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*From the Cold War to the identity  
crisis: NATO in the face of isolationism,  
imperialism and multipolarity*

**Abstract**

On the 75th anniversary of its founding, NATO's role in a postmodern geopolitical landscape is marked by normative fragmentation, social demilitarization, and a Western identity crisis. Specifically, there are three strategic challenges: the U.S. withdrawal toward a "neo-isolationism" based on its energy autonomy and domestic priorities; Russian "neo-imperialism" as a postmodern project to recover spheres of influence without territorial occupation; and multipolarity as a narrative that weakens U.S. structural hegemony. In the face of this triple challenge, NATO should transform into a platform for democratic resilience and be understood as an indirect guarantor of the Western welfare state, by enabling the sharing of defense efforts among its members and freeing up resources for social investment, thus reinforcing the democratic legitimacy of collective security in the 21st century.

**Keywords**

NATO, United States, Neo-isolationism, Russia, Multipolarity

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*“No security arrangement for Europe can be effective unless the free European governments and peoples are prepared to pool their resources and to resist by every means at their disposal, including armed force.”*

Director of the Office of European Affairs (Hickerson) to the Secretary  
of State

8 March 1948

## I Introduction

NATO's 75th anniversary is not just a historical event; it is a key opportunity to reflect on the role the Alliance has played in shaping the international order and the challenges it faces in an increasingly challenging geopolitical context. Emerging in the midst of the Cold War, under the shadow of the Berlin blockade and the Soviet nuclear threat, the Atlantic Alliance was conceived as a political-military coalition anchored in a modern vision of the world: a bipolar order, structured around ideological blocs, where democratic values, respect for sovereignty and mutual containment were the pillars of the international system. In this framework, NATO was not only a collective defense mechanism, but also a club of liberal democracies, committed to protecting the Western order from communist totalitarianism.<sup>1</sup>

In the current context, however, NATO operates in a “postmodern” environment, characterized by the fragmentation of the normative and identity frameworks that defined the 20th century (Bauman, 2005), particularly after its expansion into Eastern Europe through the incorporation of post-Soviet states with varying degrees of democratic consolidation.

“Post-modernity”, as a cultural and epistemological phenomenon, is conceived, according to Lyotard (1979) as “disbelief in the meta-narratives” that previously provided coherence and legitimacy to the international order, a transformation driven by scientific-technical progress itself, but which has simultaneously provoked a crisis in the traditional mechanisms of political and institutional legitimization<sup>2</sup>. This systemic transformation has generated a structural modification in the parameters of internal cohesion, manifested in: (1) questioning of post-Cold War international regulation, (2) increase in nationalist tendencies, and (3) processes of “demilitarization” in certain Western contexts<sup>3</sup>. The obsolescence of the great legitimizing narratives corresponds,

<sup>1</sup> And perceived as a temporary creation, unlike the EU, as stated by General de Gaulle “The Treaty of Union constitutes a permanent and definite commitment of the six States, whereas NATO is a circumstantial organization, born of the Soviet threat and called upon to fire one day” Peyrefitte A. (1994). *C'était de Gaulle. Vol. I. De Fallois/Fayard.*

<sup>2</sup> Lyotard, J.-F. (1979). *La condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir.* Les Éditions de Minuit.

<sup>3</sup> In the case of Spain, this phenomenon can be explained by two surveys: According to an international survey by Gallup International/Sigma Dos (November 2023), only 29% of Spaniards

as Lyotard points out, to a crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the institutions that depended on it, which in the field of international relations translates into a decrease in the indexes of institutional trust and a growing divergence in strategic priorities among member states (Nye, 2011).<sup>4</sup>

The nationalist tendencies present in key actors adopt specific manifestations. In the United States, an orientation towards what could be called “neo-isolationism” is identified, characterized by policies of strategic selectivity (Posen, 2014) and a pragmatic and transactional approach to traditional multilateral commitments<sup>5</sup>. This repositioning, determined by structural factors such as energy self-sufficiency and domestic fiscal pressures, substantially modifies Washington’s role as the main security provider in the Euro-Atlantic space, generating imbalances in the distribution of responsibilities within the allied structure.

For its part, in Moscow, nationalism seems to manifest itself in the form of “neo-imperialism.” The behavior of the Russian Federation exhibits a systematic revisionist pattern with respect to the international order consolidated after 1991. Far from seeking a classical territorial restoration, Russian geopolitical revisionism aims to consolidate a normative, energetic and military sphere of influence, often through hybrid tools. Its military interventions in post-Soviet spaces and the Middle East shape a multidimensional strategy aimed at the recovery of spheres of influence. This positioning incorporates elements of the postmodern paradigm through the relativization of normative principles and the fragmentation of hegemonic narratives, creating an environment of strategic ambiguity that hinders NATO’s cohesive response.

Thus, postmodernity and its identity crisis, U.S. withdrawal and Russian revisionism define a complex strategic environment, characterized by the coexistence of internal centrifugal pressures and external threats. In order to analytically delimit this scenario, this article poses the following guiding questions:

1. How does postmodernity, understood as a crisis of normative and identity referents, affect NATO’s internal legitimacy as a multilateral political-military alliance?
2. To what extent could the strategic retreat of the United States be explained as a structural phenomenon, beyond contingencies associated with the new Trump administration?

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would be willing to fight for their country in the event of war, while 53% would not (<https://www.sigmados.com/uno-de-cada-dos-espanoles-no-esta-dispuesto-a-luchar-por-su-pais/>). However, the Armed Forces enjoy a high social recognition and are repeatedly the most highly valued institution in our country, with an average score of 6.8 out of 10. For example, CIS Barometer of May 2025 (<https://www.cis.es>)

4 Nye, J. S. (2011). *The Future of Power*. PublicAffairs.

5 Posen, B. R. (2014). *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*. Cornell University Press.

3. Does Russian geopolitical revisionism constitute a systemic threat or is it a reactive strategy limited by internal factors?
4. Does the emerging multipolarity reflect a structural change in the global distribution of power or does it respond to a postmodern narrative that blurs a persistent US hegemony?

To answer these questions, a qualitative methodology with an interpretative approach will be adopted, based on critical documentary analysis, the study of strategic discourses and the contrast with empirical indicators. The aim is not to offer a definitive diagnosis, but to contribute to the understanding of the processes that are redefining NATO's role in an increasingly uncertain international order.

The article will rely on a combination of techniques: on the one hand, the study of geopolitical discourse focused on the public narratives of U.S., Russian and NATO leaders, diplomats and strategic doctrines; on the other hand, a comparative contextual analysis relating these discourses to material indicators, to assess the coherence between strategic narratives and actual capabilities.

The selection of documentary sources will be structured in five categories:

1. Official and institutional documentation: Reports from multilateral organizations and government agencies that provide verified data on military capabilities, strategic frameworks and budgetary developments.
2. Political-diplomatic sources: Public statements, memoirs and publications of high-level foreign policy and defense officials –both American and Russian– whose direct participation in key decisions gives them a unique empirical value for interpreting the configuration of the contemporary geopolitical scenario.
3. Specialized academic literature: Reference works and articles on international relations, strategic studies, political sociology and polemology, which allow contextualizing current dynamics.
4. Updated sectoral analysis: Recent studies that contribute to update the strategic position of NATO and its main actors.
5. Empirical indicators and databases that allow contrasting the geopolitical discourse with the structural reality.

Since the subject of this study is NATO, the analysis will deliberately focus on the Euro-Atlantic sphere. Although occasional references will be made to China's role in the multipolar narrative, the focus will remain within the scope of the Alliance's direct action, in order to avoid a thematic dispersion that would dilute the depth of the analysis.

With this scaffolding, the study sets out to examine how postmodernity has altered the normative and functional foundations of the Alliance, which will be addressed in the following sections.

