exploiting Israel's concerns about the growing military presence of Iran and the Tehran-backed paramilitary forces in Syria, especially along the Syria-Israel border. And Israeli military strikes against Iranian targets in Syria are part of the U.S. strategy to put pressure on Iran. Both Israel and the United States are demanding that Iran pull its military out of Syria. However, Iran is not likely to accept such demands, as this would mean squandering the Iranian achievements in Syria. Thus, the most likely scenario is a redeployment of Iranian and Hezbollah forces from the Syria-Israel border deeper into Syria and Israel's tacit acceptance of an Iranian military presence in other parts of the country.

Meanwhile, other signatories of the Iran nuclear deal are not in line with Washington. The UK, Germany, France and EU as an institution are struggling to keep the deal alive. Europeans are interested in investing in the Iranian economy and view the vast Iranian oil and gas resources as a source to increase EU energy security. The biggest irritation for the EU, however, is the United States' threats to use extraterritorial or secondary sanctions against European companies involved in Iran. Given the growing U.S.-EU tensions on trade, with a unilateral imposition of additional tariffs by the Trump administration, alongside U.S. demands on Europe to pay more for the American Defense Umbrella, the EU is increasingly concerned about the U.S. administration's new assertive policy.

Iran and the other five signatories of the Iran nuclear deal are interested in keeping the deal afloat. The EU has launched a special trade

mechanism, INSTEX, to seek to circumvent US sanctions.¹¹ However, given the tough US stance, it will be more and more difficult to keep foreign and especially European companies in Iran. The Iranian economy will continue its sharp decline, which in turn will stoke further domestic protests. Meanwhile, the U.S. maximum pressure campaign against Iran has weakened the positions of moderate forces led by President Rouhani. The conservative hardliners won a decisive victory in the February 2020 parliamentary elections and have significant chances to win the 2021 presidential elections.¹²

Turkey

President Trump inherited increasingly tense U.S.-Turkey relations. The gap between U.S. and Turkish interests in Syria, Washington's refusal to extradite the cleric Fethullah Gülen and simmering suspicions among the Turkish leadership regarding the possible involvement of the United States in the July 2016 military coup attempt made the task of normalizing bilateral relations a daunting one.

In recent years, many experts on Turkey have been arguing that Turkey was or is creating the conditions to make it a leading Middle Eastern and Mediterranean power. Turkey has moved from being a compliant member of the Western community to being an assertive power with the potential of shifting the strategic balance of the whole region. Whether or not this attitude was realistic in 2012 or remains so

¹¹ "EU mechanism for trade with Iran 'now operational'," DW.com, <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-mechanism-for-trade-with-iran-now-operational/a-49407662>, last accessed 23 July 2022.

¹² Muhammet Kursun, "Iran: Conservatives win majority of seats in parliament," Anadolu Agency, 23 February 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/iran-conservatives-win-majority-of-seats-in-parliament/1741989>.

today, there is abundant evidence that this mindset is now pervasive among Turkey's elites.¹³

Meanwhile, the launch of the Turkish Stream gas pipeline and the start of the construction of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant has created additional economic bonds with Russia. Simultaneously, the delivery of S-400 air and missile defense systems, and the resulting expulsion of Turkey from the F-35 advanced military jet program, has brought Turkey-U.S. relations to a new level of crisis.

However, the United States understands that Turkey's geopolitical significance is far-reaching. Many of the major issues in European security—migration, Libya's civil war, confronting Syria's civil war, stabilizing the Balkans, defending the Black Sea, European energy security and, in particular, accessing the energy reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean—cannot be solved without dialogue with Turkey.

We believe that the key issue in U.S.-Turkish relations was the fate of the northern parts of Syria. Here, Turkey has two strategic goals: the prevention of the establishment of a de facto independent Kurdish entity in the northeastern section; and the preservation of its influence and military presence in northwestern Syria, which will allow Ankara to influence post-war Syrian geopolitics. Since Ankara regards the YPG (the Syrian Kurdish organization) as nothing more than a group of terrorists and an adjunct of the Turkish PKK opposition, it has resolved to use force to advance its interests. But it is not willing to clash directly with Russia. Likewise, Russia is equally reluctant to fight directly with Turkey.

Thus the U.S. decision to green light a Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria in October 2019 was a significant concession to Ankara.

