

HEGEMONY AT AN INFLECTION POINT: U.S. AND THE CRISIS OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

*Adrian – Ionuț BOGDAN**

Abstract. *The current international system is defined by overlapping crises that strain global institutions and test the adaptability of U.S. leadership. The frameworks of the Perfect Storm, the Crises' Decade, and the Permacrisis provide valuable analytical tools to interpret this turbulence, capturing the interplay between short-term shocks, medium-term cycles of disruption, and long-term systemic fragility. This article employs a qualitative methodology, combining case-based analysis of contemporary conflicts, official policy documents, and scholarly literature to assess U.S. strategic responses under the Trump 2.0 Administration. The goal is not only to diagnose the vulnerabilities of the liberal international order but also to identify potential trajectories for U.S. power in a world marked by revisionism, economically rivalry, and democratic uncertainty.*

Keywords: *Perfect Storm; Crises' Decade; Permacrisis; U.S. foreign policy and international order.*

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary international system is undergoing a period of exceptional turbulence, marked by overlapping crises that test the resilience of global institutions and the adaptability of national strategies. The erosion of the post-1945 liberal order, accelerated by geopolitical revisionism, technological disruption, socio-economic strain, and the resurgence of hard power politics, raises fundamental questions about the future of U.S. leadership in a transforming global environment. Concepts such as the Perfect Storm, the Crises' Decade, and the Permacrisis have emerged as analytical paradigms to conceptualize this volatility, each offering a framework to understand the temporal dynamics of instability and their impact on the balance of power. These paradigms illuminate how short-term shocks, medium-term turbulence, and long-term systemic fragility interact to shape the trajectory of the international order.

Methodologically, this article adopts a qualitative and interpretative research approach, drawing on comparative analysis of contemporary case studies, political documents, and scholarly literature in international relations and strategic studies. The study integrates primary sources, such as government documents with secondary academic analyses to evaluate U.S. responses to systemic disruption. By combining theoretical frameworks of systemic instability with empirical observations of recent crises, ranging from the Russia–Ukraine war and Indo-Pacific tensions to domestic political polarization under the Trump administration, the paper situates U.S. strategy

* PhD Candidate, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, adrian.bogdan@ubbcluj.ro.

within the broader dynamics of global transition. This approach allows for a structured yet flexible analysis, highlighting not only the risks of systemic breakdown but also the potential for innovation and adaptation in the American role within the emerging world order.

1. A DYNAMIC GLOBAL POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

The global political landscape is currently experiencing an unprecedented level of volatility, marked by rapid, overlapping crises that challenge the very foundation of the international order. This fragility stems from the accumulation of multiple, simultaneous, consecutive, or long-term crises, which test the resilience of global institutions and governance frameworks. Understanding these crises requires a structured analytical approach, which can be categorized into three explanatory paradigms, each defined by its duration, intensity, and magnitude of impact on the global system:

“Perfect Storm” (characteristics: short-term, 4-5 years, extremely powerful, with simultaneous crises and disruptive effects). Several relevant authors have approached the concept of “Perfect Storm” in recent years.

Johan Swinnen conceptualized the Perfect Storm in 2009, in the context of the Fischler Reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), as a rare convergence of political, economic, and institutional pressures that enabled substantial policy change in an otherwise resistant system (Swinnen, 2009: 137). He argues that CAP reform, historically constrained by entrenched interests and institutional inertia, became possible due to the simultaneous alignment of external trade negotiations (WTO), internal budgetary constraints, EU enlargement, and shifting societal preferences. This unique combination of factors undermined traditional resistance and allowed for a shift toward market-oriented and sustainability-focused policies, illustrating how deep policy change occurs when multiple reinforcing forces align at a critical moment. It is one of the first examples of situational management exposure where a Perfect Storm can become an opportunity.

Peter Margulies, in his article “Putting Guantanamo in the Rear-View Mirror: The Political Economy of Detention Policy,” examines the complex interplay of political, legal, and economic factors that have shaped U.S. detention policies, particularly concerning the Guantanamo Bay detention facility. While Margulies does not explicitly use the term “Perfect Storm,” he analyzes how a convergence of factors, such as national security concerns, legal challenges, international pressure, and domestic politics, created a unique environment (Margulies, 2010: 339) that both established and sustained the detention practices at Guantanamo Bay. He discusses how these intersecting dynamics have led to policy decisions that are difficult to reverse, even when they are controversial or counterproductive.

In 2022, in his paper “A Perfect Storm of War, Pandemic, Climate Crises and Global Dis-Governance: Unfolding Implications for Population Dynamics and Policies,” George Martine examines the simultaneous convergence of multiple global crises, namely warfare, pandemics, climate change, and governance failures, and their compounded effects on population trends and policy frameworks. He posits that these intertwined crises create a “perfect storm” scenario, where each exacerbates the others, (Martine, 2022) leading to unprecedented challenges in managing population dynamics. Martine emphasizes the necessity for integrated policy responses that address the root causes of these crises, advocating for sustainable development strategies that are resilient to such multifaceted threats.