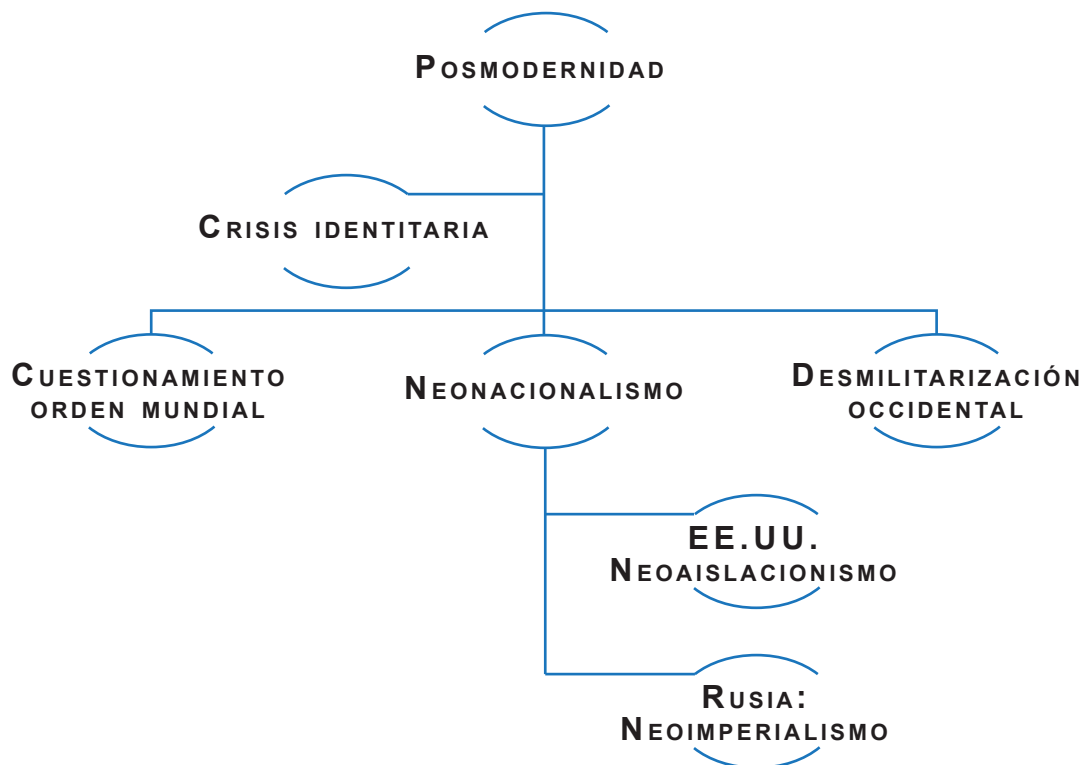


Gráfico 1. Posmodernidad y geopolítica. Fuente: elaboración propia

## 2 NATO in the face of postmodernity: from democratic bastion to identity crisis

NATO was created to protect the Western democratic-capitalist system against the communist threat. As President Truman (1956) explained, “The Marshall Plan had brought some relief, but the constant threat of unpredictable Soviet measures gave rise to an atmosphere of insecurity and fear among the peoples of Western Europe. (...). Only an inclusive security system could allay these fears.” In other words, NATO was to play the role of economic guarantor in countries threatened by the USSR in order to anchor investments and their *postbellum* recovery. It was the era of the German *Wirtschaftswunder* or the French *Trente Glorieuses*, marked by a collective confidence in the system, which motivated citizens to defend it.

During the Cold War, the West clearly positioned itself as the defender of freedom and democracy against communist totalitarianism, in a historical context marked by the *postbellum* optimism of economic recovery in which the Alliance, as envisioned by Truman, provided the necessary institutional stability. As Jervis (2010), scholar and CIA advisor, noted, “the Cold War was not merely a bilateral contest; it was a global struggle in which the identities of the superpowers played a crucial role in shaping alliances”<sup>6</sup>.

6 Jervis, R. (2010). Identity and the Cold War. In M. Leffler & O. Westad (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* (Vol. 2). Cambridge University Press.

However, the oil crises of the 1970s and the successive deindustrializing waves due to globalization seem to have ended up forming, in the West, a “disappointed Postmodernity”, according to Lassalle (2017), with a proletarian class for which “voting takes on a contrite character in which rancor surfaces as a kind of vengeful catharsis for having failed to achieve the expectations to which it believed itself entitled”<sup>7</sup>. Western institutions are subjected to the critical examination of their foundations, which favors their external detractors.

This “deconstructivism” would no longer be purely philosophical but real and would be undermining the very foundations of the current world order. For this reason, the postmodern populism that seems to be eating away at Western democracies is creating a new scenario for which NATO does not seem to be prepared. With the current geopolitical fragmentation, postmodern deception seems to break the conviction of citizens in the goodness of the system, which morally disarms the Atlantist democracies in ideological confrontations.

As Colonel Pardo de Santayana (2021) emphasizes, “the question of whether Western values are universal is now a geopolitical question. Ideas and beliefs are once again part of the battlefield.”<sup>8</sup> And the fact is that both Russia and China have driven, in their own way, a “de-Westernizing” movement, which aims to unite countries not aligned with the US, the so-called Global Majority (глобальное большинство, globalnoye bolshinstvo), a phenomenon that coincides in turn with a profound Western identity crisis.

Moreover, NATO’s eastward enlargement has failed to consolidate it as a true club of democracies. Certainly, the new members of Eastern Europe are experiencing a different, somewhat more optimistic mood because, precisely due to their recent “re-westernization”, they are experiencing an improvement in their living conditions. For example, in the last 20 years, the human development indices (HDI) of Poland, Romania, members of NATO and the EU and former members of the Warsaw Pact, have shown greater progress than those of Serbia and Belarus, also former members of the Eastern Bloc but now close to Moscow<sup>9</sup>. Among NATO states, only Albania (0.789) and North Macedonia (0.764) recorded a lower Human Development Index (HDI) than Serbia (0.807) and Belarus (0.797) in 2022<sup>10</sup>. Thus, as President Truman

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7 Lassalle, J. M. (2017). *Against populism: Cartography of a postmodern totalitarianism*. Debate.

8 Pardo De Santayana, J. (2021). *Should we oppose the de-Westernization of the world?* IEEE Analysis Paper, (37). <https://www.ieee.es/>. <https://www.ieee.es/>.

9 Poland has led with an increase in its HDI from 0.855 in 2003 to 0.910 in 2022. Romania has followed closely behind, improving from 0.785 to 0.842. Both Belarus and Serbia have experienced somewhat smaller increases, rising from 0.740 to 0.797 and from 0.750 to 0.807, respectively. Source: [hdr.undp.org/en/reports](http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports).

10 Latest available data. For guidance purposes, Serbia, with 6.7 million inhabitants, generates a GDP of 65 billion euros, while the Valencian Community, with 5 million inhabitants, produces a GDP of 130 billion, more than twice as much.

envisioned, European military and economic integration has generated tangible social benefits.

However, this “re-Westernization” has not necessarily been accompanied by greater democratization of the new allies nor, most especially, by greater respect for rules, a key aspect of a liberal order based on rules, which NATO is called upon to preserve. Illustratively, the evolution of the World Justice Project (WJP) index reveals marked differences between Western and Eastern European Atlanticists. The former, such as Denmark (1st), Norway (2nd), Finland (3rd) and Sweden (4th), lead the way, reflecting robust justice systems and strong protection of fundamental rights. In Eastern Europe, on the other hand, Poland (31st), and Hungary (73rd) register declines in judicial independence and fundamental rights due to controversial reforms. Turkey (117th) is the member state with the worst score<sup>11</sup>. In this sense, the recent incorporations of Sweden and Finland could represent a turning point in the democratic relativism that seemed to permeate the Alliance in recent decades.