¹³ Stephen Blank, "Is rapprochement with Turkey possible?" MEI@75, 15 May 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/rapprochement-turkey-possible>.

This decision can be explained by President Trump's desire to fulfill his campaign promises to end the endless wars and bring American troops home. Another possibility could be the existence of a U.S. master plan to create tensions between Turkey, Russia and Iran and undermine the Astana process, and, most importantly, to drive a wedge into Ankara-Moscow relations and make Moscow sink down deeper into the Syrian crisis.

More recently, Turkey has postponed the activation of S-400 systems, the acquisition of which had caused enormous rancor in NATO and Washington, in particular.¹⁴ Prior to the sanctions, the thinking in Washington was that Turkey would activate these systems around late-April and the U.S. Congress would retaliate by imposing sanctions. This delay gave both Ankara and Washington more time to ponder the S-400 issue and search for alternatives to going to the brink.

The Eastern Mediterranean

In recent years the Eastern Mediterranean has been transformed into another hotspot of global geopolitics. The key sources of rivalry here are the recently discovered abundant energy resources, among them huge reserves of natural gas. In recent years, a U.S. oil company discovered a gigantic gas field off Cyprus's south coast. Experts assume that it may hold 227 billion cubic meters of gas—a find worth approximately forty billion euros. Israel, Cyprus, Greece and Turkey are vying for resources and transportation routes. Turkey argues that the so-called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus has undeniable rights to extract natural resources near its shores. Meanwhile Cyprus, Greece and the EU reject the Turkish claims. In mid-2019 EU foreign ministers approved a new mechanism for

¹⁴ Diego Cupulo, "Delayed S-400 activation could offer chance for Turkey-US ties to warm," Al-Monitor, 21 April 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/s-400-delay-us-turkey-window-opportunity.html#ixzz6QIAIafk>.

sanctioning entities involved in unauthorized oil drilling in Cypriot waters and in late-February 2020 measures were imposed on two high-level officials from the Turkish TPAO company for being responsible for, or involved in, the planning, directing and implementing of offshore hydrocarbon exploration activities in the Eastern Mediterranean without the authorization of Cyprus.

Shortly before that, on 2 January 2020, Greece, Cyprus and Israel signed a deal to build a 1,900km (1,180 mile) subsea pipeline to carry natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean's rapidly developing gas fields to Europe. The countries aim to reach a final investment decision by 2022 and have the pipeline completed by 2025 in order to help Europe diversify its energy resources.¹⁵

The Libyan conundrum has added much uncertainty to this puzzle. The struggle between the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), which controls the capital Tripoli, and the forces of the Libyan National Army (LNA), with its stronghold in Benghazi has been escalating since April 2019 when LNA forces led by the retired field marshal Khalifa Haftar launched an offensive to capture Tripoli. Meanwhile, in an apparent bid to strengthen its positions in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey signed a military memorandum of understanding with the GNA in November 2019, sent Libya Turkish military consultants and modern weaponry including UAVs, and deployed there thousands pro-Turkish fighters from Syria. Even more important for Turkey was the accord signed with the GNA on a maritime boundary demarcation, which significantly expanded the Turkish zone of maritime sovereignty. In spite of the fact that Cyprus, Egypt, Greece and France denounced this maritime deal, Turkish military support

¹⁵ Angeliki Koutantou, "Greece, Israel, Cyprus sign EastMed gas pipeline deal," Reuters, 2 January 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-cyprus-israel-pipeline/greece-israel-cyprus-sign-eastmed-gas-pipeline-deal-idUSKBN1Z10R5>.

allowed the GNA to repel Haftar's attack on Tripoli and expel his forces from the Western parts of Libya.

However, the situation remains fluid, as on 16 May 2020 the EU condemned the drilling and exploration operations of the Turkish drill ship *Yavuz* that had been drilling off Cyprus since April, and Egypt has announced an anti-Turkey alliance including Greece, Cyprus, the United Arab Emirates and France to confront Turkish moves in Libya and the Mediterranean. In a joint statement, the five-party alliance said it will focus on confronting Turkish moves in the territorial waters in Cyprus, where Turkey has been carrying out "illegal" excavations in the part of the Mediterranean under Cyprus's sovereignty, and it condemned Turkey's escalated violations of Greek airspace.¹⁶

Libya was also one of the key sources of the 2015 migration flows to Europe, which triggered a migrant crisis and contributed to the rise of right-wing populist forces in the Continent. Thus, from a Turkish perspective, control over large swaths of Libyan territory may give Turkey additional leverage in its relations with the EU. Turkey has been effectively using the refugee issue to pressure the EU in Syria, threatening to "open the gates" and repeat the 2015 situation.

