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The substance, specifics,
and perception of American
international leadership
in times of uncertainty





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Reviewer

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Table of contents

Introduction: the United States and the post-Cold War (in)security environment	7
Résumé	11
The substance and specifics of American international leadership: is American leadership experiencing a crisis today?	15
Changes in the perception of U.S. power in the international system in the 21st century	33
U.S. policy towards the Balkans from the end of World War II to the present age of uncertainty	55
About the authors	93



Introduction: the United States and the post-Cold War (in)security environment

In the shadow of the presidential elections in the United States, the key question that politicians, experts, and analysts in various parts of the world are asking is what impact these elections may have on the future international order, both globally and regionally¹. This influence can of course be assessed in different ways, just as political expectations related to them may differ – or even be diametrically opposed. These are elections in which the stakes may turn out to be high, especially from the perspective (and future security) of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This is because the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine has raised a number of questions about the security and future of this region – questions that, until recently, were

¹ A. Darnal et al., *The Impact of the US Presidential Election on the Future of the International Order: Global South Experts Turn the Tables*, The Henry L. Stimson Center, 15 August 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/the-impact-of-the-us-presidential-election-on-the-future-of-the-international-order/> [13.10.2024].

solely the subject of academic discussions. Reality, however, shows that, contrary to what some contemporary political philosophers claim, world history has not come to an end – for better or worse. There is no doubt that America remains a part of this history, euphemistically speaking. Due to its unique position and considerable *power*, the United States is and will remain one of the pillars and the main guarantor of the current international order.

There are many arguments to suggest that speculations about the rise of the “post-American world” have, for now, been exaggerated, although they should be listened to carefully². The United States still has a number of advantages, including political, economic, and technological superiority over the rest of the world; military potential that gives America an absolute advantage over the rest of the world; and global power projection, i.e. the ability to rapidly deploy its armed forces in any part of the world in a manner that allows for conducting military operations anywhere. Last but not least, the American Dream, exceptionalism, and soft power remain incomparable to any other country, although these ideals may have somewhat faded in recent decades³. There is no doubt that America makes a crucial contribution to maintaining the democratic and liberal global order, although some believe that “Washington, while shaping the international order, is also introducing elements of disorder into it”⁴.

² F. Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, New York–London 2008, pp. 1–5.

³ R. Kuźniar, *Polityka i siła. Studia strategiczne – zarys problematyki*, Warszawa 2005, pp. 289–291.

⁴ T. Delpech, *Powrót barbarzyństwa w XXI wieku*, Warszawa 2008, p. 11.

On the other hand, any triumphalism would be a mistake. The internal debate in America also seems complicated and radicalised both in the social and political dimensions, while the conclusions drawn from it are not necessarily optimistic. There are also challenges at the international level. U.S. military operations in the Greater Middle East region have shown that there are certainly limits to American capabilities, in terms of political will, states' interests, terms of engagement, and accurate extrapolative analysis. There are also competitors such as the BRICS countries (especially Russia and China), who challenge U.S. credibility and global leadership, striving more or less skilfully to modify the rules of the liberal post-Cold War international order. All in all, even America has limited capabilities to solve difficult global and regional problems on its own.

Some U.S. allies, on the other hand, are concerned about America's tendency towards unilateralism and neo-isolationism, a possible weakening of the Transatlantic relationship, the indecisiveness of the U.S. leadership in NATO, the fear that in the future the Americans will be less willing to become involved in resolving European crises, or will do so in a way that diverges from the preferences of other allies. They are also concerned about changes in the balance of power on a global scale, caused by the growth of the political and economic potential of China and Russian neo-imperial, revisionist, and nationalist policy. This especially relates to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which remain convinced that the global leadership of the United States is essential to ensuring their security and believe that a substantial American military presence in the region is necessary. In the short and medium term, it is not possible

for the EU to replace the credible deterrence of NATO, and above all, U.S. military potential – the most crucial element of the Alliance. EU countries – and European security – remain deeply dependent on the technological and military potential and operational capabilities of the United States of America.

The abovementioned perspective certainly applies to Poland. Although many Polish politicians and experts remain convinced of the need for the simultaneous development of both strategic directions of Polish foreign policy – the European and Euro-Atlantic vectors – there is no doubt that from the Polish point of view, membership in NATO and the strategic partnership between Poland and the United States have fundamental importance for ensuring the security of the Republic of Poland and the regional stability of Central and Eastern Europe. It is also assumed that U.S. political and military presence on the European continent strengthens both the potential and credibility of Allies' collective defence, as well as NATO's enhanced forward deterrence on its Eastern flank. Therefore, there is no doubt that Poland is and will remain a reliable partner of the United States, regardless of who occupies the White House after the 2024 U.S. elections.



Résumé

Despite the passage of more than thirty years since the end of the Cold War, the emergence of the new world order has not yet been completed. This process is associated with a change in the balance of power among Great Powers, leading to increasing instability in the international system, both globally and regionally.

The beginning of the 21st century shows that American leadership, potential, and power – sometimes referred to as liberal hegemony – are relatively weakening due to the growing power and geopolitical ambitions of other international actors, including the BRICS countries. These countries are increasingly challenging United States global leadership and international credibility, as well as questioning the American view on the world economy and politics.

Nevertheless, despite rising challenges to America's position and leadership in international affairs, it seems reasonable to state that, due to its unique style of international leadership – generally accepted (but not without periodic criticism) by America's allies – as well as its undisputed

hard and soft power, the United States is and will remain one of the pillars and the main guarantor of the current international order. However, the history of American military interventions in the 20th and 21st centuries shows conclusively that there are clear limitations in America's ability to independently solve numerous regional and global problems.

In the short and medium term, it is not possible for the EU and its members states to replace NATO's overall capabilities for credible deterrence and defence, especially the military potential of the United States – the leading and most powerful member of the Alliance. The development of autonomous EU defence capabilities is and will remain an important, albeit only complementary, element of European security. As a result, NATO will remain the only international organisation capable of ensuring lasting security in Europe, while the key factor guaranteeing stability and security in Central-Eastern and Southeastern Europe will be the U.S. political and military presence in the region. However, the development of the EU's military capabilities is needed in case Washington chooses not to be involved in resolving European crises, or does so in ways different from the expectations of other allies.

From the perspective of Poland and the Baltic states – nations exposed to destabilising military and non-military actions by Russia – it would be particularly important to maintain unity within NATO, minimise transatlantic divisions, develop a strategic partnership with the United States, and increase American military presence in CEE. There is no doubt that U.S. political engagement and military presence

in the region strengthen the collective deterrence and defence of NATO's Eastern flank.

The ongoing evolution of the post-Cold War international order, manifesting itself, among others, in Russia's revisionist policy in Eastern Europe, also constitutes a challenge to the security and stability of the Western Balkans. Although the most significant challenges and problems facing Western Balkan states today are primarily of an internal or regional nature, the history of the Balkans in the 19th and 20th centuries – as well as some political tensions in the WB6 region in the wake of the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine – irrefutably show that the stability (or instability) of this region is also conditioned by broader international factors, i.e. changes in the balance of power in world politics and the involvement of competing Great Powers – both European and non-European.

While recent fears of the war in Ukraine spilling over into the Balkans have fortunately turned out to be exaggerated, there is no doubt that maintaining stability in the Western Balkans still requires political, economic, and military engagement on the part of the EU and the U.S. When it comes to hard security, America still leads the way. In other words, if the United States decides to withdraw from its commitment to the security and stability of Central-Eastern and South-eastern Europe, the current European security architecture may actually “collapse”. If this were to happen, the scenario of renewed, serious destabilisation of the Western Balkans cannot be excluded.



The substance and specifics of American international leadership: is American leadership experiencing a crisis today?

Conducting an analysis of the substance and specifics of American international leadership is important for two reasons. The first one results from epistemological motives. Despite the existence of numerous studies, the topic of leadership and its essence – particularly American leadership as a key element of the international leadership process – has not been fully explored in the field of political science.

Second, the ongoing Russian War in Ukraine and the Middle East crisis could mean that the United States may be facing a leadership crisis. One could argue that both wars could have been prevented, yet they were not, largely due to a lack of American international leadership. In addition, there are many examples of unacceptable conduct by U.S. political leaders such as Donald Trump and his close associates, leading to criminal convictions. As a result, there is a widespread opinion that America may be currently experiencing

a leadership crisis. Moreover, some distinguished international relations scholars, such as Joseph S. Nye, suggest that because of this behaviour, the U.S. has lost some of its attractiveness: "...during the Iraq War there was a loss of attractiveness of the U.S. in many countries in Western Europe, but when Obama was elected much of that attractiveness was recovered. We are going through a period now [2023] since the Trump presidency of loss of attractiveness. Some of that has been recovered under Biden, but there is still a looming question whether Trump would be re-elected, which I think would be very damaging for U.S. leadership"¹.

Furthermore, with the upcoming 2024 U.S. presidential election, there are two dangers to American leadership if Trump were to be re-elected. "First, if you talk about America First, you are automatically seeing everybody second, and that violates one of the principles of leadership – it is not dictation, it is cooption. Second, Trump would dismantle some of the tools or instruments that have enabled American leadership, such as U.S.'s alliances, and international institutions which America helped create, and that undercuts the U.S. international leadership"².

Accordingly, the research objective of this study is to identify the substance and specific characteristics of American leadership. Three main research questions were posed:

Q1: What are the main characteristics of American leadership? Q2: What is the impact of American international

¹ Joseph S. Nye, 2023. The author's interview with Professor Joseph S. Nye in person in USA on 25 September 2023.

² Ibid.

leadership? Q3: Is American leadership experiencing a crisis today?

International leadership

International leadership has two essential elements: power and purpose. Above all, it involves the skill to influence the interests or actions of other states. However, as some scholars indicate, “Leadership may involve the ability to not just ‘twist arms’ but also to get other states to conceive of their interests and policy goals in new ways”³. This implies a second component of leadership, which involves not just the mobilisation of power means, but also “the ability to project a set of political ideas or principles about the proper or effective ordering of politics”⁴. It indicates the capacity to produce collaborative actions by several states or other actors towards a collective end. International leadership “means a set of processes in which a state, with its resources, mobilizes and influences through multidimensional channels a group of other states (followership) to achieve a common goal. It is a dynamic interaction and ongoing relationship, less of a static situation or simply a policy instrument”⁵.

It is important to acknowledge the difference between international leadership and foreign policy. While international leadership is a process that needs leaders and followers who strive to achieve a shared aim, foreign policy

³ G.J. Ikenberry, *The future of international leadership*, “Political Science Quarterly” 1996, vol. 111, no. 3, pp. 385–402.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

⁵ T.M. Vu, *International leadership as a process: The case of China in Southeast Asia*, “Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional” 2017, vol. 60, no. 1.

simply focuses on *goals that guide the activities of one state in its interactions with other states*. With regard to the former, the United States has long sought to lead coalitions of nation-states to achieve certain shared strategic and security objectives. Examples may include George H.W. Bush's effective coalition-building of nations to support the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi aggression, or Barack Obama's efforts to lead an international coalition in 2011 to support rebel forces fighting in Libya. With regard to the latter, these include a nation's routine policy stance towards other international actors. For example, the U.S. has stated a commitment to maintain a "one China" policy while not accepting the PRC's sovereignty claim over Taiwan. In this case, there is no U.S. effort to establish an international leadership posture, but rather an expression of policy that suits its own national and security interests.

There are four main approaches to leadership in the academic literature⁶. The first approach focuses on leadership as a particular position from which the resources to lead are derived⁷. The second method examines the personal characteristics of individual leaders⁸. The third approach investigates leadership as a process. The interaction between leader and followers is fundamental in this approach⁹. Finally, the fourth method defines leadership in terms of the results it leads to¹⁰.

⁶ K. Grint, *Leadership: Limits and Possibilities*, New York 2005.

⁷ J.S. Nye, *The Powers to Lead*, New York 2008.

⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. A. Bloom, New York 1991.

⁹ B.M. Bass, R.E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership*, New Jersey 2006.

¹⁰ K. Grint, *op. cit.*

The author's approach to international leadership examines leadership as a process that includes three elements: 1) a leader – the U.S.; 2) followers – U.S. allies; and 3) the activity of leadership. To illustrate this approach: First, a leader – the U.S. – needs to possess power (the resources) to influence others. The question is: Does the U.S. possess sufficient resources to influence others? What are these resources and how effectively does it use them? Second, the U.S. must have followers – other states who are willing to collaborate towards a collective end – to help Ukraine win the war with Russia. Thus, a question arises: Is the U.S. willing to collaborate with other states? Third, the activity of leadership. The U.S. must have the ability, *the skill*, to influence and guide its followers – other states – to participate in a common goal. Similarly, another question follows: Has the U.S. been skilful in guiding and influencing others in this effort? What skills has the U.S. employed to foster collaboration? Were certain skills more effective than others?

The power and the nature of legitimate authority

The concept of power and the way in which it is exercised by a leader to impose their will on followers is crucial to international leadership, because it is a universal phenomenon, present in all aspects of life, and it can determine whether leadership is good or bad. One needs to remember that when authority is being practiced justifiably, it gives a leader real “power” to influence followers, which is a key determinant of the leadership's existence¹¹.

¹¹ A. Gini, *Moral Leadership: An Overview*, “Journal of Business Ethics” 1997, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 323–330.

One way to define power in relation to leadership is to describe power as a strength that provides an individual with the ability to influence others¹². Following this interpretation, one can distinguish two types of power: personal and positional. The first type of power comes from one's personality, while the second type derives from one's position¹³. In general, it is believed that followers value personal power more than positional power, because personal power depends more on the abilities of a leader, as opposed to positional power, which depends on the status of a leader. However, some recent studies suggest that participants "are better able to accept and approve of positional power bases due to the characteristics of the societal culture, particularly the high-power distance dimension of the national culture"¹⁴. These studies indicate the higher effectiveness and positive follower performance of positional power bases as compared to personal power bases¹⁵. This is observed, for example, in Turkey.

Another method of analysing power in light of leadership requires interpreting power and leadership not as separate from one another, which one might try to distinguish and define independently, but rather as a *relationship* in which both are interrelated and codependent. Following this interpretation of power, not only the perspective of defining power changes, but more importantly, the explanation

¹² B.M. Bass, *The Bass Handbook of Leadership. Theory Research, and Managerial Applications*, New York 2008, p. 290.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

¹⁴ D. Dirik, I. Eryilmaz, *Leader Power Bases and Organizational Outcomes: The Role of Perceived Organizational Politics*, "JEEMS Journal of East European Management Studies" 2018, vol. 23, no. 4, pp. 532–558.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 549.

of leadership itself becomes different. This shift occurs because the focus is no longer only on the basis of power, but on its two fundamental aspects: *motive* and *resource*. In other words, *what* a power holder does and *why* becomes more significant rather than *who* the power holder is and what their status is. Leaders can be very different and their motives can range from the desire for power or status to the need for gratitude and respect. Factors that drive a power holder are important because the approach of interpreting power as a *relationship* among people suggests that power involves the collective behaviour of more than one person. Therefore, the motives of power holders should coincide with what the power recipients want. Moreover, it is believed that they should coincide, because the authority of a power holder is diminished if his or her motives and values are not the same as those of power recipients¹⁶. However, there are many examples of well-known American figures and great leaders, such as Abraham Lincoln and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who faced strong opposition even among their closest associates, yet were still able to exercise their power effectively. Lincoln even went a step further and, to the surprise of many, intentionally chose his political rivals as members of his cabinet¹⁷. Lincoln's decision was an act of great self-confidence and it aligns with Max Weber's definition of power in his classic *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, where he wrote that "'Power' (*Macht*) is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be

¹⁶ B.M. Bass, op. cit., p. 290.