NATO, despite clear U.S. leadership, is an organization based on consensus among its members, where common values play a fundamental role. This operating model is facing growing difficulties in a context of identity fragmentation and differences in adherence to democratic values among its members. As former U.S. Minister Albright (2020) warned, “a NATO whose acceptance of democracy is in doubt would have far less claim to public approval than it has enjoyed in the past.”<sup>12</sup> This risk is compounded in an environment where the current Neo-Cold War is fought in a context of more blurred ideologies; although Moscow insists on defining itself as anti-Western, the truth is that its conservatism, especially its Orthodox Christianity, brings it identitarily close to sectors of the U.S., particularly evangelical-based Trumpism<sup>13</sup>. In fact, only 58% of US Republicans perceive Russia as an enemy, compared to 67% of Democrats.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, contemporary post-modernity also seems to favor a “demilitarization”, the result of the rejection by societies, especially democratic ones, of war and external interference, which makes NATO’s military missions more difficult. A comparison between the Korean War (1950-1953) and the Afghan War (2001-2021) illustrates this evolution. The former would represent a “modern” approach, a contest between states with unquestionable popular support, as demonstrated by General McArthur’s return to New York despite having been dismissed by Truman. At its peak, more than 325,000 U.S. troops were stationed on the Asian peninsula, of which today, seven

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<sup>11</sup> WORLD JUSTICE PROJECT (2024). <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/global>. Accessed 11-05-2025.

<sup>12</sup> Albright, M. (2020). *Hell and Other Destinations*. HarperCollins.

<sup>13</sup> According to Karaganov (2025), a former Kremlin advisor, “God, and therefore faith in the higher destiny of man, should become part of the Russian dream-idea, even if someone does not believe in Him” in what seems like a simile of the American “In God we trust”.

<sup>14</sup> PEW RESEARCH CENTER (2024). *Partisan Divisions Over NATO and Ukraine*. <https://www.pewresearch.org>

decades later, almost 29,000 still remain in a Republic that has established itself as a democratic-capitalist bastion in Asia.

In contrast, the international mission in Afghanistan would exemplify a “post-modern” context, with a larger NATO-led coalition fighting a complex and diffuse terrorist network. Citizen pressure, especially through social media and the press, forced the contending to formulate extremely vague objectives and narratives, sometimes contravening strict military logic. Moreover, to avoid civilian casualties and abuses of power, the rules of engagement were very restrictive, drafted by jurisconsults rather than military men, which would have demoralized the deployed troops and hindered the success of the mission. As General McMaster (2024), President Trump’s former chief of staff, recalls in his memoirs, [U.S. embassy staff in Afghanistan] “lamented the lack of authority for our military to pursue the enemy, describing the restrictive rules of engagement as a sign that “we were not taking the war seriously””.<sup>15</sup>

And is that, as stated by General Mattis (2019), former US defense minister, “if a democracy does not trust its troops, then it should not go to war.”<sup>16</sup> This is the question that every society should resolve before embarking on military conflict resolution; the media and political pressure to intervene in foreign genocides and civil wars contrasts with the high citizen intolerance to own human losses, which motivates a sort of “pro-forma intervention”, where the stated objectives are not accompanied by the necessary resources to achieve them.

### 3 U.S. “Neo-isolationism”: the “demilitarization” of post-modern democracies

The phenomenon of “demilitarization” described above perhaps finds its most evident expression in U.S. “neo-isolationism.” This trend, particularly visible under the new Trump administration, reflects the structural limitations experienced by advanced democracies in sustaining global military commitments in the face of domestic social demands. The U.S. electorate that voted for the current president, composed mostly of a non-college working class from the *Rust Belt* and rural areas, clearly prioritizes economic protection, strengthening national identity and a foreign policy pragmatism that generates tangible benefits for the country (Ruffini, 2023)<sup>17</sup>. In this context, Trump’s promise to end “endless wars” –such as those in Iraq and

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<sup>15</sup> McmEaster, H.R. (2024). *At War With Ourselves*. HarperCollins Publishers.

<sup>16</sup> Mattis, J. N. and West, F.J. (2019). *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead*. Random House.

<sup>17</sup> Ruffini, P. (2023). *Party of the people : inside the multiracial populist coalition remaking the GOP*. Simon & Schuster.

The Rust Belt is a region of the northeastern and midwestern U.S., marked by its industrial past and an economic decline following deindustrialization. In the 2024 election, Donald Trump won in the key Rust Belt states of Pennsylvania (with its economic capital Philadelphia), Michigan (Detroit) and Wisconsin (Milwaukee).

Afghanistan— and withdraw U.S. troops from theaters of conflict has been central to his discourse and responds to the weariness of his electoral base regarding prolonged military engagements abroad<sup>18</sup>.

Against this backdrop of retrenchment, two factors seem to emerge as defining the new paradigm of post-modern American demilitarization: energy sovereignty, the foundation of unprecedented strategic autonomy, and the pressure of a growing social bill, which competes directly with military spending for limited budgetary resources.

### *3.1 Energy self-sufficiency: a pillar of neo-isolationism*

The US energy transformation represents one of the most significant geopolitical shifts of the 21st century and constitutes the main material support for its neo-isolationism. In 2018, the United States became the world's largest oil producer, culminating an evolution that took its crude oil generation from 6.5 million barrels per day in 2012 to a record 13.4 million in August 2024 (U.S. Energy Information Administration [EIA], 2024a)<sup>19</sup>. In parallel, natural gas extraction soared from 66 billion cubic feet per day in 2012 to 103.6 billion in 2023 (EIA, 2024b).<sup>20</sup>

This energy revolution has not only shielded the United States from the traditional vulnerabilities of the global market, but has fundamentally redefined its international position, allowing it to contemplate a strategic retreat unthinkable in previous eras. As O'Sullivan (2017) points out, this new reality configures a geopolitical scenario with “a Russia more petulant than powerful” and a China less antagonistic to the international order because it would not be forced to control resources vital to its economy.<sup>21</sup>

The tension between European NATO allies with the Reagan administration during the Cold War, with a very similar scenario over the construction of the Trans-Siberian gas pipeline, is a long time ago: sanctions against the former USSR for martial law in Poland, which Germany and France did not support; an attempt to delay the construction of the pipeline, and the promotion of the development of alternatives in the North Sea and Norway (Department of State, 1982)<sup>22</sup>. Current US energy

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18 Indeed during his first term, the Trump administration oversaw the withdrawal of troops from Syria, Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan, and signed the Doha Agreement with the Taliban for a conditional total withdrawal from Afghanistan, which was later culminated by Biden.

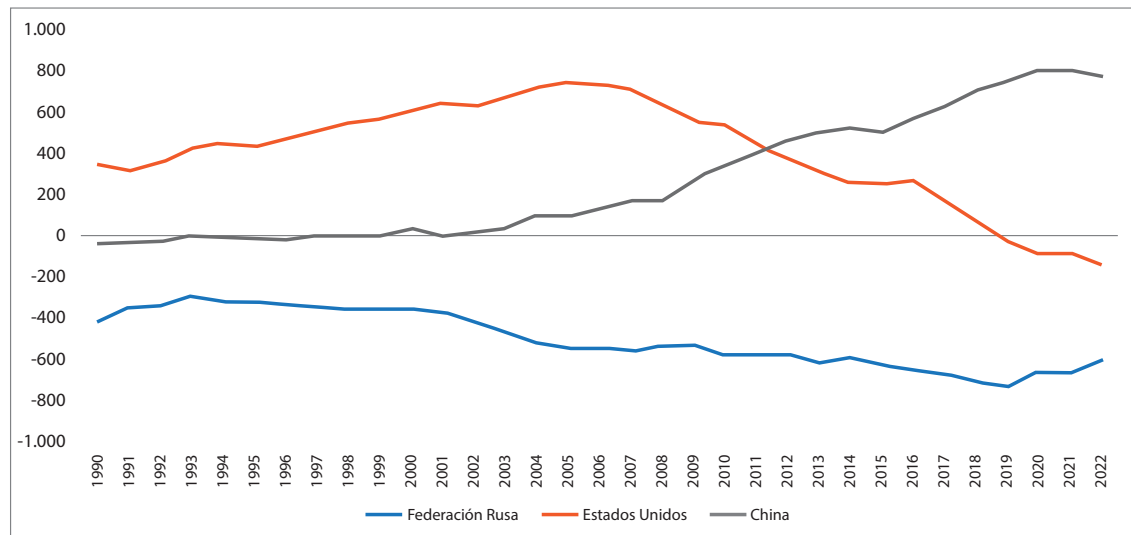
19 U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA). (2024a). U.S. crude oil production hits record high. Retrieved from <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=63824>

20 U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA). (2024b). Annual dry natural gas production. Retrieved from <https://www.eia.gov/naturalgas/annual/>

21 O'SULLIVAN, M. L. (2017). *Windfall: How the New Energy Abundance Upends Global Politics and Strengthens America's Power*. Simon & Schuster.