The Eastern Mediterranean was not a top foreign policy issue of President Trump's administration, as its main focus was China. However, given the resurgence of great power competition, the United States is concerned about the growing Russian influence in the region. Russia has firmly anchored itself in Syria and gaining another point of influence may significantly strengthen Moscow's positions. Meanwhile, the United States views the regional developments as a part of its strategic relations with

¹⁶ George Mikhail, "Egypt announces international anti-Turkey alliance," *Al-Monitor*, 25 May 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/egypt-anti-turkey-alliance-libya-mediterranean-waters.html>.

Israel and Turkey. Unsurprisingly, in August 2019 the United States participated in the first 3+1 (Cyprus, Greece, Israel and the United States) energy ministerial summit held in Athens. In a joint statement, the ministers and the United States reiterated their full support and solidarity for the Republic of Cyprus in exploring and developing its resources in its Exclusive Economic Zone and expressed their concern with recent provocative steps underway in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁷ Meanwhile, in parallel with acting against Turkish interests in the issue of Cyprus, the United States was supportive of Turkey's activities in Libya, seeking to use Turkey as a tool to counter Russian influence there and undermine a possible Russia-Turkey Libyan deal. Moscow and Ankara made efforts to decrease tensions during a meeting between Putin and Erdoğan in Ankara on 8 January 2020, and the leaders of the conflicting sides were later invited to Moscow to hold negotiations under joint Russian-Turkish mediation. However, these efforts, as well as an international conference on Libya held in Berlin in late January 2020 did not bring any results.

The Black Sea

The Black Sea region is one of the key regions defining the main parameters of European security. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and NATO's enlargement, Russia's positions were significantly weakened since three littoral states—Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria—were NATO member states while Ukraine and Georgia were overtly striving for Euro-Atlantic integration. The balance of power was strategically altered in 2014 after Russia annexed Crimea. Since then, Russia has significantly increased its military presence in the Crimean Peninsula.

¹⁷ Elena Becatoros, "Greece, Cyprus, Israel, US pledge to boost energy cooperation," The Times of Israel, 7 August 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/greece-cyprus-israel-us-pledge-to-boost-energy-cooperation/>.

The United States and NATO seek to counter Russia by developing a “forward presence” in the Black Sea region. On land, this presence is built around the Romanian-led multinational brigade in Craiova. In the air, several Allies have reinforced Romania’s and Bulgaria’s efforts to protect NATO airspace. In the Black Sea, NATO is active with more ships and more naval exercises, which means more NATO forces, and more exercises and training under Headquarters Multinational Division Southeast (in Romania), which became fully operational in June 2017.¹⁸

Meanwhile, it should be noted that Turkey seeks to maintain a balance between Russia and NATO, hoping to come to terms with Russia on the issues of Black Sea security in order to effectively transform the Black Sea into an area controlled jointly by Turkey and Russia. Thus, Turkey rejects Romania’s calls for an increased NATO presence in the Black Sea.

Another key development affecting the geopolitics of the Black Sea is the launch of the Three Seas Initiative. The initiative is a flexible political platform, at a presidential level, launched in 2015. The current Three Seas Initiative has its ideological basis in twentieth-century Polish geopolitical thought associated with the figure of Józef Piłsudski. Piłsudski’s Intermarium strategy envisaged the creation of a multinational and multicultural confederation to include Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Moldova, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Finland was also expected to join this structure. Józef Piłsudski believed that the creation of this kind of confederation would affect the balance of power in this region by leveling the influence of both Germany and Russia. Another attempt to implement a project integrating

¹⁸ “NATO’s military presence in the east of the Alliance,” NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm, last accessed 23 July 2022.

the countries of Central and Eastern Europe was the concept of Jerzy Giedroyc and Juliusz Mieroszewski. In 1974, the two researchers published an article in *Paris Culture* about the inseparable relationship between the independence of Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine.¹⁹