¹⁷ D. Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, New York 2009, p. 319.

in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests"¹⁸.

By analysing power, one can recognise its different dimensions. Harold D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan, in their classic work *Power and Society*, stated that power may stand on numerous bases and listed three power dimensions, namely: weight, scope, and domain¹⁹. Legitimate political power can be manifested by various symbols such as titles, uniforms, vehicles, crowns, etc., and can be associated with money, authority, religious symbols or legal regulations. Moreover, power can take different forms. On the one hand, it may be represented by a soldier dressed in a uniform holding a gun, or it may be associated with a man kneeling in prayer. When there is power, there is also a probability of a major conflict. The source of a conflict needs to be linked with the distribution of power. For example, the distinguished scholar, Robert Dahl, described power as a relation among people when "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do"²⁰. In his famous *Who Governs?*, the author observed that a pluralistic distribution of power takes place in politics and that neither "Social Notables" nor "Economic Notables" have significant impact on the process of political decision-making²¹.

Moreover, one cannot forget about the existence of state power at the international level and the fact that one country can impose its economic, military, cultural and other rules upon another country and, as a consequence, become

¹⁸ M. Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, New York 1957, p. 152.

¹⁹ H.D. Lasswell, A. Kaplan, *Power and Society*, New Haven 1950, p. 85.

²⁰ R.A. Dahl, *The Concept of Power*, "Behavioral Science" 1957, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 201–215.

²¹ Idem, *Who Governs?*, New Haven–London 1961, pp. 63–81.

hegemonic. The term *hegemony* or *empire* refers to a scenario in which one state seems to have substantially more power than other states. In his classic, *War and Change in World Politics*, Robert Gilpin mentions that this hegemonic type of structure control takes place when “A single powerful state controls or dominates the lesser states in the system”²². Gilpin stressed the significance of the second factor, namely, *prestige*, in exerting dominance within the international system. He defined this as “the reputation for power, and military power in particular”²³. Prestige is very important, because it allows a state to achieve its goals without using strength. However, the most prestigious states are those that are remembered for the most recent successfully implemented goals through military or economic power²⁴.

Consequently, according to another power specialist, Joseph S. Nye, there are three ways of using power: hard, soft and smart. Nye wrote that hard power is “the use of coercion and payment”²⁵. Hard power actions may include military actions, economic sanctions, or coercive diplomacy. There are contemporary examples of American presidential leadership that show the misuse of hard power; for example, in Abu-Ghraib or Guantanamo²⁶. Soft power, on the other hand, “is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction”²⁷, and includes other instruments, such as public

²² R. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, New York 1981, p. 29.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁵ J.S. Nye, *Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power*, “Foreign Affairs” 2009, vol. 88, no. 4, pp. 160–163.

²⁶ *Idem*, *Smart Power and the “War on Terror”*, “Asia Pacific Review” 2008, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 1–8.

²⁷ *Idem*, *Get...*, p. 161.

diplomacy, broadcasting, and development assistance in order to persuade others to do what one desires. Finally, smart power is the combination of both soft power and hard power and is used to ensure higher effectiveness. Smart power was especially favoured by President Barack Obama, and it became an essential part of his foreign policy. In contrast, actions taken by President Donald Trump, such as withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, pulling out of 2015 Paris Agreement, recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and moving the American embassy there, prove that he prefers a hard power approach²⁸.

Finally, when looking at power and leadership as a relationship, one needs to understand how power is distributed in groups as well as how it influences affairs among followers and leaders. With that in mind, the attention should be paid to the major component of power influence: authority. When analysing the concept of authority, one can recognise that “authority is not power”²⁹, but rather a lawful entitlement to exercise power³⁰. Moreover, authority is correlated with responsibility and accountability. Leaders have an obligation and, therefore, should feel accountable for how they apply their authority not only to God but also to those who entrusted the authority to them. Power, on the other hand, is a force that enables an individual to affect other people. The influence of a leader highly depends on their followers and can be weakened or strengthened, depending on whether the followers identify with the leader’s objectives

²⁸ R. Havertz, *Trump’s Departure from Smart Power*, “Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik” 2019, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 93–111.

²⁹ B.M. Bass, *op. cit.*, p. 355.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

and values or not. Similarly, leaders' responsibilities are tied to the authority granted to them and dependent on the leaders' subordinates. The connection of power and authority needs to be analysed further in order to fully understand the specifics of American leadership.

The specifics of American leadership

The United States represents an extraordinary example of a notion, because democracy is the only form of government known to Americans, who have never experienced autocratic rule in their history. Americans have come from all over the world to create "the land of the free and the home of the brave". Therefore, *leadership is embedded in the formation of this nation.*

The founding fathers understood that power cannot be placed in the hands of one man but needs to be fragmented. On the one hand, presidential power needed to be constrained but, on the other hand, a president had to be able to effectively manage public life. American anti-authoritarianism results from the American revolutionary tradition, and from the *American Creed*, which includes political values responsible for the creation of the American national identity, such as democracy, individualism, liberty, equality, and the rule of law under the Constitution.

However, the most fascinating aspect about the American Creed related to leadership in the United States is the characteristic anti-government element it carries. According to distinguished scholar Samuel P. Huntington, the distrust of government derives directly from the substance of values that form the American Creed. Huntington wrote: "The essence of constitutionalism is the restraint of governmental

power through fundamental law. The essence of liberalism is freedom from government control-the vindication of liberty against power". What is significant in terms of this study is the question of what it takes for the president of the United States to accomplish objectives, taking into consideration the anti-authoritarian aims of the American Creed.

The American public's demands from a president, as chief executive, are overwhelming. Americans expect their president to be fully responsible for all the tasks that are assigned to them in areas such as military, diplomacy, and legislature, to name a few. Moreover, they also anticipate their commander to be an expert in all of these fields. In addition, these anticipations are also related to the international community, as the president of the United States is at the same time considered to be the world leader. As a result, the difficulty of identifying presidential responsibilities allows one to distinguish one of the main characteristics of holding the office of the U.S. president – the unusual difficulty of executing American presidential leadership. Therefore, a president does not possess enough authority to govern independently and mainly needs to rely on his or her personal power to lead successfully. The key component of presidential dominance depends on their ability to bargain. The power to persuade demands the ability of being a talented bargainer, one who knows how to convince others of their ideas and eventually turn these ideas into shared beliefs and goals.

There are many examples of situations when presidents used their power without Congressional approval, for instance, President Clinton's undeclared war against Bosnia; President Bush's Terrorist Surveillance Program, the use of waterboarding and the Iraq war; President Barack

Obama's deployment of drones aimed at fighting terrorists abroad and his decision to use military action in Libya; President Donald Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Paris Agreement, and the Iran nuclear deal, as well as his imposition of tariffs on Canada, China, Mexico, and the European Union.

At the same time, there are many examples where U.S. presidents did not use "enough" power and their presidential leadership to prevent crises from happening or to mitigate their escalation. For example, Obama's response in Syria and Ukraine as Professor Collin Dueck describes:

The Obama administration came in hoping to reset relations with Russia... In 2009, Obama and his team initially did not think the problem was Putin. They thought the main problem was Bush. And if anything, the U.S. should be more accommodating to Moscow. Obama, Clinton and Kerry tried to do that. And the 2014 invasion of Ukraine was a shock, and you had a typical Obama response, which was a halfway response. I will do something to show you that I am serious, but I will not really get serious. And that was typical about Obama. His main priority was always domestic. I want to stay out of trouble and not overdo it. Obama's instinct was let's not overreact. By the end of the Obama years, obviously you had this growing feeling that Russian aggression of Ukraine had gotten the better of United States and of its NATO allies. The most common critique on the right was we need to get tough on Russia³¹.

³¹ Collin Dueck, 2023. The author's interview with Collin Dueck via Zoom on 25 August 2023.

Another example is President's Biden decisions or lack thereof with regard to China's push for international leadership through economic means, military strength, and ideology. When this occurs, "it is almost inevitable that anyone who is resisting will turn to the U.S. and look for leadership, whether it is an English-speaking democracy like Australia, or Vietnam with its traditional resistance to Chinese hegemony. So, they look to the U.S. for leadership, and I think there is some. The question is how much?"³² Some former U.S. presidential advisers, such as Elliott Abrams, indicate that the Biden administration is not exercising a sufficient degree of leadership now: ideologically, militarily, or economically. "You see it when you see the U.S. step forward to try to sell nuclear submarines to Australia, or the AUK-US, or the effort to improve relations with India. These are all forms of leadership in resistance to China. So, does the U.S. have some capacity – yes. My own view is that we have capacity to do more, and I am critical of Biden administration for not doing more".³³

Studies that examine the opinion of Americans on issues such as the Russian War in Ukraine or the Israel-Hamas War in Gaza indicate that the American public tends to be repeatedly divided. Moreover, the most educated Americans are polarised in terms of their political ideology. For example, even when most Americans believed that their country was heading in the wrong direction under the command of President Donald Trump, the public remained divided

³² Elliott Abrams, 2023. The author's interview with Elliott Abrams in DC via Zoom on 15 September 2023.

³³ Ibid.

over whether Trump would win reelection. This characteristic of American polarisation determines what it takes for a leader to be politically skilled. This makes the leadership in the United States distinct compared to that in other countries in the world.

Conclusions

American leadership is experiencing a crisis today that concerns two dimensions: international and presidential. As for the former, some argue that the U.S. simply does not have the military, economic, and political power it had at the beginning of the first decade of this century, which allowed it to play the role of global leader. This is a very important issue, because as some specialists indicate, “The United States now confronts graver threats to its security than it has in decades, perhaps ever. Never before has it faced four allied antagonists at the same time – Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran – whose collective nuclear arsenal could within a few years be nearly double the size of its own”³⁴. Accordingly, the United States simply needs more military power to meet the threats it faces. The problem, however, is “...Its fractured political leadership – Republican and Democratic, in the White House and in Congress – has failed to convince enough Americans that developments in China and Russia matter. Political leaders have failed to explain how the threats posed by these countries are interconnected”³⁵.

³⁴ R. Gates, *The Dysfunctional Superpower, Can a Divided America Deter China and Russia*, “Foreign Affairs” 2023, November/December.

³⁵ Ibid.

Second, the U.S. is also facing a crisis in presidential leadership. Polls conducted by the reputable Pew Research Center indicated a great dissatisfaction with the Biden-Trump match-up. Polls showed that “nearly half of registered voters (49%) say that, if they had the ability to decide the major party candidates for the 2024 election, they would replace *both* Biden and Trump on the ballot”³⁶. An important characteristic of the competition is that American voters have little confidence in *either* Biden or Trump “across a range of key traits, including fitness for office, personal ethics and respect for democratic values”³⁷. In general, the public believes both are too old and not fit for the job. The fact that “Fifty-nine percent of respondents who said they planned to vote for Biden said they were motivated primarily by opposition to Trump”³⁸, speaks something about the state of American presidential leadership.

On 21 July 2024, President Joe Biden withdrew his candidacy via a signed letter posted on his X account, writing that this was “in the best interest of my party and the country”, and endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris. However, his decision does not reflect strong leadership. One can make an argument that, if Biden were to withdraw well before a major event like a debate loss, it could have been seen as a strong leadership move. This would show that he is prioritising the party’s success and the country’s needs

³⁶ *In Tight Presidential Race, Voters Are Broadly Critical of Both Biden and Trump*, Pew Research Center, 24 April 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/04/24/in-tight-presidential-race-voters-are-broadly-critical-of-both-biden-and-trump/> [11.05.2024].

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ J. Lange, *Trump vs. Biden: The rematch many Americans don't want*, Reuters, 26 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/americans-dismayed-by-biden-trump-2024-rematch-reutersipsos-poll-finds-2024-01-25/> [11.05.2024].

over personal ambition. A timely withdrawal could also allow for a smoother transition, giving the Democratic Party time to rally around a new candidate.



Changes in the perception of U.S. power in the international system in the 21st century

Power and the state: methodological assumptions

The aim of the article is to discuss the changes in the perception of the power of the United States in the international system in the 21st century. The author seeks to identify the main factors driving these changes and turning points.

For the purposes of this article, we assume, as other authors have done, that the international system can take many forms, but in simple terms, its structure is shaped by the division of power between major powers in international relations¹.

The power of the state is a specific set of various material and non-material factors that condition its ability to act

¹ K.N. Waltz, *Struktura teorii stosunków międzynarodowych*, Warszawa 2010, p. 98; H. Kissinger, *Dyplomacja*, Warszawa 1996, p. 24; J. Joffe, *Wielkie mocarstwa*, Warszawa 1999, p. 14.

and determine its position within the international system. It is an ambiguous concept defined in various ways by researchers of international relations. In American and English-language literature on the subject, the word “power” is the most commonly used term. Sometimes, however, it is replaced by other terms such as strength, authority or influence. As J.S. Nye emphasises, there is no single and universally accepted definition of state power in the field of international relations. On the other hand, there are many different ways of defining the power of the state in international relations, reflecting different concepts and research approaches of individual authors and research schools, resulting in different proposed models for measuring the power of the state².

Simply put, the power of the state is the ability to achieve its goals or pursue its own interests. Some researchers claim that it is the ability to get what one wants. R. Dahl believes that power is the ability to get other participants to do something they would not do otherwise. Some authors define power as the ability to bring about or resist change in an international system³.

M. C. Smouts divided the definitions of state power into three basic groups: 1) In the traditional approach, the power of the state depends on the resources possessed; 2) In the neorealist approach, power is seen as an opportunity to set the rules of the game in international relations and the outcome of negotiations; 3) On the other hand, the structural approach defines the power of the state as the ability

² J. Nye, *The Future of Power*, New York 2011, pp. 5–6.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

to choose and shape the world economy, impose dominant values, and establish patterns of action that must be followed by other states, their political institutions, and elites⁴.

A separate issue is the perception of the power of the state, which should concern both the assessment of the resources possessed by the state and, above all, the ability to use them effectively in relations with other participants in international relations to achieve the assumed goals. An interesting proposal of the perceived power of the state was presented by R. C. Cline, who suggests the following formula⁵:

$$P_p = (C + E + M) \times (S + W)$$

where:

P_p – perceived strength of the state,

C – critical mass of population and territory,

E – economic potential,

M – military potential,

S – strategic goals,

W – the will to implement the strategy.

The perception of the power of the state in the international system can take one of four forms: 1) appropriate – when the assessment of the power of the state is realistic and corresponds to its real resources and possibilities of influence; 2) inflated – when the perception of the power of a given state is overly optimistic in relation to its objective power; 3) understated – when the perceived power of the state is below the level at the disposal of the state; 4) imaginary – when the perceived power of the state is only

⁴ M.C. Smouts, *International Organizations and Inequality among States*, "International Social Science Journal" 1995, no. 144, p. 234.