Thomas B. Edsall, in his article “A Perfect Storm for the Ambitious, Extreme Ideologue,” published in *The New York Times* on September 20, 2023, explores how a unique convergence of political, economic, and cultural factors has facilitated the rise of extremist ideologies and populist leaders. He identifies key drivers of this perfect storm, (Edsall, 2023) including deepening political polarization, widening economic inequality, cultural anxieties, and the weakening of democratic norms. According to Edsall, these forces have collectively destabilized traditional political structures, creating an environment where radical movements can thrive. He underscores the need for proactive measures to counteract these trends and reinforce democratic resilience.

Riccardo Alcaro, in “The Perfect Storm: Trump and USA 2024,” explores how a unique convergence of political, institutional, and social factors has reinforced Donald Trump's dominance in the 2024 U.S. elections. He describes this perfect storm as the result of a fragmented Republican opposition, Trump's ability to galvanize his base despite legal challenges, and plans for a radical transformation of U.S. governance, such as the Project 2025 initiative (Alcaro, 2024). Alcaro warns that this alignment of forces could significantly alter the institutional and democratic landscape of the United States, making the 2024 election a pivotal moment in American politics.

Crises' Decade (characteristics: medium-term “vortex”, up to 10 years, powerful but consecutive crises, partly manageable although with some irreversible changes). In 2020, George Friedman dealt extensively in his book with aspects regarding this concept that is so useful today.

In “The Storm Before the Calm: America's Discord, the Coming Crisis of the 2020s, and the Triumph Beyond”, George Friedman presents a cyclical interpretation of American history, arguing that the United States is currently undergoing a profound period of crisis, what he terms the Crises' Decade. He attributes this turmoil to the overlapping breakdown of two major systemic cycles (Friedman, 2020: 90): the institutional cycle (Friedman, 2020: 108-109), which restructures the governing institutions approximately every 80 years, and the socio-economic cycle (Friedman, 2020: 130-131), which reshapes economic and social structures roughly every 50 years. While these cycles have historically occurred independently, their rare convergence in the 2020s has intensified instability, making the current crisis uniquely severe.

Friedman suggests that America's politico-administrative cycle is reaching its inflection point, characterized by institutional dysfunction, declining public trust, and government inefficiency, symptoms of a system that is due for restructuring.

Simultaneously, the socio-economic cycle, marked by technological shifts, economic inequality, and labor-market transformations, is exacerbating social divisions and uncertainty. The confluence of these cycles, he argues, explains the heightened polarization, institutional gridlock, and societal unrest seen during the beginning of this new decade.

Despite the turbulence, Friedman maintains an optimistic long-term outlook. He contends that the U.S. has repeatedly faced and overcome such cyclical crises, emerging stronger through institutional and economic reinvention. He predicts that by the 2030s, America will enter a new phase of stability and resurgence as the systemic realignment naturally unfolds. In this sense, the current storm is not an existential collapse but rather a necessary transition toward a more adaptive and resilient nation. Friedman's Crises' Decade framework provides a structured explanation for contemporary American discord, positioning it not as an anomaly but as part of an inevitable historical pattern of renewal and reinvention of the American nation.

Permacrisis (characteristics: long-term turbulence, over 15 years, sequence of changes at a moderate level, living in a culture of instability, uncertainty, threats and risks as a “new normality”, no stable order can be defined but rather a long transition between two eras).

In “Permacrisis: A Plan to Fix a Fractured World”, Gordon Brown, Mohamed El-Erian, and Michael Spence explore the concept of “permacrisis,” describing a prolonged period of global instability driven by overlapping economic, political, and environmental challenges (Brown, El-Erian, 2023: 144). The authors argue that traditional governance and economic models have become inadequate in addressing the complexity of contemporary crises, leading to persistent uncertainty and systemic dysfunction. They emphasize how financial volatility, income inequality, climate change, and geopolitical tensions have created a world in which short-term solutions are frequently prioritized over sustainable, long-term strategies. Their work highlights the failures of both national and international governance in managing these crises effectively, pointing to institutional weaknesses, lack of coordination, and diminishing public trust in political leadership (Brown, El-Erian, 2023: 145 – 147). The authors stress that the inability of governments and global institutions to respond decisively to economic recessions, climate-related disasters, and public health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, has deepened the sense of global fragmentation. They also critique the widening gap between economic policies and social realities, arguing that economic structures have favored market-driven solutions while neglecting social welfare and environmental sustainability.