22 DEPARTMENT OF STATE (1982). *Debrief of Under Secretary Buckley's Trip to Europe*. <https://history.state.gov/>

self-sufficiency, on the other hand, has kept the Atlantic bloc united against Russia, largely due to lower fuel costs<sup>23</sup>, a scenario that was unimaginable during the Cold War. Europe, by geography, will continue to depend on Russian gas supplies, but the global abundance created by the US will limit its use as a diplomatic weapon, making NATO less vulnerable in this Neo-Cold War than in the previous one, demonstrating how demilitarization does not necessarily imply a weakening of collective security when it is backed by complementary economic strengths<sup>24</sup>.



Energy balance of payments. Source: Enerdata (2024)

This new US energy position has eliminated the strategic need to control regions such as the Mediterranean to secure access to Middle Eastern resources, one of the fundamental historical reasons for the integration of Italy, Greece and Turkey into NATO (Department of State, 1951)<sup>25</sup>. It has also allowed Washington to dispense with privileged relations with actors such as Saudi Arabia, previously crucial for stabilizing oil prices in times of crisis. Moreover, the traditional Persian Gulf allies may now see Washington as a rival because it is the world's largest producer and because it is no longer their main customer, which is now China and, in time, perhaps India as well.

<sup>23</sup> The Brent price averaged \$83 per barrel for the full year 2023, compared to \$101 in 2022; By mid-February 2024, the Brent price was \$85 per barrel, similar to the average price for the full year 2023, and well below \$101 in 2022.

<sup>24</sup> In 2023, the US produced almost 50% of the liquefied natural gas imported by Europe, followed by Qatar (14%) and Russia (13%), when in 2021 it had been 27% (Zaretskaya, 2024); European imports from Russia fell from 150 billion cubic meters in 2021 to less than 43 in 2023 thanks to the US and Norway, both NATO member states, which offset the falls and reduced dependence on Russian imports. Consequently, US energy autonomy has shielded Europe from the possible impacts of a global shortage of key materials for economies such as France, Spain or the Netherlands, the main EU importers.

<sup>25</sup> DEPARTMENT OF STATE (1951). Briefing Book Prepared in the Department of State for the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (Eisenhower)<sup>2</sup>.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951v03p1/d251>

Energy sovereignty thus represents the material support of neo-isolationism, providing Washington with the unprecedented ability to reconsider its global commitments and develop a more selective and less interventionist foreign policy. This retreat, far from being a sign of decline, would reflect the strategic adaptation of a postmodern democracy that prioritizes efficiency in the use of its budgetary resources over indiscriminate commitments.

### *3.2 Social bill (and fracture): defense versus welfare?*

U.S. neo-isolationism can also be explained to a large extent by an increasingly visible structural tension: the growing pressure of social spending on public resources, drastically limiting the capacity to mobilize for military purposes. This fundamental transformation, characteristic of postmodern democracies, represents a paradigm shift that U.S. Minister Eagleburger (1993) clearly anticipated: “During the Cold War it was relatively easy to justify national security expenditures and generate support for sustained U.S. involvement abroad. It is infinitely more difficult now.”<sup>26</sup>.

The budget figures reveal this transformation in stark contrast. As Figure 3 shows, in 1962, the United States spent 9% of its GDP on defense, whereas in 2024 this proportion fell to 3%, a drop of two-thirds in relative terms. This decline has not been accidental but the result of a shift in priorities towards social spending. Social Security has doubled to 5% of GDP, Medicare now accounts for 3.8% of GDP and Medicaid accounts for 2.3% of GDP<sup>27</sup>. These three programs, which barely existed in the 1960s, now total \$2,980 billion, quadrupling the defense budget (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2024)<sup>28</sup>.

This structural dilemma between “guns or butter” represents the very essence of postmodern demilitarization: citizens of advanced democratic societies increasingly prioritize investment in social welfare over military projects<sup>29</sup>. This trend generates

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26 Eagleburger, L. S. (1993). Memorandum For Secretary Of State - Designate Warren Christopher. 5 January. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/1993-01-05-Memorandum-for-Secretary-of-State-Designate-Warren-Christopher-from-Lawrence-S-Eagleburger.pdf>

27 Medicare is federal health insurance for people age 65 and older and for some people under 65 with certain disabilities or conditions, while Medicaid is a joint federal and state program that helps cover medical costs for people with limited income and resources.

<https://www.hhs.gov/answers/medicare-and-medicaid/what-is-the-difference-between-medicare-medicaid/index.html>

28 U.S. CONGRESSIONAL BUDGET OFFICE (CBO) (2024). Atlas Of Military Compensation. Retrieved from <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2023-12/59475-Military-Compensation-Infographic.pdf>

29 The “guns or butter” dilemma is an economic concept to illustrate the choice faced by governments between spending on national defense or on food in times of conflict; it has its origins in the debate over the use of nitrate as fertilizer or as gunpowder during World War I. For a Spanish analysis: Jurado-Sánchez, J., and Jiménez-Martín, J. A. (2019).

unavoidable political pressures to reduce defense spending, a phenomenon that President Eisenhower (1953) anticipated with remarkable prescience: “Every gun made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, means, in the final analysis, a theft from those who are hungry and not fed, those who are cold and not clothed”<sup>30</sup>.

The urgency of this budgetary reorientation is evident when analyzing the social shortcomings of the United States: despite being the world’s largest economy, the country presents worrying indicators such as an infant mortality rate of 5.6 deaths per 1.000 live births –much higher than that of Spain (3.0)– and profound inequalities, as the mortality of African-American babies (10.9) is double that of whites (4.5) and far exceeds that of Hispanics (4.8) and Asians (3.5);<sup>31</sup> furthermore, the rate varies from 8.9 in Mississippi to 3.1 in Vermont,<sup>32</sup> which underlines the internal pressure to allocate more resources to social needs instead of military spending.

In this context of budgetary tensions, NATO takes on a new strategic significance: not only as a military alliance, but also as a mechanism for managing the inevitable demilitarization of advanced democracies. By distributing defensive burdens among multiple actors and generating economies of scale, this structure frees resources for social purposes without compromising collective security. Without the Alliance, each member state’s military spending would be higher, surely at the expense of its education, health or pensions.<sup>33</sup>

However, the sustainability of this model depends critically on an equitable sharing of responsibilities that, so far, has not fully materialized. The United States continues to assume 68% of the alliance’s total spending in 2023, an unsustainable proportion in the long term considering its growing domestic social commitments.