⁵ R.C. Cline, *World Power Assessment 1977. A Calculus of Strategic Draft*, Boulder–Colorado 1977, p. 34.

a projection of one's own expectations and a product of imagination, not reflected in reality.

If the difference between the perceived power of the state and its actual potential and causative capabilities is too large, it usually leads to the adoption of misguided strategies by decision-makers. There is also a consistent trend that the assessment of the strength of a state made by its decision-makers generally differs from the perception of the international environment, because politicians, in their assessment of the power of their own state, usually tend to adopt an overly optimistic view, especially in the verbal dimension, while depreciating the power of other states. It should also be noted that research findings, as well as the views of individual researchers and experts in international relations, are not only the result of an objectively conducted analysis of the change in the distribution of power among selected states in the international system. They are also significantly influenced by their subjective assessments of the parameters of the power of individual states.

Taking into account studies on the perception of U.S. power at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, we can generally distinguish two different research currents: 1) pessimistic – resulting from the belief that the international position of the United States in the international system will inevitably and systematically decrease; 2) optimistic – based on the premise that the U.S., despite numerous problems and challenges, thanks to its resources and ability to cope with crisis situations, is able to manage them and maintain its current leadership position in international relations.

With regard to the assessment of the power of the United States in international relations, we can theorise that

immediately after the end of the Cold War and throughout the first decade of this century, more optimistic views prevailed in the scientific community. However, currently, pessimistic opinions are beginning to prevail, albeit to a different degree.

Sticking to the discussed methodological assumptions, we will examine the changes that have occurred in the perception of the United States' power in the 21st century. Before doing so, it is important to consider the output conditions of this process.

The perception of U.S. power at the end of the 20th century

The collapse of the Soviet Union meant the end of the Cold War and at the same time the collapse of the bipolar system. One of the consequences of this situation was a relative and noticeable increase in the international position of the U.S. across all major dimensions of power. Some authors were even convinced that we were dealing with a new unipolar international order, with the United States as the natural world leader. One of the many examples of this way of perceiving the power of the United States was the emblematic position taken by C. Krauthammer, who argued that the United States is the only country equipped with the military, political and economic instruments that allow it to play the role of a decisive player in international relations⁶.

According to Z. Brzezinski, this was due to the global dominance of the United States in four basic dimensions:

⁶ Ch. Krauthammer, *The Unipolar Moment*, "Foreign Affairs" 1990/1991, vol. 70, no. 1, p. 24.

1) the strategic capabilities and global reach of its military forces; 2) economic position and high technological development, giving the possibility of effective influence on international economic processes; 3) attractive and easily accessible mass culture, thanks to which it was possible to promote one's own ideas and values; 4) the possibility of exerting effective political pressure, which is the cumulative effect of the three previous dimensions, creating effective instruments of influencing the policy of other countries and shaping international phenomena and processes⁷.

The other powers, with the exception of demographic potential, could only demonstrate power similar to America's on one level. In the last decade of the 20th century, the population of the United States was nearly 270 million, compared to China's 1.2 billion, India's 950 million, Russia's 150 million, Japan's 125 million, and over 370 million across the 15 countries of the European Union. During the period in question, the Gross Domestic Product of the U.S. reached 7.6 trillion USD, accounting for about 22% of the global gross domestic product. In comparison, the EU's GDP stood at 7.1 trillion USD, Japan's at 4.6 trillion USD, India's at 1.45 trillion USD, Russia's at 1.1 trillion USD, and China's GDP, depending on the source and calculation method used, was estimated to be between 0.7 trillion USD and 3.5 trillion USD. At the end of the last century, the strategic nuclear forces of the United States were estimated to consist of over 1,000 long-range missiles, Russia 1,300, Great Britain and France together 120, and China 85. The other nuclear states, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel, did

⁷ Z. Brzeziński, *Bezląd. Polityka światowa na progu XXI wieku*, Warszawa 1994, p. 81.

not have intercontinental nuclear missiles at that time. U.S. military spending amounted to 280 billion USD, oscillating below 4% of GDP, which was just over 1/3 of global military spending. Russia spent more than 80 billion USD, China (according to various estimates) between 40 billion USD and 70 billion USD, Japan 44 billion USD, the EU 190 billion USD, and India about 8.5 billion USD. The armed forces of the United States consisted of 1.5 million personnel, Russia 1.2 million, Japan 250,000, the 15 EU countries 1.4 million, and India 1.1 million. However, only the U.S. Army has achieved the sufficient level of dislocation, logistical capabilities, and mobility to undertake military operations in almost all regions of the world with the use of its weapons and more than half of its manpower. As a result, the power of the United States was multidimensional. However, even then, it was possible to notice the existing and growing disproportion between economic potential and military power, which became the main pillar of American power in the world⁸.

The power of the United States was also manifested, among other things, in the fact that it managed the international banking system and international capital markets, had an extensive system of military bases and controlled the main sea routes, had the most advanced technologies and conducted the most advanced scientific research, and maintained a dominant position in the space sector and the aerospace and arms industries⁹.

⁸ D. Kondrakiewicz, *Systemy równowagi sił w stosunkach międzynarodowych*, Lublin 1999, pp. 62–64, 88–90; J. Joffe, *Wielkie...*, pp. 14–15.

⁹ J.R. Barnett, *Exclusion as National Security Policy*, "Parameters" 1994, no. 1, p. 54.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the victorious end of the Gulf War, the U.S. pursued a fairly balanced foreign policy of limited hegemony in the 1990s, creating regional security structures based on relations with other powers while maintaining its dominance, but taking into account the basic interests of the other powers and seeking to support globalisation processes. At the same time, efforts were made to avoid direct participation of the U.S. Army in local armed conflicts in order to reduce their own losses to an absolute minimum. Military interventions undertaken at that time were limited. Even the largest intervention – in the Balkans to defend the people of Kosovo – was confined to the use of missiles and aerial bombardment. However, as one of the authors emphasises, in the American foreign policy implemented by successive administrations, the tendency to take unilateral actions in international relations gradually began to prevail¹⁰.

In addition, the final decade of the last century was an exceptionally good time for the American economy. The years of Bill Clinton's presidency were marked by a positive economic situation, which was the longest period of uninterrupted development of this country in the 20th century, reaching a rate of over 4% of annual GDP growth at the end of the 1990s. This was the cumulative effect of many factors, including the continuation of liberal economic policies from previous administrations, reductions in military spending and the redirection of saved funds to other sectors, and structural changes taking place in the economy resulting

¹⁰ J. Zając, *Koncepcje polityki zagranicznej USA po zimnej wojnie*, [in:] *Polityka zagraniczna USA po zimnej wojnie*, Toruń 2006, pp. 18–19.

from the use of opportunities brought by the development of new technologies, especially the Internet. Additionally, the processes of globalisation and liberalisation of the world economy increased the availability of external markets for American products and American capital. By maintaining a high pace of development, it was possible to significantly reduce the unemployment level and create a constant budget surplus at the end of the 1990s, which was an exceptional phenomenon in the recent economic history of this country¹¹.

The economic successes achieved during this period allowed the U.S. to significantly strengthen its international position in the world and to reassure its decision-makers that American political, economic, and social solutions are the most effective, while giving them a sense of strength and pride and increasing their ability to influence the attitudes of other participants in international relations. At the end of the 1990s, the U.S. became the undisputed leader in the international system, unmatched by any other nation in terms of its potential. Therefore, in order to emphasise the difference between the status of the United States and the other powers, the literature most often refers to the United States as a “hegemon”, with some authors sometimes adding qualifiers such as “liberal”, “benign”, or “self-restricted”. Other terms used were “hyperpower”, “superpower”, or “lonely superpower”¹².

¹¹ *Rocznik Strategiczny 2000/2001. Przegląd sytuacji politycznej, gospodarczej i wojskowej w środowisku międzynarodowym*, Warszawa 2001, pp. 297–299.

¹² N. Ferguson, *Kolos. Cena amerykańskiego imperium*, Warszawa 2010, p. 31; S.P. Huntington, *The Lonely Superpower*, “Foreign Affairs” 1999, vol. 78, no. 2, pp. 35–38.

The United States entered the new century with a legitimate and hopeful belief that the twenty-first century would belong to America. This optimistic vision was supported by the conviction of some American political and scientific elites that after the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, humanity would slowly reach its target point of development, which F. Fukuyama termed 'the end of history', a time marked by the inevitable victory of Western liberal democracy and the free market all over the world¹³.

In this historical process, as we know, the United States of America would have a special mission to fulfil. As it was assumed during its implementation, the hegemonic power of the U.S. would be further strengthened, as it would have gained another asset for external expansion, granting itself a moral imperative to spread freedom and democracy in the world.

Turning points in the perception of U.S. power at the beginning of the 21st century

At the beginning of this century, two very important events took place in the same year, three months apart, on 11 September and 11 December 2001. The first date is widely known and refers to the terrorist attacks carried out by al-Qaeda militants on the World Trade Center and other facilities in the U.S. These attacks, due to their scale, perpetrators, and nature, caused widespread shock and indignation, snapping decision-makers and American society out of the state of blissful lethargy that prevailed in the United States after

¹³ F. Fukuyama, *Koniec historii*, Poznań 1996, pp. 72–87.

the collapse of the USSR and the victorious Gulf War in 1991. Americans had largely assumed that their geographical location, accumulated wealth, and military power would provide them with comfort and security away from the threats occurring in the post-Cold War world¹⁴.

The second date, on the other hand, is less known and only seemingly less important. On 11 December 2001, the People's Republic of China was admitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO) after long and difficult negotiations, giving China's economic reforms a new impetus for development and removing the last obstacles to China's integration into the world economy. Its membership has been controversial, bringing significant economic and political consequences for other countries (sometimes referred to as the Chinese shock) and causing numerous controversies related to the mismatch between WTO rules and the Chinese economic model. The assessment and enforcement of these non-compliances has become a flashpoint in China-U.S. trade relations and the subject of growing disputes over the extent to which China's non-compliance benefits its own economy. In the following part of the article, we will try to demonstrate the relationship between these two events and the change in the perception of U.S. power.

11 September 2001 marked a symbolic turning point in U.S. foreign policy and, arguably, in the history of international relations. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, President G. W. Bush's administration prepared a new

¹⁴ A.D. Rotfeld, *System bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego po 11 września 2001*, [in:] *Rocznik Strategiczny 2001/2002. Przegląd sytuacji politycznej, gospodarczej i wojskowej*, Warszawa 2002, pp. 19–21.

global strategy to counter threats to the international order. The U.S. broke with the previous policy of “liberal hegemony” and began a new chapter in external relations, commonly known as the war on terror, which it was already waging from the vantage of a global superpower. This new concept of foreign policy, called the Bush Doctrine, was first prepared in a draft version by researchers and politicians gathered around the neo-conservative think-tank Project for the New American Century (PNAC), and then in the National Security Strategy officially adopted in 2002. PNAC was founded by W. Kristol and R. Kagan, and its members included, among others, D. Cheney, D. Rumsfeld, P. Wolfowitz, A. Friedberg and F. Fukuyama. According to Z.J. Pietraś, the main assumptions of this new doctrine were: messianism, unilateralism, militarism and prevention; and granting the United States the right to take unilateral and unrestricted actions. It includes military and preventive actions – in response to threats to the national security of the United States against other states and non-state entities under the banner of spreading freedom and democracy in the world¹⁵.

As part of the new policy of hegemony, the war on terror became a priority, with military intervention as one of its key manifestations. The first was Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, launched in October 2001 as part of a coalition of the willing under the leadership of the United States, after the invocation of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization for the first time in history. After a short offensive involving American and British troops, with the support

¹⁵ Z.J. Pietraś, *Doktryna George'a Busha a struktura systemu międzynarodowego*, “Sprawy Międzynarodowe” 2004, no. 3, pp. 5–25.

of allied Afghan troops, it was possible to remove the Taliban from power and take control of most of the country. In December of the same year, on the basis of a UN mandate, the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) mission was established. In the same month, at the Bonn Peace Conference, an Afghan interim government headed by Hamid Karzai was appointed, and the Loya Jirga, a traditional tribal council, was announced as a substitute for provisional parliament. Additionally, significant funds were promised for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The United States and its allies seemed to have achieved their military goals. On the other hand, political objectives were planned to be met later through state-building, by rebuilding the economy and creating efficient state institutions, in hopes that Afghanistan would cease to be a “graveyard of empires”¹⁶.

However, it soon became evident that the initial victory of the U.S. and its allied forces was only superficial. At the end of 2002, the Taliban began to regain influence by waging guerrilla warfare, and the conflict entered a new phase. In order to prevent the collapse of the Karzai government and his successors, the United States was forced to send more troops and financial support to Afghanistan for years¹⁷.

It was only when it was realised that this conflict could not be won that the U.S., after concluding an agreement with the Taliban, finally decided to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan in 2021. An analysis of the reasons for the defeat

¹⁶ H. Kissinger, *Porządek światowy*, Warszawa 2017, pp. 298–299.

¹⁷ J.J. Mearsheimer, *Wielkie złudzenie. Liberalne marzenia a rzeczywistość międzynarodowa*, Kraków–Warszawa 2021, pp. 254–255; M. Madej, *Interwencja w Afganistanie – najdłuższa wojna, największe fiasko?*, [in:] M. Madej (ed.), *Wojny Zachodu*, Warszawa 2017, pp. 123–127.

would require a separate study, exceeding the modest size of this article; therefore, we will only briefly discuss this topic. For the United States, the overall balance of the intervention in Afghanistan was disastrous. The military operation failed. The Taliban have again taken power in Afghanistan. The evacuation of military equipment and civilians turned out to be a disaster in terms of logistics and media, reminiscent of the scenes of the evacuation of the American embassy in Saigon in 1975. It was the longest war in the history of the United States, lasting 20 years and twice as long as the intervention in Vietnam. The number of deaths from direct fighting is estimated at over 100,000. International forces lost a total of 3,500 soldiers, including nearly 2,400 U.S. troops, as well as 3,400 private military companies. The rest of the more than 90,000 casualties are due to warring government forces, the Taliban and other insurgent groups, and civilians. The financial cost of the operation is estimated to be 1 trillion USD. By the end of 2016, the U.S. had spent 117 billion USD on the reconstruction of Afghanistan alone, which is more than the Truman administration spent on helping European countries under the Marshall Plan¹⁸.