The Three Seas Initiative includes the twelve EU Member States located between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The Dubrovnik Summit in 2016 opened the dialogue under the aegis of the Three Seas Initiative, and it was followed in 2017 by the Warsaw Summit, where the twelve Three Seas Initiative states were joined by U.S. President Donald Trump. In Warsaw, President Trump expressed his unambiguous support for the idea of this structure and the implementation of projects proposed by participants of the summit. In Bucharest, a joint declaration on development was adopted that takes into account the most important projects and plans for their implementation. The summit in the Romanian capital was also significant for two other reasons. Namely, Germany gained the status of an observer state, which may mean that Berlin is interested in the Three Seas Initiative and is ready for constructive actions. Moreover, the declaration adopted in Bucharest established the “Three Seas Investment Fund”, from which will be allocated funds for the implementation of joint projects.

The third summit was hosted by Romania, in Bucharest, in September 2018; the fourth summit was held in Slovenia in June 2019; the fifth summit was held in virtual format in Estonia in October 2020; the sixth summit took place in July 2021 in Sofia; and the seventh summit was held in Latvia in June 2022. The United States views the Three Seas

¹⁹ Wiktor Możliński, “The Three Seas Initiative – An aspect of contemporary geopolitical competition for dominance in Europe, *Ante Portas* 2(13) (2019): 45-60, http://anteportas.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/AP.XIII_Mozgin.pdf.

Initiative as a key point of leverage for countering China's growing influence in the region through the 17+1 format (which includes China plus the seventeen states of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe) and the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as a way to check Russia's growing assertiveness. Meanwhile, this initiative can also be viewed also in the context of the struggle within the EU between the so-called New and Old Europes.

In any case, the Trump administration perceived the Black Sea region as one of the hotspots of great power competition in the world and was resolute in protecting the United States' vital national interests there.

Conclusions

U.S. foreign policy between 2017 and 2020 may be characterized by several key patterns—unilateralism, disdain for international institutions and an emphasis on emerging great power competition. There was also a sense of inconsistency and chaotic changes of people in key positions—President Trump's administration had four national security advisors over a four-year period. Meanwhile, despite the president's seemingly favorable attitude towards the leaders of Russia and China, his administration pursued tough policies in both directions. New and sweeping sanctions were imposed on Russia, including on such vital economic projects as Nord Stream 2, and a trade war was launched against China. The United States has also provided lethal weapons to Ukraine and Georgia, seeking to bolster their positions vis-a-vis Russia. In the Middle East, the United States' overarching aim was the containment of Iran though the administration sometimes teetered on the brink of a policy of regime change. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the United States was seeking to foster the launch of new gas pipelines to boost Europe's energy

diversification and prevent Russia from gaining an additional foothold in Libya. In Eastern and Central Europe, the United States was supporting the establishment of the Three Seas Initiative, viewing it as a bulwark against the growing influence of both Russia and China in the region as well as a foothold for American interests.

However, during the Trump administration the main foreign policy goal for the United States was the prevention of China's future growth, as Beijing was perceived as the top long-term threat to the country's vital national interest of securing America's unrivaled positions on the Asian continent and beyond.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant negative impact on Armenia. Armenia registered a 7.6% GDP decline, and the tourism sector, one of the pillars of Armenia's economic growth (up to two million tourists visiting Armenia in 2019), was also ruined. However, the biggest crisis for Armenia in 2020 was the war in Nagorno Karabakh, where Armenia suffered a humiliating defeat. As a result of the war, the Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) Republic lost 8,500 square km of territory. The remaining part of Artsakh (3,000 square km) was transformed into a de facto Russian protectorate where Russian peacekeepers are deployed for the initial period of five years, until November 2025. The war extended the border with Azerbaijan by over 500 km, which creates serious security problems for the Armenian population living in the border regions. The 12-13 May 2021 and 16 November 2021 incursions of Azerbaijani troops into Armenian territory in the Syunik and Gegharkuniq provinces indeed laid bare the problems currently faced by the Armenian state.

The election of President Biden may reinvigorate the U.S. involvement in the South Caucasus based on the "America is back" notion.

However, it should be noted that the South Caucasus is not a top priority for the United States. Given the transition of the world order from the “unipolar moment” towards a multi-polar or polycentric architecture, the United States has to recalculate its involvement in the different regions, focusing its attention on vital areas such as the Asia-Pacific region.