Therefore, in order to justify a redistribution of burdens in the Atlantic area, it seems essential to transform the social narrative about NATO, presenting it not only as a military instrument, but also as an indirect pillar of the European welfare state. By distributing the costs of collective defense among member states, significant domestic savings can be achieved without increasing the tax burden.<sup>34</sup>

The need for this rebalancing of responsibilities is increasingly reflected in U.S. policy discourse. Burns (2019), former CIA director under Biden, argued, “a deeper

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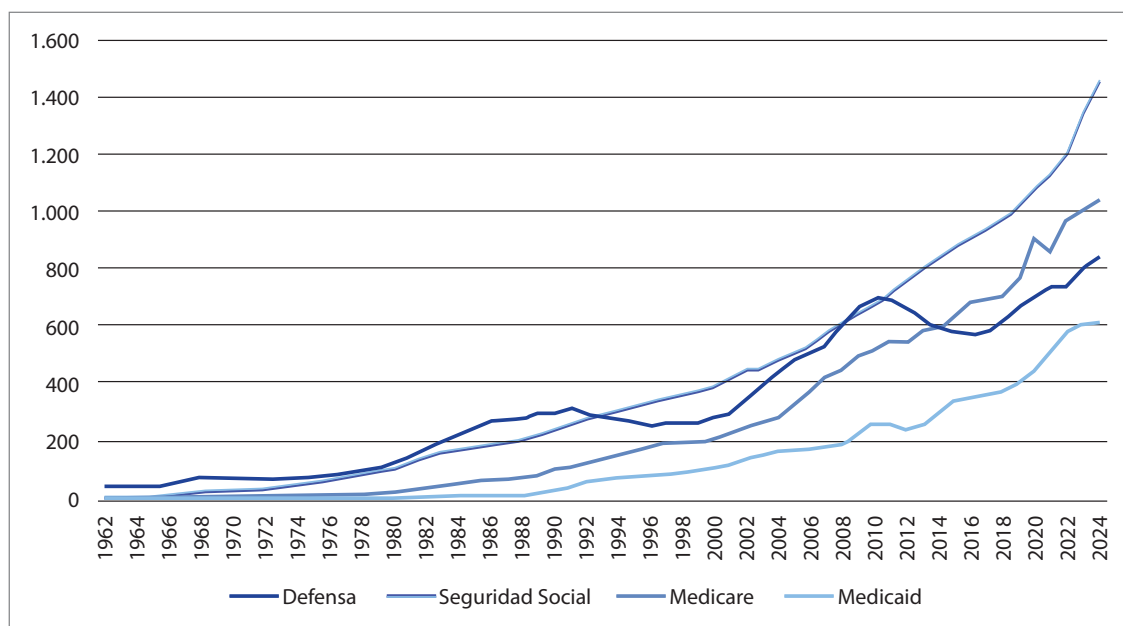
30 Eisenhower, E. (1953). *The Chance for Peace*. American Society of Newspaper Editors. April 16.

31 CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION (2024). *Infant Mortality in the United States, 2022*. National Vital Statistics Reports, 73(5), 1-28.

32 Ely, D.M., Driscoll, A.K. (2024).

33 As happened in Greece during the 2008 financial crisis, when social adjustments were greater than those of defense spending. Gabellini, G. (2016). *Greece, chronicle of a disaster foretold*. Perspectives. January/June.

34 For this reason Coffey, L. (2024) proposed that the finance ministers of NATO member states hold regular meetings.



U.S. military and social expenditures.source: Congressional Budget Office (2024)

U.S. focus on Asia makes the transatlantic partnership more, not less, meaningful. It implies a new strategic division of labor with our European allies, where they assume even more responsibility for order on their continent.”<sup>35</sup> This view is echoed also by Mattis (2019), former defense minister under Trump: “NATO cannot hold together if the burden-sharing remains so unequal. Europeans cannot expect Americans to care more about their future than they do.”<sup>36</sup> Both perspectives, coming from senior officials with different political orientations, underline the structural and not merely conjunctural nature of this change in approach.

In view of this situation, American neo-isolationism would represent not a temporary anomaly but the most visible manifestation of a structural transformation in post-modern democracies, which are facing increasing difficulties in mobilizing resources for military purposes in the face of domestic social demands. Energy self-sufficiency has given the United States greater room for maneuver to reconsider the scope of its global commitments, while the pressure of social spending is driving the search for more collaborative and selective formulas in its foreign policy, to the detriment of traditional unilateral military leadership. This process, rather than an unequivocal confirmation of a multipolar *Weltanschauung*, reflects Washington’s adaptation to an international environment characterized by competition between powers and the need for alliances, without necessarily implying the renunciation of its dominant role, but rather a redefinition of its priorities and methods of leadership.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Burns, W. J. (2019). *The back channel*. Random house.

<sup>36</sup> Mattis, J. N. and West, F.J. (2019). *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead*. Random House.

<sup>37</sup> It is worth considering that the collaboration model that Washington finally promotes could be close to that of the international consortium responsible for the development of the F-35, with a business rather than institutional approach. This scheme, for example, allows the exclusion of actors

#### 4 Russian revisionism as a manifestation of postmodern “neo-imperialism”

Russian revisionism represents one of the most complex and determining geopolitical phenomena of the 21st century. Rising from the ashes of the Soviet collapse, this movement has gone from an internal ideological debate to consolidate itself as an imperial project with postmodern characteristics, challenging the international order established after the Cold War. Russia’s transformation from a country in the throes of an identity crisis to an actor claiming its space as a global power reveals the profound contradictions of a world where traditional narratives of imperialism intermingle with new forms of power projection and historical nostalgia.

##### *4.1 The evolution of Russian revisionism: from ideological debate to postmodern “neo-empire”*

In the current geopolitical landscape, NATO faces its greatest challenge in Russian military aggressiveness, evidenced since the intervention in Georgia (2008) and extended to Syria (since 2015), Kazakhstan (2022) and Ukraine (2014 and since 2022). This phenomenon reflects a paradoxical postmodern manifestation: while the West embraces relativism and the deconstruction of established narratives, Russia has walked an antithetical path, revitalizing its traditional values and imperial ambitions vis-à-vis the Atlanticist bloc<sup>38</sup>. The identity vacuum after the Soviet collapse led to a profound national crisis that resulted in a sense of imperial nostalgia, fertilizing the ground for the current Russian neo-imperialism.

This postmodern nostalgia, however, did not emerge unchallenged within Russian political thought itself. During the 1990s and early 2000s, there developed mainly two clearly opposing currents of thought regarding Russia’s future and its position in the world, represented not by mere theorists but by figures who occupied high echelons of power and held the country’s destiny in their hands.

On the one hand, the ideological current, represented by figures such as Aleksandr Dugin or Yevgeny Primakov (former Foreign Minister and Prime Minister), advocated a reaffirmation of Russian imperial sovereignty through an autonomous foreign policy and

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who do not make significant financial contributions to the project or who dissociate themselves geostrategically, as was the case with Turkey when it acquired Russian military equipment. However, recent reports highlight serious problems in the estimation of costs associated with these programs, which seems to be a recurrent problem in this type of military initiatives (GAO, 2024).

38 For example Dugin (1997) “The fate of Russians and their great future does not depend today on how many Russians are outside the Russian Federation, nor on what our political or economic situation is at the moment, but on whether we will have enough weapons to defend our independence militarily against Russia’s only and natural ‘potential enemy’ - the United States and the North Atlantic bloc.”

the consolidation of a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. On the other hand, the more pragmatic economist current, led by Yegor Gaidar (former Minister of Economy and Finance and former Acting Prime Minister) and Andrei Kovalev (prominent diplomat in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), advocated the integration of Russia into global economic structures and the adoption of liberal market-oriented reforms.

Gaidar, from his experience as an architect of Russian economic reforms and his empirical and institutional analysis, argued that the Soviet system collapsed because of structural inefficiencies in centralized planning, inability to adapt to technological change and critical dependence on oil exports. He believed that the only viable solution for Russia's future was liberal economic reform and integration into global markets. As the main person responsible for "shock therapy" in the 1990s, he advocated that transforming Russia into a modern market economy was the only path to stability and prosperity, despite the social costs and strong political opposition that these reforms generated<sup>39</sup>.

In contrast, Dugin (1997), whose influence extended to military circles and Putin's entourage, offered a geopolitical and civilizational interpretation of the Soviet collapse, placing it within the framework of a historical struggle between "land power" (Eurasia) and "sea power" (Atlantism). According to him, the disintegration of the USSR was not an inevitable systemic failure, but a geopolitical dismantling orchestrated by the West<sup>40</sup>. Primakov (2004), for his part, although less radical than Dugin, adopted his ideas as Foreign Minister and later as Prime Minister to qualify Western military interventions in the former Yugoslavia as "*NATO unilateralism under American leadership*" and advocated a multipolar foreign policy counterbalancing American hegemony<sup>41</sup>.