The next country on the list of American interventions was Iraq. However, unlike in Afghanistan, where the United States recognised its right to retaliate against the Taliban government in Kabul for sheltering al-Qaeda militants and refusing to extradite them – thus sharing responsibility

¹⁸ J.J. Mearsheimer, *Wielkie...*, pp. 256–257; M. Madej, *Interwencja...*, pp. 144–145; *Ofiary i dolary. Ile tak naprawdę kosztowała USA wojna w Afganistanie?*, Forsal.pl, 6 September 2021, <https://forsal.pl/swiat/usa/artykuly/8236685,ile-kosztowala-usa-wojna-w-afganistanie.html> [15.09.2024].

for the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 – the decision to invade was made without obtaining the consent of the UN Security Council. The reasons declared by the U.S. for initiating military action against Iraq included accusations that the government in Baghdad was illegally working on the production of weapons of mass destruction, supporting international terrorism, and massively and constantly violating human rights. Before the attack, efforts were made to convince global public opinion that these three premises are sufficient to conclude that Hussein's regime poses a serious threat to international security. As we know, after the defeat of the Iraqi troops, despite strenuous searches, no evidence was found to confirm that Iraq had acquired nuclear weapons. Thus, the main reason justifying the intervention collapsed. It can be assumed that the real goals of the intervention were to demonstrate the power of the superpower, to reconfigure the balance of power in the Middle East, and to strengthen the geostrategic presence of the U.S., as well as to gain access to and control over Iraq's oil resources¹⁹.

The military operation, called Iraqi Freedom, began on 20 March 2003 with a missile and air attack on selected critical Iraqi command and military infrastructure facilities. The next day, land operations began. American and allied troops, defeating the Iraqi army, quickly moved into the country. On 9 April – 20 days after fighting began, Baghdad was captured and the occupying troops took power, with General Tommy Franks as their commander. On 1 May,

¹⁹ B. Balcerowicz, *Interwencja w Iraku 2003–2010 – katastrofa w wojnie z wyboru*, [in:] *Wojny...*, pp. 154–157.

President G.W. Bush officially announced the end of hostilities. On 22 May, the UN Security Council de facto accepted the U.S. intervention by adopting Resolution 1483, which served as the formal basis for the occupation of Iraq²⁰.

It seemed that the overthrow of the government of S. Hussein – who was captured at the end of 2003 and then tried, sentenced to death and executed in December 2005 – paved the way to building a pluralist democracy in place of dictatorship. The reality proved less optimistic. As early as May 2003, the activities of various irregular armed formations were recorded, intensifying over time. Various rebel groups and people's militias, created both spontaneously and in an organised way, formed by Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds, joined the fight. International terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda, along with neighbouring countries were also more active. These armed groups, attempting to control as much territory as possible, were constantly fighting each other and, with the exception of the Kurds, attacked American troops and coalition forces and organised terrorist attacks against them. Since 2004, in the years that followed, there was an escalation in internal fighting and attacks on coalition forces to such an extent that the United States was forced to send additional contingents to control the situation. In October 2011, President Obama announced the end of the military operation in Iraq²¹.

The question arises: what effects did the American intervention in Iraq bring? The financial costs of this operation for

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 166–168.

²¹ B. Balcerowicz, *Interwencja...*, pp. 167–171; H. Kissinger, *Porządek...*, p. 305; J.J. Mearshaimer, *Wielkie...*, p. 256.

the U.S. are estimated at 2 to 3 trillion USD. The U.S. Army lost more than 4,600 soldiers. The number of victims of the Iraq War varies according to estimates from 200,000 to one million people. Contrary to declarations, Iraq did not become a developed, stable allied country that adhered to democratic rules, but plunged into chaos, which resulted in the creation of ISIS and the destabilisation of the situation in Iraq's neighbouring countries. The intervention upset the fragile balance of power in the Middle East and strengthened Iran's position in the region²².

The list of U.S. interventions in the 21st century would be incomplete without mentioning the military operations in Syria and Libya and the two instances of "help" during the change of power in Egypt. The declared motives for these actions were the readiness to overthrow authoritarian regimes under the slogan of protecting human rights and freedoms, with the assumption that this would allow these countries to be transformed into stable democracies²³.

From the current perspective, it is clear, to paraphrase the title of one of J. Mearsheimer's books, just how much of a great delusion these expectations turned out to be. Not only were they counterproductive in terms of spreading liberal democracy and human rights, but they also largely contributed to the escalation of bloody conflicts, resulting

²² A. Łukasiewicz, *Afganistan i Irak: ekonomiczny bilans wojny z terroryzmem*, "Żurawia Papers" 2010, vol. 15, pp. 96–102; P. Milewski, *To jedna z największych kompromitacji w historii USA. "Polacy ryzykowali życie, by stworzyć alibi"*, Newsweek, 19 March 2023, <https://www.newsweek.pl/historia/wojna-w-iraku-jedna-z-najwiekszych-kompromitacji-usa/39pqkrf> [15.09.2024].

²³ A. Wojciuk, *Interwencja w Libii – pozorny sukces militarny drogą do państwa upadłego*, [in:] *Wojny...*, pp. 183–191; B. Balcerowicz, *Interwencja...*, p. 160; M. Madej, *Interwencja...*, p. 114; J.J. Mearsheimer, *Wielkie...*, p. 255.

in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and chaos in the Middle East and Central Asia. Additionally, they seriously weakened the power of the United States, which, by engaging in local armed conflicts, squandered its resources and lost time and opportunities to oppose the main challenge to its global position: the rise of China's power²⁴.

The age of uncertainty: challenges and competitors

While the United States was engaged in military interventions, China was constantly and dynamically increasing its economic potential. At the end of the 1990s, China's gross domestic product, determined on the basis of exchange rates, was only 10% of the U.S. GDP. When calculated according to purchasing power parity, it was estimated at less than half of the GDP of the United States. Currently, depending on the method of calculation, it ranges from 70% to 115%. At the end of the last century, China was ranked 9th in the world's foreign trade; now, it is the world's largest trading power, the first exporter and the second importer, maintaining a positive trade balance for years, amounting to 350 to 870 billion USD per year, depending on the economic situation. This success has allowed China to amass the world's largest foreign exchange and gold reserves, estimated at nearly 4 trillion USD²⁵.

²⁴ J.J. Mearsheimer, *Wielkie...*, p. IX.

²⁵ A. Brunett, J.-P. Guichard, *Chiny światowym hegemonem?*, Warszawa 2011, pp. 26–27; *The Economic World*, The World Factbook, 2022, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/static/503b62a3f8c38cb33b2b2be2f5762a30/Economic_World.pdf; M. Kalwasiński, *Historyczna nadwyżka Chin*, Bankier.pl, 13 January 2023, <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Chiny-eksport-i-import-w-2022-r-Partnerzy-handlowi-i-najwazniejsze-towary-8471525.html>; World Intellectual Property Organization, *Executive Summary Global Innovation Index 2023*, <https://tind.wipo.int/record/48228?v=pdf> [17.09.2024].

China has usually been associated with being a global manufacturer of simple and mass-produced products; however, in recent years, by skilfully using foreign technologies and allocating significant funds to research and development, the Chinese economy has become a global competitor in some of the most advanced technological sectors, such as AI, biotechnology, electronics, space, and the defence industry²⁶.

It would be an oversimplification to reduce the issue of perceiving U.S. power and its ability to act only through the prism of military interventions; however, these undertakings consumed between 3 and 4 trillion USD, contributing significantly to the increase in public debt from 32.5% in 2001, to 53.5% in 2009, and to 110.3% in 2022, relative to GDP²⁷.

Another turning point in the perception of U.S. power was the 2008 financial crisis, which was largely caused by excessive military spending. It not only seriously weakened the country's position in international relations, setting the limits of the United States' military capabilities in managing the international system, but also undermined the previously dominant belief in the superiority of Western civilisation and development over the rest of the world²⁸.

²⁶ J. Fenby, *Upadek i narodziny wielkiej potęgi*, Kraków 2009, pp. 36–37; K. Seitz, *Powrót olbrzymia*, Warszawa 2008, p. 400; D. Wang, *China's Hidden Tech Revolution, How Beijing Threatens U.S. Dominance*, "Foreign Affairs" 2023, vol. 102, no. 2, p. 66.

²⁷ D. Kondrakiewicz, *Między porządkiem a chaosem. Faza nierównowagi systemu międzynarodowego*, Lublin 2015, p. 221, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/united-states/#economy> [18.09.2024].

²⁸ R. Kuźniar, *Zmierzch dominacji Zachodu*, [in:] *Kryzys a pozycja międzynarodowa Zachodu*, Warszawa 2011, p. 33.

The next turning point was the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the war, it turned out that China and other Asian countries were much more effective at combating the virus than European countries and the United States. For some authors, this was a clear symptom that the U.S. was entering a period of decline in relation to China's growing power²⁹. A different position on this issue is taken by A.D. Rotfeld, who believes that it was not the pandemic that undermined the position of the United States, but internal factors – the crisis of American democracy, the increase in social inequalities, and the loss of citizens' trust in the state and its institutions, as well as the lack of will on the part of the government to make the necessary changes for the U.S. to meet the challenges of the 21st century³⁰.

Another challenge, and at the same time an opportunity to reverse the unfavourable trends in the assessment of the power of the United States, may be the war in Ukraine. However, the U.S. must demonstrate its ability to manage this crisis in such a way that, on the one hand, it provides Ukraine with sufficient support to defend itself against Russian aggression and maintain its independence, and on the other hand, prevents the escalation of hostilities to other countries. Ultimately, the U.S. must work to finally bring about an end to the conflict on terms favourable to the West, thus confirming its role as the main stabiliser of the security of the international system. However, this requires strong political leadership and bold strategic decisions.

²⁹ N. Fergusson, *Fatum. Polityka i katastrofy współczesnego świata*, Kraków 2002, pp. 452–456.

³⁰ A.D. Rotfeld, *Porządek międzynarodowy w czasach pandemii*, [in:] *Rocznik Strategiczny 2020/2001. Przegląd sytuacji politycznej, gospodarczej i wojskowej*, Warszawa 2021, p. 34.

So, what is the current position of the United States in international relations? The United States is still the most powerful country in the world. Occupying an area of 6.6% of the globe inhabited by 4.2% of the world's population, produces from nearly 20% of the global gross product (calculated according to purchasing power parity) to 25% (estimated on the basis of the real dollar exchange rate). The U.S. is above all the strongest military power. Last year's military spending amounted to 3.4% of GDP, reaching an astronomical amount of over 905 billion USD, which is 40% of all military spending in the world and corresponds to the sum of spending of the next 14 countries on the list of the largest military powers. Comparing the share of military spending with the share of global GDP, we are dealing with a classic example of imperial overstretch described by P. Kennedy³¹.

At the same time, the perception of U.S. power in terms of military power, given the political dimension of the failure of U.S. military interventions in recent years, affects the overall assessment of the possibility of maintaining the U.S. hegemonic position in international relations. If the United States, which is undoubtedly a global military power, achieves military successes in the initial phase of subsequent interventions, and then is unable to use its political advantage in subsequent stages of conflicts, incurring huge financial and image costs – this obviously gives the impression of weakening American power and the loss of the ability to act effectively in international relations.

³¹ data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD; www.iiss.org/the-military-balance-plus, www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/united-states [20.10.2024].

Conclusions

The perception of U.S. power in the international system has evolved as follows:

- at the beginning of the 21st century, the perception of American power was realistic and corresponded to its real resources and influence capacity;
- after the intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq the perception of the U.S. power was definitely inflated and overly optimistic in relation to its objective power, passing to the imaginary phase, as the perceived power of this country was only a projection of its own expectations and a product of imagination that was not reflected in reality;
- it is currently underestimated – because the perceived power of the USA is below the level of its overall social, economic and military potential.



U.S. policy towards the Balkans from the end of World War II to the present age of uncertainty

The United States has been one of the most important actors in international politics in recent decades. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the NATO intervention in Kosovo, and next year will bring the 30th anniversary of the Dayton Agreement. It is worth taking a historical perspective on the role of the United States after World War II in the Balkan Peninsula, focusing particularly on its influence over Yugoslavia¹, which existed until the early 1990s, and the states that emerged after its collapse. Today, most of these states, along with Albania (excluding Slovenia), form the Western Balkans. What external/internal factors influenced U.S. engagement in a given period? When was its role crucial in this region? Can Americans claim success for their diplomacy in the Balkans?

¹ In 1963, the name of the Yugoslav state was changed to the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY).

Cold War – between the East and the West

At the end of World War II, a significant part of the Balkan Peninsula (Yugoslavia, Albania, Romania, Bulgaria) fell within the Soviet sphere of influence, while Western policy, including that of the United States, initially focused on limiting communist expansion (e.g. in war-torn Greece). Earlier in the region, the British and the Soviets had been more active. Marshal Josip Broz Tito's Yugoslavia emerged as the leading Balkan state, having liberated its territory from occupation with limited Allied assistance. The country's geostrategic location was a significant factor². Yugoslav communists provided aid to their comrades in Albania under the leadership of Enver Hoxha, and soon began supporting Greek communists as well. Michael Petrovich, a member of the U.S. military mission in Yugoslavia, noted: "Tito appeared to be the most extreme of the East European dictators" and "Tito and his lieutenants seemed to be almost more Stalinist than Stalin"³. The American ambassador to Yugoslavia, Richard Patterson, stated in August 1945: "Tito is colorful, dynamic, hospitable, a military genius, but a thorough Communist, and his economic and political philosophy is not ours"⁴. The Yugoslav leader's ambitions also led to a dispute with the Western Allies over Trieste,

² As Robin Alison Remington wrote in the 1970s: "Yugoslavia is roughly the size of Wyoming, geography magnifies the strategic importance of the area it covers. Yugoslavia is the heart of the Balkans. It borders on seven states [...]. Physically, ideologically, even economically, it has been the dividing line between East and West". R.A. Remington, *Yugoslavia and Foreign Affairs*, [in:] G.K. Bertsch, T.W. Ganschow (eds.), *Comparative Communism. The Soviet, Chinese, and Yugoslav models*, San Francisco 1976, p. 421.

³ M.B. Petrovich, *The View from Yugoslavia*, [in:] T.T. Hammond (ed.), *Witness to the Origins of the Cold War*, Seattle-London 1986, p. 42.

⁴ *Memorandum by the Ambassador to Yugoslavia (Patterson). August 31, 1945*, Foreign Relations of the United States, vol. 5: 1945, Washington 1969, p. 1253.

which has been described as “the first major confrontation of the Cold War” or “the first Cold War confrontation in Europe”⁵. President Harry Truman described this conflict in his memoirs: “I was trying to be extremely careful not to get us mixed up in a Balkan turmoil. The Balkans had long been a source of trouble and war. [...] I did not want to become involved in the Balkans in a way that could lead us into another world conflict”⁶.

Yugoslavia’s policy during the years 1945-1948 increasingly displeased the Truman administration. This was influenced by factors such as the communists’ brutal crackdown on their opponents, the issue of American flights over Yugoslavia⁷, and the assistance provided under the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), which was largely provided by the United States. Despite this support, the United States became the target of Yugoslav propaganda during this period.

The Greek Civil War, in which neighbouring socialist states such as Albania and Yugoslavia⁸ provided significant support to the communists, led to American involvement in the conflict. In March 1947, the Truman Doctrine was announced, which included aid for Greece and Turkey. This was undoubtedly a significant step for the U.S. administration

⁵ S. Rajak, *The Cold War in the Balkans, 1945–1956*, [in:] M.P. Leffler, O.A. Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. 1: *Origins*, Cambridge 2010, p. 202; B. Dimitrijević, *The Trieste Crisis 1953. The first Cold War confrontation in Europe*, Warwick 2019.

⁶ H.S. Truman, *Memoirs*, vol. 1: *Year of Decisions*, New York 1955, p. 245.