Russian-U.S. relations

Russian-U.S. relations have reached their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. Different factors have played a role here—the Ukraine crisis, the Russian military intervention in Syria and alleged Russian interference in the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections. According to strategic documents published by the Biden administration, the United States perceives Russia, along with China, as a key adversary. The Russian threat is significant in such fields as cyber-security and hypersonic missiles. Meanwhile, the United States is not interested in seeing the further growth of Russia-China relations, and the U.S. administration has sought to stabilize its relations with Russia. It seems that the Biden-Putin summit of June 2021 and the decision to launch a dialogue on strategic stability and cyber-related issues prove the United States intended to stabilize relations with Russia. However, the 2022 war in Ukraine completely ruined U.S.-Russia relations, with the US providing tens of billions of U.S. dollars in economic and military support to Ukraine to support its fight against Russia and rallying the EU and other American allies to impose tough sanctions on Russia.

Turkish-U.S. relations

Turkish-U.S. relations are currently in a crisis. The Turkish leadership has serious suspicions about the possible U.S. involvement in the July 2016

military coup attempt. The United States' support for the Syrian Kurds in northeastern Syria and the rejection of Turkish demands to extradite Fetullah Gülen are other reasons for the significant decline of the U.S.-Turkey relations. For its part, the United States viewed the Turkish decision to buy Russian S-400 systems very negatively. In response, the United States expelled Turkey from the F-35 program and applied sanctions on Ankara. At a strategic level, Turkey decided to pursue a more independent foreign policy approach and bid farewell to the role of being a U.S. junior ally.

Meanwhile, Turkey remains a key NATO ally and plays a critical role in the Middle East, the Black Sea region, Afghanistan and Central Asia. The agreement between the United States and Turkey which allowed Turkey to manage the Kabul airport after the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan is additional evidence of Turkey's significance for the United States. Regardless of the political future of President Erdoğan, Turkey will continue to pursue its policy of establishing itself as a relatively independent regional player. There will be no return to the Cold War kind of relationship between the United States and Turkey. The two sides will occasionally experience friction, but Turkey will remain a NATO member and the United States will allocate a significant role to Turkey in its Eurasian policy.

Infrastructure

Since 2016, Armenia has been making an effort to launch the Persian Gulf-Black Sea multimodal transport corridor, which will connect Iran with Europe via Armenia, Georgia, the Black Sea, Bulgaria and Greece. This corridor has the potential to be included either in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, as an alternative route for China to reach Europe via Iran and the South Caucasus, or in the International North-South Transport Corridor.

This project envisages connecting India with Northern Europe via Iran and Russia circumventing the Suez Canal, but one of its routes could also pass-through Iran, Armenia, Georgia and the Black Sea.

To facilitate Armenia-Iran transport infrastructure, Armenia has launched the construction of a North-South highway to connect the Armenian-Georgian and Armenian-Iranian borders. The new 555km highway should connect the Bavra crossing point at the border with Georgia to Meghri, located on the Armenian-Iranian border. Unfortunately, as of July 2022, only twenty percent of the highway is ready. The Yerevan-Gyumri section will be finished by the end of 2023, and no timetable exists for constructing the Yerevan-Meghri section.

Meanwhile, Armenia is putting effort into increasing green energy usage in its energy balance. A critical element of this strategy is the construction of solar power plants. Currently, construction of a 55-megawatt solar power plant is underway in Mets Masrik (Gegharkunik region). Furthermore, the construction of a 200-megawatt solar power plant should be launched in the Aragatsotn region by the end of 2022.

Russian-Chinese relations

Russia and China have established a truly comprehensive strategic partnership. The two countries have a very similar worldview, which is the backbone for their partnership. They firmly believe that the United States and the West in general are in relative decline, and the unipolar moment of the 1990s and early 2000s, marked by absolute U.S. hegemony, is over. The world is entering a multipolar era, where both Russia and China will be among the crucial poles. Moscow and Beijing argue that the United States seeks to contain Russia and China to prevent their growth and secure its global hegemony.

Russia and China reject the West's claims about the universality of liberal democratic values and refute its attempts to use democracy and human rights-related issues as a pretext for interfering in the internal affairs of other countries. The Russia- China strategic partnership has been accelerating since late 2014, and this has been due in part to the U.S. and EU sanctions imposed on Russia because of developments in Ukraine. The key motto of Russian-Chinese bilateral relations is "Not always with each other, but never against each other." On 4 February 2022, Russia and China signed a joint declaration during President Putin's visit to Beijing. The 2022 war in Ukraine and unprecedented sanctions imposed by the West on Russia will most probably bring Russia and China closer to each other.