The severe financial crisis of 1998, which erupted precisely during Primakov's term as Prime Minister, triggered by the fall in oil prices and the accumulation of foreign debt, proved to be the turning point that definitively tipped the balance towards Dugin's thesis. As Gilman (2010), IMF representative in Russia during the crisis, states, "Understanding the 1998 default is critical to appreciating the antipathy most Russians still feel toward the 1990s and the comfort they have found since Vladimir Putin and later Dmitry Medvedev came to power."<sup>42</sup> The perceived failure of Gaidar's liberal economic reforms, coupled with the traumatic impact of IMF intervention, deeply discredited the economic and pragmatic vision, consolidating in Russian society a revisionist view that yearned to regain its lost status as a superpower.

This dynamic has crystallized into what Lo (2015) terms "postmodern empire," where, without seeking direct territorial reconstruction of the USSR, the Kremlin pursues strategic, economic, and normative hegemony over post-Soviet Eurasia,

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39 Gaidar, Y. (2007). *Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia*. Brookings Institution Press.

40 Dugin, A. (1997). *The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia*. Arktogetja.

41 Primakov, Y. (2004). *Russian Crossroads: Toward the New Millennium*. Yale University Press.

42 Gilman, M. G. (2010). *No precedent, no plan : inside Russia's 1998 default*. The MIT Press.

exerting influence without the administrative burdens of classical empire<sup>43</sup>. This dual approach reflects the triumph of Dugin and Primakov's *Weltanschauung* adapted to contemporary realities, reasserting Russia's position as an influential power, often at the expense of international norms and regional stability. According to Kovalev (2017), from his diplomatic experience, the ideal international relations paradigm for Moscow would be the Yalta-Potsdam agreements, where the victorious powers of World War II delimited their zones of influence, arrogated to themselves a monopoly on nuclear weapons and the right to veto decisions agreed upon at the UN<sup>44</sup>. This nostalgic vision of a world order where Russia occupied a privileged place contrasted with the post-Cold War model, the unilateral *Pax Americana*, which sought to generalize democratic values in the international arena.<sup>45</sup>

#### 4.2 Geopolitical tensions and the future of Russian neo-imperialism

This emergence of Russian revisionism as an expression of a post-modern neo-imperialism has generated inevitable tensions with the West, the roots of which can be identified in three main causes. Firstly, the persistence of the legacy of the Cold War: the US had relied on Islamism in its ideological confrontation against atheistic communism, which showed that old alliances and misgivings still conditioned the bilateral relationship and hindered a full normalization. Second, geopolitical competition and the dispute over zones of influence: the proposal to integrate Russia into NATO never materialized, in part because Washington had turned to China to weaken the USSR, taking advantage of the rifts between Mao and Stalin. As Clinton advisor Stent (2019) acknowledged, "NATO's open-door policy meant that, in theory, Russia was eligible to join, although that might have raised questions about whether NATO was ready to come to Russia's defense in a potential conflict with China;"<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Primakov (2004) himself acknowledges in his memoirs that several European statesmen had commented to him that "it was absolutely inappropriate to give Russia guarantees against any threat from Asia. If Russia were to join NATO, such guarantees would be necessary". Finally, a third cause could be the fear of a leadership bicephaly within a NATO with an integrated Russia, as Primakov (2004) also noted: "And then what, two centers would be formed in NATO, the United States and Russia?"<sup>47</sup>.

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43 Lo, B. (2015). *Russia and the New World Disorder*. Brookings institution press.

44 Kovalev, A. (2017). *Russia's Dead End: An Insider's Testimony from Gorbachev to Putin*. Potomac Books.

45 The concept of Pax Americana Unipolar refers to a period of U.S. global dominance following the end of the Cold War in 1991, characterized by U.S. military, economic and cultural hegemony. Key proponents of this idea include Paul Wolfowitz, who advocated U.S. primacy to prevent the rise of rival powers, and Madeleine Albright, who promoted American leadership in the maintenance of international institutions and the spread of liberal values.

46 Stent, A. (2019). *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and With the Rest*. Hachette.

47 Primakov (2004) op.cit.

These fundamental tensions were in turn aggravated by NATO's successive eastward enlargements, which seemed to be more politically than technically driven, lacking the necessary diplomatic and military backing. According to the Czech-born former U.S. minister Madeleine Albright (2020), the Alliance was supposed to expand without the need for Russian consent: "The theory, apparently, is that Russia's reward for losing the Cold War should have been a veto over alliance decisions."<sup>48</sup> However, this position did not have a strong diplomatic consensus within the Western establishment itself. Burns (2019), then U.S. ambassador to Moscow and later CIA director under President Biden, expressed significant reservations, "it seemed to me that NATO expansion was at best premature and at worst unnecessarily provocative."<sup>49</sup> From the Russian perspective, General Dvorkin (2008) anticipated the divisive consequences of this policy: "The NATO accession process is a democratization process that will lead to a civilizational schism between Russia and its neighbors, if they join the Atlantic bloc"<sup>50</sup>.

The absence of adequate military-technical analysis was especially evident in the subsequent attempts to incorporate Georgia and Ukraine. Gates (2014), former U.S. Secretary of Defense, called these initiatives strategic recklessness:

"Trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was truly overkill. (...) Were Europeans, much less Americans, willing to send their sons and daughters to defend Ukraine or Georgia? Hardly. Therefore, NATO expansion was a political act, not a carefully considered military commitment, which undermines the purpose of the alliance and recklessly ignores what the Russians considered their own vital national interests."<sup>51</sup>

Another factor contributing to the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West was the deployment of the missile shield in Europe. Although the U.S. initially considered it necessary to defend the Alliance against Iranian and Syrian threats, former Warsaw Pact members, such as Poland, justified the deployment on purely domestic grounds, arguing that it provided supplementary defense guarantees against a possible Russian threat, not Iranian or Syrian, beyond the generic commitment of Article V of the Washington Treaty. To avoid further U.S.-Russian antagonism, Minister Gates made the deployment of the missiles in Europe conditional on the progress of the Iranian ballistic project, perhaps hoping that Moscow could mediate with Tehran, its ally. Unfortunately, the objective was not achieved, and Iran continues to advance its ballistic capabilities, while U.S. systems such as the Aegis Ashore remain operational despite Russian objections.<sup>52</sup>

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48 Albright, M. (2020). *Op.cit.*

49 Burns (2019). *Op.cit.*

50 Dvorkin, V. (2008). *Pochemu rasshirenie NATO dolzhno trevozhit' voennykh professionalov.* <https://www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=7969>

51 GATES, R.M. (2014). *Duty : memoirs of a Secretary at war.* Alfred Knopf.

52 Aegis Ashore uses advanced radar to detect and track incoming missiles and launch interceptor missiles before they can reach their targets. Based on technology originally for ships, it has been

All these geopolitical dynamics are those that would have contributed to consolidate Russian revisionism as a postmodern neo-imperialist expression. This growing Russian assertiveness, manifested in the invasion of Ukraine, seems to ratify, moreover, Bouthoul's (1967) classic postulate that "war is the luxury of rich and powerful nations", since it is only after becoming socio-economically entrenched that Moscow has felt strong enough to initiate a conflagration<sup>53</sup>. This traditional view is in turn subscribed to by some contemporary Russian intellectuals such as Karaganov (2025): "Russia has turned in on itself, has returned –out of necessity, but also as a result of having finally mustered the necessary will– to its traditional state of war against external invaders. Thus, it has finally begun to grow economically and technologically through import substitution. This is the road to sovereign development and to the freedom of the nation to choose its own course."<sup>54</sup>.

However, there is a crucial limiting factor for these Russian neo-imperial ambitions: the demographic crisis. Indeed, the war in Ukraine will foreseeably hurt a population already badly affected by high mortality and aging. Despite the increase in the birth rate from 1.16 children per woman in 1999 to 1.8 in 2016, thanks to the economic boom, Russia has been losing inhabitants since 2018, a trend aggravated by the pandemic and the war, which would force it to adopt a military strategy based on minimizing human losses and not so much on maximizing its territorial power, a "*stratégie de l'homme rare*", according to Todd (2024), which would confirm the probability of a tactical use of nuclear weapons in case of threat, and would draw a war scenario of about five years maximum, when the effects of the ephemeral demographic hatching would dissipate and it would be even more difficult to recruit soldiers (Druyan Feldman and Mil-Man, 2023).<sup>55</sup>

As Balzer (2024) notes, perhaps "Putin understood that Russia's economic and demographic challenges mean that the country will not be in a more favorable condition at any time in the coming decades."<sup>56</sup> If this hypothesis holds true, Russian

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adapted for use on land. The two main European sites are in Deveselu, Romania, and Redzikowo, Poland. Both work in coordination with radars in Turkey to provide early warning and tracking information.