⁷ In 1946, two US aircraft were shot down by Yugoslav aviation.

⁸ As M. Petrovich noted: “Tito sent not only supplies but also military and political advisers. To the West, Yugoslav support of the Greek rebellion seemed to be another example of Tito attempting to spread communism by armed force”. M.B. Petrovich, *op. cit.*, pp. 48–49.

in its policy of limiting the influence of the USSR and its communist allies in the region.

The balance of power shifted dramatically in mid-1948 when Yugoslavia was expelled from the Eastern Bloc. Tito's significant independence and plans for a Balkan federation led to a conflict with Stalin. The Soviets launched a propaganda and economic offensive against their former satellite. In the West, there was a belief that the Tito-Stalin conflict presented an opportunity to draw Belgrade into its sphere of influence, thereby weakening the cohesion of the Eastern Bloc. As John Campbell noted: "The question was whether the West, especially the United States, was going to do anything to influence the situation brought on by this most portentous heresy since Henry VIII"⁹. Dean Acheson, U.S. secretary of state, observed early in 1949 that it was in the "obvious interest" of the United States, "that Titoism continue to exist as an erosive and disintegrating force in the Soviet sphere"¹⁰. It was hoped that the dispute would contribute to, for example, the emergence of new anti-Soviet centres in the Eastern Bloc, strengthen the position of Western countries, lande ad to favourable Western solutions in the Trieste dispute (which, however, lasted for many

⁹ J.C. Campbell, *Tito's Separate Road. America and Yugoslavia in World Politics*, New York 1967, p. 15.

¹⁰ J.L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment. A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, New York 1982, p. 67. Tito, who may have been a "son-of-a-bitch", became "our son-of-a-bitch", to use the words of D. Acheson. T. Jakovina, M. Previšić, *Challenging the Cominform: Tito-Stalin Split 70 Years Later*, [in:] T. Jakovina, M. Previšić (eds.), *The Tito-Stalin Split 70 Years After*, Zagreb–Ljubljana 2020, p. 8.

more years¹¹) and in Greece¹². The Americans hoped that the Tito-Stalin conflict would also have an impact in Asia, with Mao Zedong becoming an “Asian Tito”, though this did not happen¹³.

Despite their ideological differences, the West, particularly the U.S., provided political, economic, and military support to Yugoslavia out of pragmatic considerations. Informally, American aid to Yugoslavia was described as a policy of “keeping Tito afloat”. This support was vital as the Yugoslavs feared Soviet aggression, a threat confirmed by U.S. intelligence. The United States and Yugoslavia signed the Military Assistance Pact in November 1951. Many modern jet fighters, helicopters, radars, contemporary tanks, artillery pieces, and vehicles were sent to the Yugoslav People’s Army by the United States¹⁴.

The issue of cooperation between representatives of the Western world and communist Yugoslavia during the Cold War has been the subject of controversy among various groups and politicians, as well as the American public for many years. According to Tvrtko Jakovina, the country became an “American communist ally”¹⁵. Yugoslavia began

¹¹ As John Foster Dulles stated when he became secretary of state in 1953: “I made a list of the more important problems which needed to be resolved in the interests of world peace and security. Trieste was in the top bracket of that list” – quoted in R.G. Rabel, *Between East and West. Trieste, the United States, and the Cold War, 1941–1954*, Durham 1988, p. 161.

¹² The civil war ended in 1949, partly due to U.S. support for the Greek government and the cutting off of aid to communist partisans by Yugoslavia.

¹³ J.L. Gaddis, *The Cold War*, London 2005, pp. 37–38.

¹⁴ Cooperation ended in 1958. See more: B. Dimitrijevic, *The Mutual Defense Aid Program in Tito’s Yugoslavia, 1951–1958, and its Technical Impact*, “The Journal of Slavic Military Studies” 1997, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 20–31.

¹⁵ T. Jakovina, *Američki komunistički saveznik? Vanjskopolitički odnosi SAD-a i Jugoslavije (1955.–1963.)*, “Radovi” 1998, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 81–108.

to open up to the world, including in the cultural sphere, as evidenced by the appearance in Yugoslavia of American magazines, books, newspapers, films, comics, music, etc¹⁶. American information centres – such as the United States Information Service (USIS) – operated in cities like Belgrade, Zagreb, Novi Sad, and Ljubljana and were used for this purpose¹⁷.

The U.S. attempted to integrate Yugoslavia into Western alliances (the Balkan Pact or NATO) but failed¹⁸. Although the former satellite did not return to its alliance with the USSR after Stalin's death, Tito continued to pursue an independent foreign policy, remaining between the two competing blocs. Soon, the Yugoslav federation became one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement. Subsequent American administrations continued to support Yugoslavia, presenting it as an alternative model for the Soviet-dominated satellite states to follow. Washington was interested in maintaining Belgrade's independence from the USSR. U.S. authorities tried not to interfere in Tito's domestic affairs and avoided sensitive topics for him, such as human rights. However, there were, of course, contentious issues in their mutual relations, related, for example, to the foreign

¹⁶ According to Radina Vučetić: "The most successful short-term result for America was the fact that in Yugoslavia, in the time of the Cold War, Washington had a Trojan horse behind the Iron Curtain and it used it as circumstances demanded from time to time; for Yugoslavia it was the fact that 'for an affordable price', that is, at the cost of Donald Duck, pop art, Ben Quick, La Mama, and Coca-Cola, Belgrade succeeded in presenting itself to the world as 'something different', even as a liberal country". R. Vučetić, *Coca-cola socialism. Americanization of Yugoslav culture in the sixties*, Budapest–New York 2018, p. 305.

¹⁷ See more: C. Konta, *US Public Diplomacy in Socialist Yugoslavia, 1950–70. Soft Culture, Cold Partners*, Manchester 2020, *passim*.

¹⁸ Other Balkan states, Turkey, and Greece became members of NATO in 1952.

policy of SFRY and Tito's criticism of American actions (e.g. in Vietnam or the Middle East). As Warren Zimmermann said: "U.S. policy toward Yugoslavia in the entire Cold War period can be summed up in four words: independence, unity, territorial integrity. This mantra was a code for saying that we wanted to see Yugoslavia remain free of Soviet control or influence and that preservation of her unity was the best way to assure this"¹⁹.

The U.S. and Yugoslavia enjoyed strong relations, marked by high-level visits and economic cooperation. In 1970, Richard Nixon became the first American leader to arrive the SFRY – a visit intended to emphasise the special relations between Washington and countries pursuing an independent foreign policy from Moscow²⁰. In subsequent years, Yugoslavia was visited by, among others: the next U.S. President Gerald Ford (1975), Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (1974) and Vice President Walter Mondale (1977). Tito visited the U.S. in 1963, 1971 and 1978. Regardless of the good political relations between the two countries, economic cooperation was a particularly important aspect. Subsequent American administrations encouraged private U.S. investors to invest in SFRY, which benefited from the Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) treatment in trade for many years²¹. It was in Belgrade that the first McDonald's

¹⁹ W. Zimmermann, *Yugoslavia 1989–1996*, [in:] J.R. Azrael, E.A. Payin (eds.), *U.S. and Russian Policymaking with Respect to the Use of Force*, Santa Monica 1996, p. 178.

²⁰ Yugoslavia was the second socialist country to officially receive an American president during the Cold War. The first such visit took place in 1969 in Romania.

²¹ American companies such as Gillette, General Motors, and Hyatt International invested in SFRY. See more: S.G. Markovich, *An Assessment of 125 Years of Serbian-U.S. Relations*, [in:] K. Trgovčević (ed.), *125 Years of Diplomatic Relations between the USA and Serbia*, Belgrade 2008, p. 340; J.R. Lampe, R.O. Prickett, L.S. Adamović, *Yugoslav-American Economic Relations since World War II*, Durham 1990, passim.

restaurant in Eastern Europe was opened in March 1989. Between 1980 and 1988, exports from Yugoslavia to the United States averaged 4.6% of the total value of this Balkan country's exports, and in the case of imports – 6.1%²². One of the Yugoslav goods that was heavily marketed and sought to be sold on Western markets, including the U.S., was the Yugo car²³. In the 1970s and 1980s, Yugoslavia, like the countries of the Eastern Bloc, benefited generously from Western loans, including from the U.S.²⁴, which led to a rapid increase in SFRY's debt. The U.S. was also able to influence educational circles in SFRY, especially through the Fulbright Program. This was the first time that this program was signed with a communist nation in 1964. Until the disintegration of Yugoslavia, more than 2,000 scholarships were awarded to citizens of this country²⁵.

Tito passed away in May 1980. Following the demise of their longstanding leader, the United States persisted in its support for the Yugoslav federation. This continuity was underscored by the visit of a successive U.S. president to Belgrade in June 1980. Jimmy Carter stated: "The special relationship between our two countries has involved seven American presidents, beginning with President Harry Truman. I'm here to confirm the continuity of that relationship. I'm here to reiterate our firm support of Yugoslavia's

²² J.R. Lampe, R.O. Prickett, L.S. Adamović, op. cit., pp. 102–103. See more: *Trade in Goods with Yugoslavia (former)*, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c4790.html> [10.08.2024].

²³ J.R. Lampe, R.O. Prickett, L.S. Adamović, op. cit., pp. 123–124; J. Vuic, *The Yugo. The Rise and Fall of the Worst Car in History*, New York 2010, passim.

²⁴ In the 1980s the United States became Yugoslavia's "lender of last resort". J.R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History. Twice There Was a Country*, 2nd ed., Cambridge 2000, p. 275.

²⁵ S.G. Markovich, *An Assessment of 125 Years...*, pp. 340–341.

independence, territorial integrity, and unity and our respect for Yugoslavia's nonaligned position"²⁶.

Nevertheless, in the view of Yugoslav politician Raif Dizdarević: "We were embarking on the post-Tito era and its problems: economic and social stagnation, internal relations in the Federation at an impasse in certain areas, and the attendant threats to the stability and unity of the country"²⁷. The 1980s brought about a deterioration of the economic situation, a crisis in Kosovo, and a turnover of political and intellectual elites in SFRY.

U.S.-SFRY relations began to cool during this period, with significantly fewer high-level political contacts compared with the 1970s. After Carter's 1980 visit, neither of his successors made the trip to the federation. As Slobodan G. Marković noted: "The period of the 1980s should not be viewed as a peak in mutual relations but rather as a period of the American gradual disenchantment with communist Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was still seen by the U.S. in a dominantly favourable light, but it was precisely in this period that Americans realized that their capacity to preserve Yugoslavia was increasingly limited and also too costly"²⁸.

A significant factor that undeniably impacted the situation in Yugoslavia during the latter half of the 1980s was the evolving dynamic between the Eastern and Western blocs.

²⁶ *Toast of the President at a State Dinner in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. June 24, 1980*, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/251330> [10.08.2024].

²⁷ R. Dizdarević, *From the Death of Tito to the Death of Yugoslavia*, Sarajevo-Zagreb 2009, p. 57.

²⁸ S. Marković, *Yugoslavia and the United States in the 1980s. How did an important partnership become a matter of secondary importance?*, [in:] D.R. Simić, D. Živojinović, S. Nedeljković (eds.), *Srpsko-američki odnosi: trideset godina od pada Berlinskog zida*, Beograd 2021, p. 106.

The ascension of Mikhail Gorbachev to power in the USSR in 1985, coupled with his aspirations for domestic reform and détente with the United States, diminished Yugoslavia's strategic significance in the eyes of Western powers. Concurrently, Western governments were increasingly alarmed by Yugoslavia's deteriorating internal conditions, most notably the escalating Serb-Albanian conflict in Kosovo²⁹. Certain members of the U.S. Congress exhibited a pronounced interest in this region, a trend that persisted throughout the 1990s. The Albanian diaspora residing in the United States undoubtedly exerted influence upon the activities of these politicians³⁰.

The breakup of Yugoslavia – the turbulent 1990s

A change in U.S. relations with Yugoslavia became evident from 1989. With the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, the geopolitical landscape was transforming. Under the presidencies of George H.W. Bush and the ambassadorship of Warren Zimmermann, the U.S. adopted a new approach towards the Belgrade authorities, particularly in the realm of human rights. The ambassador's new message was: "I would say that Yugoslavia and the Balkans remained important to U.S. interests, but that Yugoslavia no longer enjoyed its former geopolitical significance as a balance between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Warsaw Pact. It was no longer unique, since both Poland and Hungary now had more open political and economic

²⁹ See more: K. Pawłowski, *Kosowo. Konflikt i interwencja*, Lublin 2008, pp. 64–68.

³⁰ D.L. Phillips, *Liberating Kosovo. Coercive Diplomacy and U.S. Intervention*, Cambridge 2012, pp. 33 et seq.; W. Zimmermann, *Yugoslavia...*, pp. 180–181.

systems. [...] I would reassert to the Yugoslav authorities the traditional mantra of U.S. policy toward Yugoslavia – our support for its unity, independence, and territorial integrity. But I would add that we could only support the country’s unity in the context of progress toward democracy”³¹. As Europe underwent significant changes, Americans increasingly emphasised democratisation, market-oriented reforms, and human rights. Although U.S. officials repeatedly voiced support for a united SFRY, they avoided confronting the country’s deepening crisis or proposing practical solutions. The Bush administration sought to bolster political forces, like the Prime Minister of SFRY, Ante Marković, who advocated for a multinational federation. However, the United States did not plan any real assistance, such as the financial aid Marković sought in Washington.

When the situation in Yugoslavia had already become tense, secretary of state James Baker decided to visit Belgrade in June 1991. His mission was doomed, as Slovenia and Croatia declared independence days later, triggering a violent conflict. According to Micheal Dobbs: “The failed attempt at diplomacy left Baker deeply discouraged. He returned to Washington convinced that the United States ‘did not have a dog in that fight’, as he later put it. [...] His assessment was shared by the president, who, like many people in Washington, had trouble sorting out the bewildering complexity of Balkan politics”³².

³¹ W. Zimmermann, *Origins of a Catastrophe. Yugoslavia and its Destroyers – America’s Last Ambassador Tells What Happened and Why*, New York 1996, pp. 7–8.

³² M. Dobbs, *Down with Big Brother. The Fall of the Soviet Empire*, London 2013, p. 441.

The Bush administration was deeply sceptical of a peaceful resolution to Yugoslavia's complex crisis. As senior NSC staffers noted, quoted by diplomat Robert Rackmales, the situation was "horribly complicated", even "worse than the Middle East", and "there were no good guys"³³. Additionally, Europeans were not interested in engaging in the United States' conflict. In July 1991, Dutch foreign minister Hans van den Broeck in Washington "breezily told skeptical yet relieved U.S. officials that the United States had done a good job in the Gulf War, but that Yugoslavia was part of Europe, and thus Europe would take the lead in solving its own crises"³⁴. According to Baker: "It was time to make the Europeans step up to the plate and show that they could act as a unified power. Yugoslavia was as good a first test as any. [...] Yugoslavia was in the heart of Europe, and European interests were directly threatened. [...] Milosevic had Saddam's appetite, but Serbia didn't have Iraq's capabilities or the ability to affect America's vital interests, such as access to energy supplies"³⁵. Therefore, as James Gow noted: "This made it easier for Washington to hand the baton to Brussels"³⁶.