Russian-Turkish relations

Russian-Turkish relations can be characterized as simultaneously cooperative and competitive. On a strategic level, Russia is satisfied with Turkey's efforts to pursue more independent foreign and security policies since, from the Kremlin's point of view, it diminishes U.S. influence in several critical regions, namely the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Russia and Turkey have agreed to compartmentalize their relations and not allow disagreements in one region to impact other areas negatively. In the South Caucasus, Moscow and Ankara have also succeeded in coming to terms regarding the region's future, and their competition and even confrontation in other regions, such as Libya or Ukraine, does not harm their cooperation in the South Caucasus. This approach was confirmed during and after the 2020 Karabakh war.

EU-Russia

The European Union joined the United States in its response to the Ukraine crisis in 2014 and also imposed sanctions on Russia. Since then, bilateral

relations between the EU and RF have nose-dived. In March 2016, the EU agreed on five guiding principles for its relations with Russia: the full implementation of the Minsk agreements; closer ties with Russia's former Soviet neighbors; strengthening EU resilience against Russian threats; selective engagement with Russia on specific issues such as counterterrorism and support for people-to-people contacts. While new EU members, such as Poland, Romania and the Baltic States, called for a tougher policy against Russia, the European heavyweights, especially France and Germany, argued for the necessity of launching a dialogue with the Kremlin. The president of France, Emmanuel Macron, has been pushing this idea forward, stating many times, including during his meeting with the Russian president on 7 February 2022, that there could be no European security without dialogue with Russia. Macron believed that dialogue with Russia is necessary in order to realize the idea of "European strategic autonomy", which gained momentum during the Trump presidency. Prior to the 2022 war in Ukraine, Germany supported economic, especially energy, cooperation with Russia and rejected any attempts by the United States or others to prevent the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline construction. In June 2021, the European Commission published a new report on EU-Russian relations, and it put forward three main principles: push back, constrain and engage. However, the 2022 war in Ukraine resulted in a complete rupture of EU-Russian relations, and the EU has adopted six packages of economic sanctions against Russia as of June 2022.

Turkey-EU

Turkey's EU membership bid is dead, and both Ankara and Brussels well understand this. Turkey's growing assertiveness in the Eastern Mediterranean, its encroachments into EU member Cyprus's territorial waters and its military involvements in Libya, Syria and northern Iraq have

created complications for bilateral relations between Turkey and the EU. And President Erdoğan's tilt toward authoritarian rule further exacerbates the situation. At the same time, the EU needs Turkey's cooperation to prevent the additional flow of migrants from the MENA region into the EU. In the long-term perspective, the sides may arrive to the solution of elevating Turkey-EU relations and granting Turkey some special status in the European Union short of full membership. The recent idea of President Macron on establishing a European political community may be useful in this context.

China-EU relations

From the late 2010s, the EU has found itself increasingly caught up in the U.S.-China strategic rivalry. Growing economic connections with China makes it difficult for the EU to rally behind the United States and fully embrace the U.S.-China cold war. The geographical remoteness of the South China Sea, Taiwan straits and other potential flashpoints between the United States and China permit the EU to worry less about China's rising influence in Asia. The U.S. warnings about the Chinese intention to achieve hegemony in Asia do not create panic in the EU. Nonetheless, the EU, being a value-based organization, does have concerns about the situation surrounding human rights in China, particularly with regard to abuses in Xinjiang and Tibet. In March 2021 the EU joined the United States, Canada and UK in imposing sanctions on several Chinese officials for human rights abuses. However, it is becoming difficult for the EU to disentangle its concern for human rights issues from the benefit it receives from economic cooperation with China. China retaliated to the abovementioned sanctions against its own officials by imposing sanctions on several EU officials, including five members of the European Parliament. Then, in response to this, the EU

Parliament overwhelmingly voted to freeze the ratification of the EU-China investment agreement, which was preliminarily agreed upon in December 2020. The EU will resist the United States' attempts to push the EU into the U.S.-China strategic rivalry, but as a part of the Euro-Atlantic community, the EU cannot keep a neutral balance.