53 BOUTHOU, G. (1967). *Sociologie de la politique*. Presses Universitaires de France.

54 KARAGANOV, S.A. (2025). To Eurasia with Intellectual Freedom. *Russia in Global Affairs*. <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/eurasia-karaganov/>

55 DRUYAN FELDMAN, B. C.; MIL-MAN, A. (2023). The War in Ukraine: Exacerbating Russia's Demographic Crisis. *INSS Insight*, No. 1754. <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/russia-demographic/>.  
TODD, E. (2024). *La Défaite de l'Occident*. Gallimard.

56 BALZER, H. (2024). A Russia without Russians? Putin's disastrous demographics. *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/russia-tomorrow/a-russia-without-russians-putins-disastrous-demographics/>

neo-imperialism, fueled by a postmodern imperial nostalgia, may have an approaching expiration date, determined not by ideology but by stark demographic reality.<sup>57</sup>

## 5 NATO in the face of multipolarity as a post-modern vision of the geopolitical scenario

Today's multipolarity contrasts with the bipolar structure of the Cold War, with three nuclear powers –the US, China and Russia– dominating the UN Security Council (US Congress, 2023)<sup>58</sup>. This *Weltanschauung*, promoted, among others, by Primakov (2004) when he was Russian Prime Minister, can be understood as a postmodern conceptual construct that interprets the international order in transition to a fragmented system where these three powers seek to balance global power.

Since the end of the 20th century, this multipolar narrative has gained strength in both Moscow and Beijing, constituting a strategic response to the US policy of global democratic promotion and its interventions in internal conflicts in third countries (Rwanda, ex-Yugoslavia), which, according to this perspective, undermine fundamental principles such as international stability and national sovereignty. The war in Ukraine has reinforced this view by revealing the European military imbalance and the decisive importance of conventional means such as missiles and low-cost munitions. As Kashin and Sushentsov (2024) point out, this conflict has demonstrated the crucial importance of mass production of unguided munitions and missiles in contemporary conventional wars<sup>59</sup>.

In this context, the productive structure of the European powers, with more than three quarters of their GDP concentrated in the service sector, reveals a strategic vulnerability that feeds the multipolar discourse. These economies, although statistically robust, are configured to prosper in an environment of peaceful globalization, not in a scenario of military confrontation. This reality considerably limits their ability, especially in the short term, to translate their economic might into

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57 However, according to Admiral Stavridis (2014), former Allied High Command, Russian resentment towards the West would have structural overtones because of its leaders' perception of playing a "bad hand" on the geopolitical chessboard: demographic crisis, Islamic terrorist threats, Chinese demographic pressure, and the need to maintain a vast nuclear arsenal with a highly oil-dependent economy. Consequently, the Russian-Western antagonism could persist for decades.

58 U.S. CONGRESS (2023). AMERICA'S STRATEGIC POSTURE The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States. October 2023.

<https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf?gsid=7cec988b-5a55-4e46-a5e8-70aa9de3255c>

59 "The Ukrainian conflict has once again demonstrated the wisdom of Friedrich Engels' words that 'war has become a branch of big industry' (1968). But the West seems to have forgotten this truism, having moved its production to countries with cheaper labor. This, in turn, led to a paradox when a coalition of 50 countries supplying Ukraine could not match Russia in terms of supply of artillery shells for the front." KASHIN, V.B. and SUSHENTSOV, A.A. (2024).

effective military force, particularly in conflicts that do not pose existential threats. This European structural weakness reinforces the narrative promoted by Moscow and Beijing of a world where power is distributed among powers with different strengths, moving away from the model of Western hegemony that prevailed after the Cold War. However, as Aznar warns, this emerging multipolarity “is not per se a necessarily more peaceful order nor [...] a stable product” but would accentuate global conflict (Aznar Fernández-Montesinos, 2025).<sup>60</sup>

This condition, on the other hand, does not apply in the case of the United States, since, despite being an economy clearly specialized in services, it is home to the five largest global defense companies<sup>61</sup>. Moreover, as Figure 4 reveals, there appears to be an overwhelming U.S. leadership in global military spending, with \$916 billion in 2023, equivalent to the combined budget of the following eight countries in the ranking: China (296), Russia (109), India (83), Saudi Arabia (76), United Kingdom (75), Germany (66), Ukraine (64) and France (61). (SIPRI, 2024).<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, the United States maintains an undisputed superiority in global naval power projection thanks to its 11 nuclear-powered aircraft carriers in active service (10 of the Nimitz class and 1 of the Gerald R. Ford class), a capability that no other power matches: China has only three conventional aircraft carriers (Liaoning, Shandong and Fujian) and Russia just one, currently out of service for repairs (Admiral Kuznetsov) (IISS, 2024).<sup>63</sup>. This difference is fundamental, since U.S. nuclear aircraft carriers can operate in any ocean for long periods without frequent logistical support, giving them an unattainable autonomy and global reach for their rivals.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, the network of military bases abroad would further reinforce this unipolar hegemony. The United States maintains more than 750 bases in more than 80 countries, a figure unmatched by the 21 Russian bases and only 2 Chinese facilities abroad (Djibouti and Cambodia). This infrastructure allows for rapid intervention capacity, robust logistics and permanent deterrence, which is unparalleled in the rest of the international system.<sup>65</sup>

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60 Aznar Fernández-Montesinos, F. (2025). The great geopolitical challenge of the 21st century: Unbalanced multipolarity. IEEE Analysis Paper 06/2025. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies.

61 Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon Technologies and General Dynamics. SIPRI (2023).

62 SIPRI (2024). Trends In World Military Expenditure, 2023.

63 International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) (2025). The Military Balance 2025 (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003630760>

64 As Dugin (1997) recognized, “The Russian Navy should become the starting point for a gigantic system of strategic ports in both the south and the west...Aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered submarines are of paramount importance in this.”

65 CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE (2024). U.S. Overseas Basing: Background and Issues for Congress. <https://crsreports.congress.gov>

Rogozińska, A.; Ksawery Olech, A. (2020). THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S MILITARY BASES ABROAD. Institute of New Europe.

Consequently, this overwhelming differential would point to a U.S. structural hegemony that would contravene a supposed multipolarity, revealing it as a postmodern construct that would blur real power hierarchies. In any case, the current system would be closer to a diffuse bipolarity, comparable to that of the Cold War, where Chinese economic power could be eclipsing a real Russian resurgence, as would confirm the war in Ukraine (Castellort Claramunt, 2023). In this context, NATO would act as an extension of U.S. military power and as a containment mechanism against Russia and China.