Yugoslavia was not a top priority for the Bush presidency, even after fighting broke out and spread to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in the spring of 1992. The administration limited itself to humanitarian aid, the imposition of sanctions,

³³ *Yugoslavia Breaks Up*. Robert Rackmales. Deputy Chief of Mission, American Embassy, Belgrade, Yugoslavia, 1989–1993, [in:] W.D. Morgan, Ch.S. Kennedy (eds.), *American Diplomats. The Foreign Service at Work*, New York 2004, p. 232.

³⁴ L. Sell, *Slobodan Milosevic and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, Durham 2002, p. 146.

³⁵ J.A. Baker III (with T.M. DeFrank), *The Politics of Diplomacy. Revolution, War and Peace 1989–1992*, New York 1995, pp. 636–637.

³⁶ J. Gow, *Triumph of the Lack of Will. International Diplomacy and the Yugoslav War*, London 1997, p. 204.

or repeated declarations regarding peaceful solutions. According to Kurt Bassuener, this was a “policy of malign neglect”. Bassuener further argues that “Bush’s policy toward the unfolding carnage in dissolving Yugoslavia, until nearly the end of his term, was one of vacillation, aloofness, and weakness”³⁷. Zimmermann, on the other hand, contends that “The refusal of the Bush Administration to commit American power early was our greatest mistake of the entire Yugoslav crisis. It made an unjust outcome inevitable and wasted the opportunity to save over a hundred thousand lives”³⁸. The United States also consistently refused to send its troops to reinforce UN forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Croatia. Only at the end of his term did President Bush issue a “Christmas warning” in December 1992, threatening Belgrade with air strikes if a conflict started in Kosovo³⁹. Washington feared that another conflict could spread to neighbouring countries on the Balkan Peninsula. These concerns have also appeared repeatedly in analyses and statements by the Bush successor administration. In June 1995, the defence secretary William Perry announced: “The tension and circumstances which might cause this war to spill out north into Croatia, south into Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, and possibly even into Greece and Turkey, those conditions exist and we have to continue to work very hard to be sure that that does not happen. Because if

³⁷ K. Bassuener, *The Reluctant, Intermittent Interventionist: US Foreign Policy in the Former Yugoslavia 1991 – to Date*, [in:] S. Keil, B. Stahl (eds.), *A New Eastern Question? Great Powers and the Post-Yugoslav States*, Stuttgart 2022, pp. 106, 110–111.

³⁸ W. Zimmermann, *Origins of...*, p. 216. During the war in BiH, approximately 100,000 of its inhabitants were killed. See more: K. Krysienieł, *W cieniu Dayton. Bośnia i Hercegowina między etnokracją i demokracją konsocjonalną*, Warszawa 2012, pp. 185–186.

³⁹ L. Sell, op. cit., p. 264.

the war were to spread, particularly if it were to engulf our NATO allies of Greece and Turkey, then I would change my judgment about the national interest and it then becomes a vital national interest of the United States. [...] this conflict could become a vital national interest to the United States if it spreads beyond Bosnia to a wider Balkan war, and even outside of the Balkans. And I believe that is a real possibility, not an academic possibility”⁴⁰. The United States did, however, support preventive measures by deploying UN forces to Macedonia and sent its own soldiers there⁴¹.

The change in the White House in 1993 did not lead to a radical shift in the superpower’s policy towards the Balkans, especially the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite criticising Bush’s policy in the 1992 election campaign, Bill Clinton, as president, was initially very cautious about the Yugoslav conflicts, limiting himself, for example, to the “lift and strike” strategy and the delivery of humanitarian aid. According to Madeleine Albright: “At this stage, with a new president, a wary secretary of state, a negative Pentagon, nervous allies, and crises in Somalia, then Rwanda

⁴⁰ *United States Policy toward the Former Yugoslavia. Committee on National Security House of Representatives. Hearings held June 7, 1995, July 11, 1995, October 17, 18, 1995, November 2, 8, 15, 30, 1995, December 6, 1995 and September 25, 1996, Washington 1997, pp. 6, 20.*

⁴¹ S.L. Szczesio, *The Policy of the George H.W. Bush’s Administration Toward Macedonia, “Politeja”* 2014, vol. 4(30), pp. 246–247. In 2001, General Wesley Clark stated: “Beginning in 1993 we deployed U.S. troops along the border with Serbia [...] It was a mission held up as an example of a new U.S. and international strategy, Preventive Defense. In conjunction with the United Nations, we successfully used a small military mission, only some 500 U.S. troops and an equal number of Scandinavians”. *The Crisis in Macedonia and U.S. Engagement in the Balkans. Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate. June 13, 2001, Washington 2001, p. 31.* According to J. Gow, the mission in Macedonia was a precedent “not only because it was the UN’s first preventive deployment, but also because it was the first UN armed peacekeeping mission with American troops”. J. Gow, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

and Haiti blowing up, we weren't prepared to run the risks of leadership on Bosnia"⁴². In 1993, President Clinton called the wars in the Balkans "the most difficult, most frustrating problem in the world", while the secretary of state, Warren Christopher, said: "the situation in Bosnia [...] It's really a tragic problem. The hatred [...] is almost unbelievable. It's almost terrifying, and it's centuries old. That really is a problem from hell. [...] The United States simply doesn't have the means to make people in that region of the world like each other"⁴³. In his memoirs, Christopher underscored that "From the day I took office as secretary of state, the war in Bosnia cast a dark shadow over our foreign policy"⁴⁴. Christopher Hill characterised the region's problem as follows: "While the Balkans were a distant part of the world, far removed from the centers of power and authority, their explosion, to say something of the human rights calamity graphically detailed by CNN's coverage, meant that this tiny, obscure region of the world became the locus of all our fears. [...] The Balkans was a constant stream of bad news that seemed impervious to any efforts – certainly not those cooked up in Washington interagency meetings – to make it better"⁴⁵.

⁴² M. Albright (with B. Woodward), *Madame Secretary*, New York 2003, p. 229.

⁴³ P. Lewis, *U.S. Seeks Tougher Sanctions on Yugoslavia*, "The New York Times", 7 April 1993, p. 15; T.L. Friedman, *Bosnia Reconsidered. Where Candidate Clinton Saw a Challenge the President Sees an Insoluble Quagmire*, "The New York Times", 8 April 1993, p. 1.

⁴⁴ W. Christopher, *In the Stream of History. Shaping Foreign Policy for a New Era*, Stanford 1998, s. 343. The conditions prevailing in BiH at that time were described by senator John James Exon: "Everybody hates everybody and everybody fighting everybody and everybody is trying to survive". *Briefing on Bosnia and Other Current Military Operations. Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services United States Senate. February 23, 1994*, Washington 1994, p. 22.

⁴⁵ Ch.R. Hill, *Outpost. Life on the Frontlines of American Diplomacy: A Memoir*, New York 2014, pp. 77–78.

Thus, many factors influenced U.S. policy towards the region during both the Bush and Clinton administrations, such as the complicated situation of war-torn countries in the Balkans, the reluctance of the military (the Powell Doctrine and the Vietnam syndrome)⁴⁶, numerous other crises around the world, divisions within the administration, relations with allies, pressure from the U.S. Congress⁴⁷, lobbies, the media (the so-called CNN effect), and public opinion.

The Vietnam Syndrome had a significant impact on U.S. policy towards the Balkans in the 1990s, influencing Washington to be cautious in its military engagement, focusing initially on diplomacy and avoiding ground troop commitments. Many U.S. military officers, as well as politicians, had negative experiences in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as from Lebanon in the 1980s, for example. They feared repeating situations, in the mountains of BiH, for example. Additionally, as General Collin Powell wrote in his memoirs: “When ancient ethnic hatreds reignited in the former Yugoslavia in 1991 and well-meaning Americans thought we should ‘do something’ in Bosnia, the shattered bodies of Marines at the Beirut airport were

⁴⁶ According to James Pardew: “The trauma of Vietnam also was in the background of any discussion of sending U.S. troops to Bosnia. Powell and other senior Bush administration officials saw a parallel between the Balkans and Vietnam, where the United States had become bogged down in an unwinnable civil war”. J.W. Pardew, *Peacemakers. American Leadership and the End of Genocide in the Balkans*, Kentucky 2018, p. 14.

⁴⁷ One of the leading congressmen who repeatedly spoke out in the 1990s on issues relating to the conflicts in the Balkans, including BiH and Kosovo, was Joe Biden – as an influential member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Biden was one of the strongest advocates of NATO military intervention in the region.

never far from my mind in arguing for caution⁴⁸. There are times when American lives must be risked and lost. Foreign policy cannot be paralysed by the prospect of casualties. However, lives must not be risked until we can face a parent or a spouse or a child with a clear answer to the question of why a member of that family had to die⁴⁹.

The media also had a strong influence⁵⁰, often presenting a simplified, largely anti-Serb narrative. However, this “CNN effect” rarely compelled Washington to take real action, with notable exceptions such as the massacres in Sarajevo and Srebrenica⁵¹. Powell also mentioned the role of the media: “The all-seeing eye of twenty-four-hour television kept thrusting images in our faces of rape, pillage, and murder committed by Bosnian Serbs against the region’s Muslims. Photographs of skeletal Muslim prisoners held in Bosnian

⁴⁸ In 1983, two suicide bombings targeted the U.S. and French military barracks in Beirut, Lebanon. The attacks resulted in the deaths of 241 U.S. service members (marines and sailors) and 58 French military and civilian personnel. These bombings were the deadliest attacks against U.S. forces since World War II and represented the largest loss of life in a single day for the Marine Corps since the Battle of Iwo Jima in 1945.

⁴⁹ C.L. Powell (with J.E. Persico), *A Soldier's Way. An Autobiography*, London 1995, pp. 291–292. Some of the military and diplomats changed their minds during the war, as J. Pardew writes: “As a Vietnam veteran, I, too, had early doubts that the Balkans were worthy of serious U.S. military engagement. But by 1995 I was convinced that U.S. leadership in Europe, U.S. security interests in the Balkans, and the U.S. commitment to human rights and dignity were important enough to warrant a direct and significant U.S. military commitment to end a humanitarian disaster and restore stability to the region”. J.W. Pardew, op. cit., p. 99.

⁵⁰ According to Marie-Janine Calic: “As horrific images from Yugoslavia appeared nightly on the world’s TV screens, and some public voices began to call for military intervention, the war became one of the most pressing international problems of the 1990s”. M.-J. Calic, *The Great Cauldron. A History of Southeastern Europe*, Cambridge–London 2019, p. 532.

⁵¹ See: P. Robinson, *The CNN Effect. The Myth of News, Foreign Policy and Intervention*, London–New York 2005, passim.

Serb concentration camps looked like Dachau or Auschwitz all over again"⁵².

However, with the deterioration of the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995, coupled with the failure of European diplomatic initiatives and the vision of the upcoming U.S. elections, the administration decided to act more decisively in the Balkans. As late as 1994, U.S. diplomats brought an end to the Croat-Muslim war and facilitated the signing of the Washington Agreement. An anti-Serb coalition was formed in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the support of Croatia's Franjo Tuđman, to bring about a balance of power on the fronts. The U.S. supported this alliance through, among other things, the actions of Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI)⁵³ and tacit approval of arms supplies in defiance of existing sanctions.

The threat of withdrawal of peacekeepers, the erosion in trans-Atlantic relations, the killing of several thousand Muslims in Srebrenica, and another massacre in Sarajevo during the summer of 1995, combined with growing concerns about the credibility of the superpower and leader of NATO⁵⁴, as well as public and media pressure, ultimately

⁵² C.L. Powell (with J.E. Persico), op. cit., p. 558.

⁵³ A corporation in Alexandria, Virginia, private military contractor comprised of former U.S. military officers. See more about the role of MPRI in the Balkans: E.B. Smith, *The New Condottieri and US Policy: The Privatization of Conflict and Its Implications*, "Parameters" 2002, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 110–111; P.W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors. The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*, Ithaca–London 2008, passim.

⁵⁴ According to W. Perry: "Our credibility is definitely a part there. If we were not prepared to step up to our responsibilities as we define them, then other potential dictators in other countries would draw some conclusions about that. I don't argue that there is a straight-line cause and effect relationship, but I think you can be sure that the leaders of North Korea and the leader of Iraq and many others are watching the United States to see how much resolution and will it is prepared to show in Bosnia." *United States Policy toward the Former Yugoslavia. Committee on National Security House of Representatives...*, p. 210.

led to active U.S. involvement and NATO intervention in BiH. This involved a bombing campaign (Operation Deliberate Force) in late August and early September 1995. Finally, in November 1995, the Dayton Agreement was signed, and Richard Holbrooke and his “shuttle diplomacy” played a special role in ending the conflicts in the Balkans⁵⁵.

The process of rebuilding the devastated country began, with the Americans involved, of course. The U.S. also took part in the NATO Implementation Force (IFOR) mission to ensure the security and stability of BiH. The United States initially contributed close to 20,000 troops to IFOR (about one-third of the total force). IFOR was replaced by the smaller Stabilization Force (SFOR), initially numbering approximately 32,000 troops, in 1996. As the smaller SFOR scaled down over the years, so did the U.S. contingent, eventually averaging about 15% of the total force in the final years of the operation⁵⁶. The United States also played an important role after the war in training and rearming the armed forces of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina⁵⁷. The weapons necessary to properly equip the mod-

⁵⁵ More on the Dayton Agreement see: R. Holbrooke, *To End a War*, New York 1998, pp. 231–312; D. Chollet, *The Road to the Dayton Accords*, New York 2005, pp. 133–181. Previously, Holbrooke described the situation as “the greatest collective security failure of the West since the 1930s”. R. Holbrooke, *America, a European Power*, “Foreign Affairs” 1995, vol. 74, no. 2, p. 40.

⁵⁶ The U.S. contribution was about 1,000 out of a total of 7,000–8,000 troops in SFOR in late 2004. More about IFOR/SFOR see: R.C. Phillips, *Bosnia-Herzegovina. The U.S. Army’s Role in Peace Enforcement Operations 1995–2004*, [Washington 2005]; J. Kim, *Bosnia and the European Union Military Force (EUFOR): Post-NATO Peacekeeping*, CRS Report, Washington 2008.

⁵⁷ D. Wybranowski, *Początki i pierwsze lata działalności Armii Republiki Bośni i Hercegowiny*, [in:] P. Chmielewski, S.L. Szczesio (eds.), *Bośnia i Hercegowina 15 lat po Dayton. Przeszłość – teraźniejszość – perspektywy. Studia i szkice*, Łódź 2011, pp. 75–84. See more: Ch.J. Lamb, S. Arkin, S. Scudder, *The Bosnian Train and Equip Program. A Lesson in Inter-agency Integration of Hard and Soft Power*, Washington 2014.

est armed forces in BiH came from a variety of sources. According to James Pardew: “The heart of the equipment program was the authority to transfer \$100 million worth of excess U.S. military equipment and services to Bosnia. The U.S. equipment donations to the Federation included 45 modern tanks, 80 armored personnel carriers, 15 helicopters, and 116 heavy artillery pieces”⁵⁸.

MPRI played a critical role in training and restructuring the Bosnian Army. It was tasked with helping to professionalise the Bosnian armed forces through the U.S.-sponsored “Train and Equip” program. MPRI personnel were unarmed and fulfilled no military functions except training. MPRI’s vice president, retired general Carl Vuono, a former chief of staff of the U.S. Army, was the key corporate figure for the Program in BiH.

One significant challenge for the U.S. was the presence of foreign extremists and mujahideen who had come to BiH to fight on the side of the Bosnian Muslim forces during the war⁵⁹. The Dayton Agreement called for the withdrawal of all foreign fighters from BiH. The U.S. feared that Bosnia could become a safe haven for global jihadist movements and exerted pressure on the Bosnian government to expel these Islamic fighters. This pressure intensified after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. As a result, many foreign fighters were deported, and Bosnia’s security forces were required to crack down on extremist networks. International forces (IFOR, later SFOR) and local authorities, under pressure from

⁵⁸ J.W. Pardew, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

⁵⁹ See more: D. Gibas-Krzak, *Participation of Allah’s Warriors in the War in Former Yugoslavia (1992–1995)*, “Review of Croatian History” 2021, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 483–500; J.R. Schindler, *Unholy Terror. Bosnia, al-Qa’ida, and the Rise of Global Jihad*, St. Paul 2007, passim.

the U.S. and other countries, closely monitored the activities of the remaining extremists.

However, peace in the Balkans was to be short-lived. The Dayton Accords deliberately left out the Kosovo problem. Albright noted: "After the 1995 Dayton Accords [...] Kosovo's Albanians looked around and saw that the Bosnians, Croats, Slovenes, and Macedonians had all left Yugoslavia to form independent states. The Albanians shared the same ambition"⁶⁰. The Serbian-Albanian conflict turned from the peaceful protest of the first half of the 1990s into open war. In 1998-1999, there was an intensification of hostilities, with waves of refugees and media coverage of yet another chapter of the Balkan tragedy. After the Dayton Agreement, Slobodan Milošević was seen as a politician necessary to maintain stability. However, after a few years, he was perceived by the Americans as an authoritarian leader who posed a threat to the security of the Balkans. According to J. Pardew: "Many members of the U.S. national security structure who had managed the response to the conflict in Bosnia in 1995 were still on the Clinton team. [...] In inter-agency policy debates on Kosovo, senior generals at the Pentagon resisted further military commitments in the Balkans. However, the success of NATO operations in Bosnia and Milosevic's continued brutality weakened their arguments and made their resistance less effective than before. [...] Albright was the central figure pushing aggressive U.S. policy on Kosovo in Washington [...] After the success of the Dayton negotiations, the Europeans were generally inclined to support U.S. leadership in Kosovo, although they again were

⁶⁰ M. Albright (with B. Woodward), *op. cit.*, p. 483.

reluctant to confront Serbia directly with military force”⁶¹. Once again, the Clinton administration engaged in the region, attempting to bring about a peace agreement through the Contact Group (e.g. the Rambouillet talks). Richard Holbrooke returned to the region, this time unsuccessfully. Ultimately, the U.S. and NATO allies conducted air strikes on the new Yugoslavia for 78 days⁶². On 24 March 1999, President Clinton declared: “We act to protect thousands of innocent people in Kosovo from a mounting military offensive. We act to prevent a wider war, to defuse a powder keg at the heart of Europe that has exploded twice before in this century with catastrophic results. And we act to stand united with our allies for peace. [...] Ending this tragedy is a moral imperative. It is also important to America’s national interest. [...] We learned that in the Balkans, inaction in the face of brutality simply invites more brutality, but firmness can stop armies and save lives. We must apply that lesson in Kosovo before what happened in Bosnia happens there, too”⁶³. Press commentators labelled the air campaign “Madeleine’s war”. According to Marie-Janine Calic: “Because the NATO mission took place without a UN mandate – and thus, in the opinion of many experts, in violation of international law – it had a legitimacy problem. But NATO developed a clever propaganda strategy. In the words of Wesley Clark, NATO’s

⁶¹ J. Pardew, *op. cit.*, pp. 204–207.

⁶² See more: B.S. Lambeth, *NATO’s Air War for Kosovo. A Strategic and Operational Assessment*, Santa Monica 2001; B.D. Laslie, *Operation Allied Force 1999. NATO’s Airpower Victory in Kosovo*, Oxford 2024; M. Marszałek, *Sojusznicza operacja „Allied Force”. Przebieg – ocena – wnioski*, Toruń 2009.

⁶³ *Address to the Nation on Airstrikes Against Serbian Targets in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro). March 24, 1999*, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/229752> [2.08.2024].

supreme allied commander in Europe, the world media became “part of the battlefield”. The core NATO message was that the goal of military intervention was to prevent a “humanitarian catastrophe” or “another Auschwitz”⁶⁴. Contrary to expectations, the operation did not end quickly as it did in BiH in 1995, which worried the military hoping to defeat Milošević without the use of ground troops⁶⁵.

The military intervention ended with the signing of an agreement providing for the end of air strikes and the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo (the Kumanovo Agreement). Additionally, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1244, which established a mandate for the presence of an international KFOR force.

According to James Dobbins, “almost miraculously, victory had been grasped from the jaws of defeat. The dominant mood was less one of triumph than of lingering wonder and immense relief”⁶⁶. The Americans played a key role in diplomatic and military operations in the Balkans for the second time in the 1990s. The U.S. became one of the largest contributors to the KFOR force⁶⁷. This seems to have been the apogee of America’s actions in the region. Americans, as in BiH, also joined with representatives of other countries

⁶⁴ M.-J. Calic, op. cit., p. 534.

⁶⁵ Both the Bush and later Clinton administrations were against the use of ground troops in interventions in the Balkans. This is confirmed, for example, by Baker, who wrote in his memoirs: “There was never any thought at that time of using U.S. ground troops in Yugoslavia – the American people would never have supported it. After all, the United States had fought three wars in this century in Europe—two hot ones and one cold one. And three was quite enough”. J.A. Baker III (with T.M. DeFrank), op. cit., pp. 635–636.

⁶⁶ J. Dobbins, *Foreign Service. Five Decades on the Frontlines of American Diplomacy*, Santa Monica—Washington 2017, p. 198.

⁶⁷ Initially, KFOR was made up of roughly 50,000 troops, with approximately 7,000 of them being American. See more: R.C. Phillips, *Operation Joint Guardian. The U.S. Army in Kosovo*, [Washington 2007].

and organisations in the process of rebuilding Kosovo, establishing democratic institutions and strengthening the rule of law.

The 21st century: a new era of challenges

In 2000, once again, superpower involvement in the Balkans became a topic of political debate in America. The involvement of U.S. military forces in Kosovo and BiH became one a topic in the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign. Bush's team announced that one that one of its goals would be to withdraw American troops from the Balkans and hand over peacekeeping responsibilities to the Europeans.

In January 2001, George W. Bush became the new U.S. president. The new team planned to make a change in foreign policy, including in the Balkans. According to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld: "When we took office in 2001, more than twelve thousand forces remained in the Balkans performing tasks that might have been turned over to local security forces earlier. Throughout my tenure, I focused on reducing the American military presence in Bosnia and Kosovo and assigning security responsibilities to local security forces or international peacekeepers from countries more directly affected by potential instability in the area"⁶⁸. However, during his visit to the American Bondsteel base in Kosovo in July 2001, President Bush declared: "Thanks to you and the service of our forces throughout the Balkans, the region is growing closer to the rest of Europe. But there's still a lot of work to do. [...]. America has a vital interest in the European stability and, therefore, peace

⁶⁸ D. Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown. A Memoir*, London 2011, p. 482.

in the region. [...] America and allied forces came into Bosnia and Kosovo. We came in together, and we will leave together. Our goal is to hasten the day when peace is self-sustaining, when local democratically elected authorities can assume full responsibility, and when NATO forces can go home”⁶⁹. Thus, the U.S. did not unilaterally withdraw its troops from the SFOR and KFOR missions, but rather aimed for a gradual process of downsizing, with the cooperation of partners⁷⁰.

The new administration was surprised by another crisis in the Balkans. In Macedonia, the conflict between Albanians and Macedonians turned into armed clashes, once again threatening to destabilise the entire region. Daniel Serwer warned in June 2001: “I want to underline that this is a moment of great peril. The crisis in Macedonia threatens to destabilize not only that country, but also the Balkans region. [...] Bosnia and Kosovo are also at risk. If the extremists in Macedonia are successful, it will inspire Serb and Croat extremists in Bosnia and Serb and Albanian extremists in Kosovo, setting back hopes for U.S. troop reductions”⁷¹. According to J. Pardew: “A new war in the Balkans was the last problem the new Bush administration wanted. In its officials’ minds, Bosnia and the Balkans were carryover issues from the Clinton presidency, but Balkan conflicts did not end on inauguration day. [...] As the situation deteriorated, the administration fell back on the previous Bush policy

⁶⁹ *Remarks to United States Troops at Camp Bondsteel. July 24, 2001*, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/214806> [2.08.2024].

⁷⁰ Colin Powell informed NATO members’ foreign ministers meeting in Bucharest, Romania, on 30 May 2001, that President Bush had decided to remain engaged in the Balkans. “In together, out together” was a shorthand phrase for the U.S. commitment. J.W. Pardew, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

⁷¹ *The Crisis in Macedonia and U.S. Engagement...*, p. 50.

of transferring responsibility for the problems in the Balkans to the Europeans. But in 2001, the U.S. investment in the former Yugoslavia was too large and the American engagement too important to stay on the sidelines. To prevent war in Macedonia, the new administration could not avoid American participation in the peace effort⁷². The peaceful settlement of this dispute (the Ohrid Framework Agreement) again involved U.S. diplomats (including J. Pardew) together with European partners⁷³. Soon, America would be attacked by al-Qaeda terrorists, shifting its focus on the war on terrorism, interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, etc.

This did not mean a complete American withdrawal from the Western Balkan countries, as defined by the EU nomenclature. However, the U.S. was willing to cooperate with the EU, including ceding some responsibilities or missions to the organisation and agreeing to use NATO resources for EU military missions. An example of this would be the 2004 transformation of the SFOR mission in BiH into the EU Operation Althea (EUFOR) – conducted this time without American troop involvement.

⁷² J.W. Pardew, op. cit., p. 257.

⁷³ See more: I. Stawowy-Kawka, *Zbrojny konflikt albańsko-macedoński (luty-maj 2001 roku) w północno-zachodniej Macedonii. Zaangażowanie dyplomacji USA i UE*, "Studia Politologica Ucraino-Polona" 2014, vol. 4, pp. 46–60; M. Korzeniewska-Wiszniewska, *International military and police missions to the Republic of Macedonia and their role in stabilizing Macedonian-Albanian relations*, "Politeja" 2014, vol. 4(30), pp. 321–323. There were those who argued that the events of 2001 represented yet another failure of U.S. and NATO deterrence, or at least highlighted a slow response to the Macedonian crisis. See: K. Bassuener, op. cit., pp. 112–113; P.S. Shoup, *U.S. Policy Toward The Balkans: The Role Of Domestic Factors And Lessons Learned*, [in:] B. May, M.H. Moore (eds.), *The Uncertain Superpower. Domestic Dimensions of U.S. Foreign Policy after the Cold War*, Wiesbaden 2003, pp. 129–130.

The U.S. also supported individual countries in the region on their path to the EU and NATO⁷⁴. Soldiers from the Balkan states had gained experience over the years in multinational peacekeeping or stabilisation missions, including in Iraq and Afghanistan. Albania and Croatia joined the Pact in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia joined the Partnership for Peace programme of NATO in 2006. Of course, it was understood that some new members would not bring significant defence capabilities to the Pact. However, their accession was intended, among other things, to strengthen the southern flank, build up the entire transatlantic security system, and limit the influence of China and Russia, especially after Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

Therefore, as during the Cold War, certain objectives of successive American administrations towards the region remain unchanged. According to Gabriel Escobar, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State: "Our policy is grounded on a very simple principle: the continued integration of the region into Euro-Atlantic structures strengthens Europe a geostrategic partner; fortifies democratic governance and the rule of law, and makes these countries more secure and prosperous, and thus, makes the region a better partner for the United States. The obstacles are formidable. Stalled progress on democratization, corruption, energy dependence on Russia, ethno-nationalist politics, and harmful

⁷⁴ An example is the Adriatic Charter in 2003, grouping together countries in the region aspiring to join NATO.

disinformation [...] Yet, they are not insurmountable”⁷⁵. China’s engagement is another significant factor shaping U.S. policy in the Western Balkans. In 2021, Gabriel Escobar declared: “Moscow and Beijing are actively opposed to the region’s Western integration, deploying disinformation and exploiting vulnerabilities to divert the countries of the Western Balkans from their democratically chosen paths while gaining an economic and political foothold in Europe. Russia weaponizes its energy supply to coerce politicians, foster corruption, and stunt growth potential. The People’s Republic of China is also working to expand its influence in critical infrastructure and through economic coercion. We cannot let them succeed”⁷⁶.

The United States has provided sustained support for the reconstruction of the region following the devastation of war and fostering the democratisation processes of the Balkan states. Through agencies like USAID, the U.S. government has funded a wide range of projects in individual Balkan nations. Moreover, American private foundations and non-governmental organisations, such as the Open Society Foundations, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and the German Marshall Fund, have been actively engaged in these endeavours⁷⁷. According to Katerina Buchkovska, “USAID

⁷⁵ *Stability and Security in the Western Balkans: Assessing U.S. Policy. Hearing before the Subcommittee on Europe of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives. July 18, 2023, Washington 2023, p. 5.*

⁷⁶ *U.S. engagement in the Western Balkans. Hearing before the Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives. October 28, 2021, Washington 2022, p. 6.*

⁷⁷ I. Vejvoda, *The Impact of the United States*, [in:] S. Lange, Z. Nechev, F. Trauner (eds.), *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, Paris 2017, pp. 39–40.

has been active since the very beginnings of the functioning of newly created states and the process of transition from one social order to another, modern and democratic society. Through the role and work of USAID in the countries of the Balkans, primarily Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia, the contours of the American development policy in the Balkans will be reflected, which is the main roadmap and an integral crucial element of the American foreign policy and national security strategy in these spaces"⁷⁸.

One of the efforts aimed at stabilising and rebuilding the region is the involvement of the U.S. in demining the Balkans after the wars of the 1990s, through various government agencies and international cooperation. The United States has allocated over 300 million USD (out of a total of 5 billion) from the 1990s to 2023 for mine clearance, conventional weapons destruction, and the disposal of unusable ammunition in the Balkans, in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (nearly 140 million), Croatia (46 million), Serbia (27 million), and Kosovo (46 million)⁷⁹.

⁷⁸ K. Buchkovska, *The USA Development Policy in the Balkans and the Role of the USAID, "Vizione"* 2022, vol. 39, p. 419. For example, in 2017, Kosovo received aid from the United States in the amount of 101 million USD, of which 40.5 million were provided through USAID, while in 2019, a total of 57.4 million in aid was allocated to BiH by all US institutions and agencies, of which 35.2 million was invested through USAID. *Ibid.*, pp. 422, 425. Since 1999, USAID has invested more than 1 billion USD in Kosovo's development. *Kosovo. Country Overview*, <https://www.usaid.gov/kosovo> [12.08.2024]. Since 1996, the U.S. Government, primarily through USAID, has invested more than 2 billion USD in BiH's development. *Bosnia and Herzegovina. History*, <https://www.usaid.gov/bosnia-and-herzegovina/history> [12.08.2024].