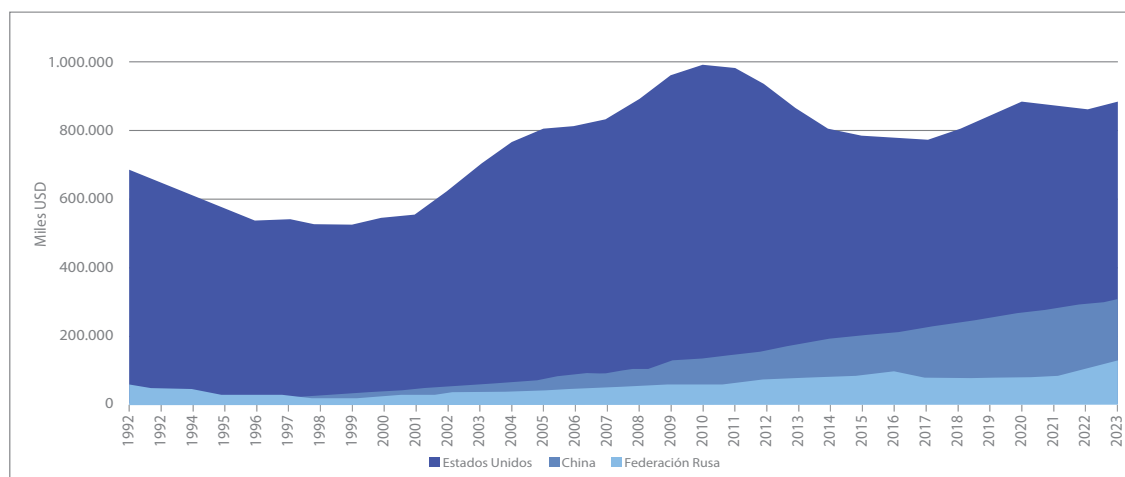


Figure 4. Annual military spending. U.S., China and Russia. Source: SIPRI (2024)

From the theoretical level, this dispute over multipolarity has strategic implications: In Kaplan's (1957) classic physics-based view, the balance of power would be stable and peaceful, so that the invasion of Ukraine would be a disruption that should be compensated by an international response, including sanctions and military support; it is thus a rationalist view of the conflict and its agents. In contrast, for Bouthoul (1951), founder of polemology, because of his sociological training, multipolarity would be inherently unstable, with a complex tangle of rivalries, a perspective recently also defended by Moreno Vílchez (2024).

The war in Ukraine, as analyzed above, seems to be the result of these postmodern tensions, with Moscow's aggressiveness motivated by NATO's eastern expansion and other historical grievances; this more emotional view of the conflict would be more pessimistic about the outcome due to the risks of escalation and systemic instability inherent in a multipolar world (Robles, 2024). In fact, this European conflict seems to ratify another classic postulate of Bouthoul (1967), that of the survival of conventional wars in a nuclear world. It is precisely this interpretation that motivated NATO's Flexible Response doctrine, which staggered the type of response to an aggression—conventional, tactical nuclear or strategic nuclear—but was repealed after the Cold War. This lack of foresight is what Everard (2022), former Allied High Command, denounced, accusing member-states of having cut back on capabilities needed for collective defense during the unipolar Pax Americana.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Everard, J. (2022). Appearance in defense committee. House of Commons. 24 May. <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/10334/html/>.

“In this context, embracing multipolarity as an operational paradigm could weaken NATO because it would mean accepting a strategic fiction that defuses the principle of collective defense and weakens Atlantic cohesion. As McMaster (2024) recalls, certain European powers have exploited this narrative to justify their low defense effort under the pretext of a “strategic autonomy” that, in practice, is unjustified: “By presenting Trump as abandoning Europe, Macron advocated the EU’s ‘strategic autonomy’ in trade and economic policies that would circumvent geopolitical tensions with Russia and China, benefiting the French economy. Since the U.S. was not really leaving Europe, France, like Germany, could continue to save on defense spending.”<sup>67</sup>.

In this view, multipolarity would not describe a balanced order, but would serve as a strategic narrative to erode Western leadership and disarticulate collective defense. As McMaster (2024) also warned, “Putin believes he can convince Trump to withdraw from Europe, South Asia, and the Middle East, thus filling the vacuum.”

In short, the current international panorama seems to reveal an unbridgeable gap between the postmodern theory of multipolarity and the material reality of global power. Despite the rhetoric of balance between great powers, only the United States appears today to possess an effective capacity for strategic leadership on a global scale, while China and Russia operate in an unequal competition, with structural limitations that prevent them from exerting an equivalent influence, even in their periphery.

In the face of this real asymmetry of power, NATO should not adapt to a non-existent multipolar order, nor should it sustain the fiction of a European strategic autonomy that does not seem to translate into effective military capability. On the contrary, a lucid recognition of U.S. military supremacy would be a necessary condition for guaranteeing real international stability. Also for Washington to assume that the Alliance is the main protector of its largest export market, since “trade in goods between the United States and the European Union reached a record \$976 billion in 2024, 60% more than trade between the United States and China (\$583 billion) and 20% more than trade between the European Union and China (\$786 billion)”.<sup>68</sup> This interdependence means that European stability directly benefits the U.S. economy and employment. Thus, according to Coffey (2024) “NATO is not only the main security guarantor of this market, but also a condition for shared prosperity.”<sup>69</sup>

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67 McMaster, H. R. (2024). *At War With Ourselves*. HarperCollins.

68 Hamilton, D. S.; Quinlan, J. P., *The Transatlantic Economy 2025*. Foreign Policy Institute, Johns Hopkins University SAIS/ Transatlantic Leadership Network, 2025.

69 Coffey, L. (2024). Testimony before the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, United States Senate.

Ultimately, NATO should resist the temptation to accommodate multipolar narratives that do not reflect the reality of global power and instead strengthen its collective security architecture based on pragmatic recognition of both U.S. leadership and mutually beneficial transatlantic economic interdependence; that is, maintain its “Trumanist” essence as a defender of the democratic-capitalist system.

## 6 Conclusions

NATO’s 75th anniversary offers a privileged juncture to rethink its role in a profoundly transformed world. Throughout this article, it has been argued that the Atlantic Alliance can no longer be understood solely as a collective defense organization conceived in a bipolar key, but as an institution in transition that must adapt to the structural, identity and strategic conditions of the postmodern international order.

A fundamental aspect of this new landscape is the erosion of the great meta-narratives, characteristic of postmodernity, which has generated a crisis of legitimacy that has hit Western democracies hard. NATO, built on democratic values and liberal norms, now faces the challenge of operating in an environment where such principles no longer enjoy the unquestionable consensus of the past. Citizen disaffection, normative fragmentation and divergence in democratic standards among its members erode the Alliance’s internal cohesion and undermine its legitimacy as a community of values.

Parallel to these challenges, the strategic withdrawal of the United States, conceptualized as postmodern “neo-isolationism”, responds to structural transformations: energy self-sufficiency has reduced its strategic exposure, while growing domestic social demands have reoriented budgetary priorities towards welfare. This tension between defense and social spending, increasingly pronounced in advanced democracies, has redefined NATO’s role. In this new context, the Alliance should not only be seen as a military instrument, but also as an indirect guarantor of the Western welfare state, insofar as it allows sharing defensive responsibilities and freeing resources for essential social policies such as health, education or pensions.

Compounding this complex situation, Russian revisionism, understood as a postmodern “neo-imperialism,” has revealed the inability of the liberal international order to fully integrate actors operating with traditional geopolitical logics wrapped in narratives of identity recovery. This threat is not only military, but also symbolic and normative, and challenges the very credibility of the Western model. NATO must face this challenge not only with conventional means of deterrence, but also by recovering its centrality as a community of principles.

In addition to the above challenges, multipolarity emerges as a strategic narrative that, despite its appearance of equity, hides a profound structural asymmetry. Only the United States today possesses a comprehensive global leadership capacity, while China and Russia operate with geographic, logistical and normative limitations.

Uncritically accepting this postmodern fiction can lead to strategic miscalculations, especially in Europe, and weaken Atlantic cohesion. Instead of accommodating equivocal narratives, NATO must reaffirm the alliance's role as an extension of Western structural power, without relinquishing the principle of collective defense as the cornerstone of its existence.

Overall, NATO is facing an ontological and functional redefinition. It is no longer enough to ensure the physical security of its members against external aggressors. It must also become a normative shield, a framework for shared governance and a strategic infrastructure supporting the sustainability of the welfare state in the Atlantic democracies. This reinterpretation does not weaken its military dimension but complements it with a comprehensive vision of security: a security that not only deters conventional threats, but also protects the social achievements that define the Western way of life.

In short, reaffirming the commitment to the founding values of the Alliance, recognizing the structural role of the United States without falling into passive dependence, and updating the Atlantic architecture with criteria of co-responsibility and efficiency are essential tasks to ensure NATO's viability in the 21st century. Only in this way can it continue to be not only an effective military alliance, but also an indispensable pillar of the democratic-capitalist order and the welfare state that has defined the West since the post-war period.

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