⁷⁹ See more: *To Walk the Earth in Safety. Documenting the U.S. Commitment to Conventional Weapons Destruction. Fiscal Year 2023*, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/FY24-To-Walk-the-Earth-in-Safety.pdf> [14.08.2024].

Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with Kosovo, hold a distinctive position within the framework of U.S. policy towards the Western Balkans in the 21st century. These states have been recurrently subject to various tensions and conflicts, prompting responses from the international community. The United States played a pivotal role in 2008 when Kosovo declared its independence. The U.S. was among the first nations to recognise the newly formed state. This recognition was instrumental in bolstering Kosovo's international standing and signalling the support of one of the world's foremost powers. The independence of Kosovo was the last act in the disintegration of Yugoslavia, which began in 1991 with Slovenia and Croatia. Kosovo is one of the most pro-American nations, as evidenced by the statue of Bill Clinton in its capital. Hillary Clinton, who arrived there as Secretary of State on a visit in 2010, writes about the unusual welcome in Pristina in her memoirs: "enthusiastic crowds waving American flags lined the road from the airport, cheering as our motorcade passed, often with children sitting on adults' shoulders so they could see. By the time we reached the plaza in town, which features a monumental statue of Bill, the crowds were so dense our motorcade had to stop. I was glad it did; I wanted to say hello. So I jumped out and started shaking hands and hugging and being hugged"⁸⁰.

Pristina regards Washington as a pivotal ally and guarantor of its security. The United States has been instrumental in supporting the presence of international missions in Kosovo, including the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the European

⁸⁰ H. Clinton, *Hard Choices*, London 2015, p. 199.

Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX). American experts have contributed significantly to these missions, facilitating the development of institutions and the consolidation of the rule of law⁸¹. Concurrently, the role of KFOR has evolved from peacekeeping to encompassing the promotion of democratic institutions and the strengthening of the rule of law. American troops have engaged in infrastructure reconstruction projects and provided training to local security forces, complementing their military duties. The U.S. remains steadfast in its commitment to KFOR, particularly given the persistent ethnic and political tensions in the region⁸². Moreover, the United States has been a staunch advocate for the creation of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF), which was envisioned as the foundation for a future Kosovo army⁸³.

The issue of relations between Kosovo and Serbia has been the subject of diplomatic efforts by the EU and successive U.S. administrations for many years. One major milestone was the Washington Agreement, signed in September

⁸¹ One of such advisors was Beau Biden, the son of the future president of the U.S. He died of brain cancer in 2015. Joe Biden visited Kosovo as vice president in 2016 when the country named a highway stretch after Beau Biden (near the Camp Bondsteel, between the two cities of Ferizaj and Gjilan). In 2021, Kosovo awarded a posthumous Presidential Medal on the Rule of Law to Beau Biden for his "work helping to strengthen the Balkan country's justice system". See more: F. Ajeti, *Biden and the Balkans*, 22 December 2020, <https://ine.org.pl/en/biden-and-the-balkans/>; *Kosovo Awards Posthumous Presidential Medal To Beau Biden*, 1 August 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-medal-beau-biden/31388468.html> [11.07.2024].

⁸² At the beginning of 2024, out of nearly 4,500 KFOR troops, the Americans had about 570 (the second contingent after the Italians). *Contributing Nations*, <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/kfor/about-us/welcome-to-kfor/contributing-nations> [15.07.2024].

⁸³ For more on U.S.-Kosovo military cooperation, see: *What are the extents of the cooperation between the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) and the Iowa National Guard?*, 7 July 2024, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/analysis/what-are-extents-cooperation-between-kosovo-security-force-ksf-and-iowa-national> [12.07.2024].

2020, under the auspices of President Donald Trump, which was supposed to be a step in the process of normalising relations between Serbia and Kosovo. However, little progress resulted from the agreement, and according to many experts, it was also intended to strengthen Donald Trump's image ahead of the U.S. presidential elections in the fall⁸⁴.

Americans have also been watching the ongoing disputes between the main nations inhabiting BiH for years. The behaviour of some politicians, including the leaders of Republika Srpska, is of particular concern. In recent years, the U.S. has imposed sanctions on, among others, the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Milorad Dodik, and his family, as well as companies associated with them. "The United States condemns Dodik's continued efforts to erode the institutions that have ensured peace and stability for Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region" Brian Nelson, the Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, said in June 2023⁸⁵. A month later, Gabriel Escobar declared: "President Milorad Dodik remains focused on dismantling the State constitution and the Dayton Peace Agreement. Dodik's persistent secessionist and anti-democratic actions threaten the stability, security, and prosperity of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider region. We will continue to call out and hold accountable those who undermine the Dayton

⁸⁴ A. Domachowska, *Serbia i Kosovo: porozumienie o normalizacji relacji ekonomicznych*, "Komentarze IEŚ" 2020, no. 248, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/serbia-i-kosowo-porozumienie-o-normalizacji-relacji-ekonomicznych/> [28.07.2024].

⁸⁵ *US imposes sanctions targeting Bosnian Serb leader Dodik's network of firms*, 18 June 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-imposes-sanctions-targeting-bosnian-serb-leader-dodik-network-firms-2024-06-18/> [22.07.2024].

Peace Agreement or threaten the country's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and multi-ethnic character"⁸⁶.

The increased U.S. engagement in the Balkans has become evident in recent times, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and a series of tensions in Kosovo-Serbia relations⁸⁷. The U.S. has intensified its support for NATO member countries in the Balkans, such as Croatia, Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia, through military exercises (e.g. Defender Europe), training, joint operations, and the sale or transfer of armaments⁸⁸. In recent times, Croatia has undoubtedly been the leader in these purchases, having ordered Black Hawk UH-60 helicopters⁸⁹, M2A2 Bradley fighting vehicles, and in August 2024, the U.S. State Department approved the purchase of M142 HIMARS rocket systems by Croatia⁹⁰. The United States is working to counter Russia's influence in the Western Balkans region, including countering Russian disinformation campaigns. An example of U.S. action are sanctions against specific individuals and entities from countries in the region who, in the view

⁸⁶ *Stability and security in the Western Balkans...*, p. 6.

⁸⁷ According to Dejan Djokić: "Under President Biden, the United States took a more active role in the Kosovo–Serbia dispute; the Russian invasion of Ukraine intensified Washington's efforts to bring Belgrade and Priština back to the negotiating table, and in the process neutralize Russia's influence in the region". D. Djokić, *A Concise History of Serbia*, Cambridge 2023, p. 532. See also: *Balkany Zachodnie w cieniu agresji rosyjskiej na Ukrainę. Z Konradem Pawłowskim rozmawia Tomasz Stępniewski*, [in:] M. Nocuń, T. Stępniewski (eds.), *Balkany: stabilna niestabilność*, Lublin 2023, pp. 118–129.

⁸⁸ See more: *Balkan Defence Monitor 2024*, Belgrade 2024, <https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/balkan-defence-monitor-2024/> [20.08.2024].

⁸⁹ The United States has agreed to fund 51% of the contract value, over 139 million USD, in exchange for offsets related to military equipment (Mi-8 transport helicopters) transferred to Ukraine. R. Muczyński, *Umowa na kolejne 8 śmigłowców UH-60M dla Chorwacji*, 14 March 2024, <https://milmag.pl/umowa-na-kolejne-8-smiglowcow-uh-60m-dla-chorwacji/> [20.08.2024].

⁹⁰ *Croatia – M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems*, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/croatia-m142-high-mobility-artillery-rocket-systems> [30.08.2024].

of the U.S. government, directly facilitate Russia's influence or engage in corrupt activities that benefit from it⁹¹.

Conclusions

U.S. policy towards the Balkans after World War II was varied and dynamic, adapting to changing challenges and geopolitical realities. Yugoslavia played a particularly significant role in the region, briefly aligning with the Moscow bloc and experiencing tense relations with the Americans. This changed after the Tito-Stalin split, when the West provided assistance to the rebellious leader (the policy of "keeping Tito afloat").

Throughout the Cold War, U.S.-Yugoslav relations were defined within the broader context of East-West relations. However, the Balkans remained a secondary theatre of this rivalry. The Americans supported this Balkan country, which, however, did not opt for closer cooperation with them, instead choosing to manoeuvre between the East and the West.

The oft-repeated slogans of supporting "independence, unity, territorial integrity" aimed to exploit the strategic significance of SFRY in the region (a buffer separating NATO countries from the Warsaw Pact; access to the Mediterranean Sea and Africa), keeping it away from Soviet influence and presenting it as an alternative to Moscow-subordinated socialist countries. The 1970s seem to have marked the peak of good relations between Washington and Belgrade. This

⁹¹ *Countering Corruption and Russian Malign Influence in the Western Balkans*, November 16, 2023, <https://rs.usembassy.gov/countering-corruption-and-russian-malign-influence-in-the-western-balkans/> [22.07.2024].

began to change after Tito's death, especially after the start of the reform process in the East, thanks to Gorbachev's reforms and the end of the Cold War rivalry between the U.S. and the USSR. SFRY began to lose its previous position in Washington's geopolitical game. For the Americans, events in the Eastern bloc – particularly the democratisation efforts in successive countries, especially from 1989 – were more important. Yugoslavia, with its numerous internal problems, once again found itself on the fringes of Washington's interests. During this period, the White House's priorities shifted towards the Middle East, Germany, the USSR/Russia, etc. Then, the Bush coalition liberated Kuwait with its oil fields, thereby solidifying America's global position of power. There was no place for SFRY in this vision.

The collapse of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s marked a new phase of U.S. engagement. When fighting began in SFRY in mid-1991, the Americans gladly agreed to “pass the baton” to the Europeans, who themselves were shouting that this was “their hour”, not America's. As violence escalated in Croatia and Bosnia, U.S. policymakers were reluctant to intervene militarily, fearing another Vietnam-like entanglement. America did not have vital interests in the Balkan Peninsula, unlike, for example, the Persian Gulf region. The U.S. adopted a cautious stance during the presidencies of George H.W. Bush and the early years of Bill Clinton.

The U.S. limited its involvement to sanctions, humanitarian aid, and repeated declarations. Both administrations presented similar arguments, citing the region's complex situation, longstanding conflicts, and the notion that it was “the problem from hell” and that the United States “did not have a dog in that fight”. They also asserted that

the country could not be the world's policeman in every corner of the globe. When the region was engulfed in a "war of all against all", the Americans faced a dilemma: whom to help? Who was the good guy and who was the bad guy?

Furthermore, there were conflicting opinions within the administration regarding the role of the U.S. in the Balkans. The Pentagon was reluctant to engage in such a dangerous region, fearing a repeat of Vietnam or Lebanon, especially if ground troops were deployed. Sending American soldiers to Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, could have jeopardised the prestige of a superpower that had spectacularly defeated Iraq in 1991. This led to questions such as "Is Bosnia worth dying for?", as featured on the cover of "Time" magazine in November 1995.

Throughout the 1990s, various domestic actors pressured U.S. administrations to take more decisive action in the Balkans. Congress, particularly certain lawmakers forming bipartisan coalitions, played a significant role. Joe Biden was one such influential figure. Countless congressional hearings and commissions on the Yugoslav conflicts and the current situation in the Western Balkans were held both then and in the 21st century. The media also exerted a strong influence, often presenting a simplified, largely anti-Serb narrative. Humanitarian organisations and ethnic lobbies (such as pro-Croat, pro-Albanian, or pro-Muslim groups) placed intense pressure on policymakers. As a global superpower, the U.S. was involved in numerous other parts of the world. Consequently, cooperation with other partners and international organisations was crucial. In the Balkans, Washington struggled for a long time to coordinate its policies with NATO partners.

Ultimately, after several years of limited involvement in the region, the United States finally assumed a leading role in 1995. It spearheaded peace initiatives, culminating in Holbrooke's forceful diplomacy and the Dayton Agreement. Furthermore, a crucial factor compelling U.S. action was the need to maintain the credibility of both the superpower and NATO.

However, U.S. involvement in the region did not end there. Although bloodshed was prevented in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, the conflict in Kosovo, which escalated into open war in the second half of the 1990s, was avoided as a topic. At that time, Americans once again became involved in diplomatic efforts, and subsequently in NATO's intervention against Slobodan Milošević. Although controversial, this intervention was seen as necessary to prevent further ethnic violence. The armed conflicts of the 1990s thus led to the involvement of the superpower, as well as many international organisations, in this part of the Old Continent. NATO airstrikes led to the Kumanovo Agreement of June 1999 and seem to have been marked the apex of American activity in this region. Both BiH and Kosovo saw the presence of international forces, with the participation of American troops. Both in 1995 and in 1999, interventions effectively ended the fighting and mitigated the humanitarian crisis; however, not all solutions of the Dayton or Kumanovo agreements were ideal, e.g. the issue of Kosovo's ultimate status was postponed, which caused a constant dispute between Belgrade and Pristina.

The administration of George W. Bush sought to limit the role of the U.S. and its involvement in the region. Together with the EU, the Americans prevented conflict

in Macedonia in 2001. However, U.S. engagement fluctuated, influenced by global power politics (especially after the September 11th attacks) and the War on Terror. The U.S. reduced its military presence but remained engaged in supporting democratic institutions and economic development. Subsequent administrations advocated for a coordinated and unified transatlantic approach towards the Western Balkans. Over time, the European Union took a leading role in the region, supported by the United States. Although the EU provides most of the investment and development aid, the level of U.S. support for the region is also significant, for example, through USAID.

The shift in America's diplomatic priorities compared to the mid-1990s can be observed, among other things, in the frequency of visits by U.S. officials to the region or in the accounts of key U.S. decision-makers over recent years (such as presidents, secretaries of state, or national security advisors).

The region remains crucial to Europe's stability, especially in the wake of the full-scale war in Ukraine. The U.S. has sought to counter Russian disinformation and bolster the security of its NATO allies in the Balkans. The U.S. is actively responding to ongoing political crises in the region, and American diplomats are engaged in mediation efforts. Certainly, the U.S., in cooperation with the EU and NATO, has a key role to play in strengthening the region's security. The United States remains a critical player in the Balkans, balancing the region's challenges with broader strategic goals.



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In the shadow of the presidential elections in the United States, the key question that politicians, experts, and analysts in various parts of the world are asking is what impact these elections may have on the future international order, both globally and regionally. This influence can of course be assessed in different ways, just as political expectations related to them may differ – or even be diametrically opposed. These are elections in which the stakes may turn out to be high, especially from the perspective (and future security) of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This is because the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine has raised a number of questions about the security and future of this region – questions that, until recently, were solely the subject of academic discussions. Reality, however, shows that, contrary to what some contemporary political philosophers claim, world history has not come to an end – for better or worse. There is no doubt that America remains a part of this history, euphemistically speaking. Due to its unique position and considerable *power*, the United States is and will remain one of the pillars and the main guarantor of the current international order.

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