Despite this bleak diagnosis, Brown and his co-authors propose a roadmap for addressing the permacrisis through systemic reform. They advocate for structural economic changes that prioritize equitable growth, investments in sustainable development, and a redefinition of global governance mechanisms to better coordinate responses to transnational threats. Strengthening multilateral cooperation, revitalizing democratic institutions, and adopting a long-term vision for economic stability are central to their vision for overcoming the persistent crises that define the modern era. Ultimately, their study serves as both a critique of the existing world order and a call for transformative policies that can restore stability and resilience. The authors argue that while the challenges facing global society are unprecedented in scale and complexity, they are not insurmountable, provided that policymakers embrace bold, cooperative, and forward-thinking approaches to governance and economic management.

How can the three concepts be linked?

Transitions between these paradigms are fluid and unpredictable. A “perfect storm” may erupt within a crises’ decade, while a prolonged crises’ decade may gradually evolve into a permacrisis. Conversely, a permacrisis could culminate in an extreme shock, triggering a new “perfect storm.” The difficulty in predicting the next framework arises from the dynamic interplay of multiple variables, unknown factors, and emerging disruptions such as wars, economic collapses, social unrest, and technological transformations. One thing is certain: a combination of these situations or the escalation and deviation from one to another can lead to catastrophic consequences in the long term, especially in a context of interdependence such as the current one.

Why is the International Order so vulnerable today?

The vulnerability of the international order can be attributed to the multiplication of complex and unprecedented challenges that global institutions and governance systems were never designed to handle comprehensively. Most international organizations were originally structured to address specific, isolated crises rather than overlapping, systemic crises that strain multiple dimensions of global stability. In response, there has been increasing attention to reinforcing resilience mechanisms, but these efforts remain insufficient in the face of growing uncertainty and systemic risks.

What would the 'Perfect Storm', the Crises' Decade, and the Permacrisis look like for the current international system and for the United States?

A “perfect storm” in international politics denotes an exceptionally rare but profoundly disruptive convergence of major crises occurring within a compressed time frame. These crises, military, economic, political, technological, or environmental, do not emerge in isolation but rather interact in unpredictable and mutually reinforcing ways. What distinguishes a perfect storm is not only its intensity, but the simultaneity and complexity of systemic shocks that overwhelm national and international coping mechanisms. Historically, such episodes have included the World Wars, the Great Depression, or the concurrent collapse of empires and ideologies.

Key characteristics of a perfect storm include a relatively short temporal horizon, typically four to five years, during which institutional and societal stress reaches unsustainable levels. There are no predefined or readily applicable solutions, as the nature of the crisis defies conventional policy tools. In such contexts, resilience mechanisms, whether economic buffers, diplomatic frameworks, or institutional safeguards, are rendered insufficient. The rapid escalation of crises triggers chain reactions across systems, leading to widespread economic dislocation, political polarization, mass social unrest, and legitimacy crises for both domestic governments and international organizations.

From a geopolitical standpoint, a perfect storm places the liberal international order under existential strain. Multilateral institutions struggle to coordinate responses due to diverging national interests, rising populism, and eroded trust in governance structures. Moreover, the accelerating pace of crisis dynamics often surpasses the institutional capacity for collective action. Global interdependence, once considered a stabilizing force, becomes a channel for rapid contagion (Grynspar, 2022), magnifying localized disruptions into systemic breakdowns.

A “Perfect Storm” scenario for the United States would involve the simultaneous eruption of multiple, high-impact crises that severely test institutional resilience and strategic bandwidth. For instance, a concurrent great-power confrontation (Congressional Research Service, 2024: 1-6) in the Indo-Pacific and a protracted escalation in Eastern Europe, layered on top of a domestic economic downturn and cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, would stretch U.S. resources across military, economic, and political domains. Such simultaneity creates a crisis-management overload, overwhelming traditional decision-making processes and forcing reliance on emergency executive measures such as the Defense Production Act, strategic reserves, and rapid coordination with allies. Domestically, inflationary pressures, energy price volatility, and disinformation campaigns could polarize the electorate, eroding political cohesion at precisely the moment when strategic unity is most needed.

At the same time, history shows that “Perfect Storms” can serve as catalysts for structural innovation. They reveal institutional bottlenecks and push policymakers to adopt long-resisted reforms, whether in industrial base mobilization, cyber defense integration (Lynch, 2024: 85), or alliance burden-sharing. In this sense, the very convergence of crises can disrupt entrenched inertia, generating openings for systemic adaptation. Yet, the price is high: heightened risk of escalation, legitimacy crises, and erosion of public trust in governance. If mismanaged, a Perfect Storm risks entrenching populist distrust of elites and accelerating U.S. democratic fragility. If managed effectively, however, it can foster transformative change in defense-industrial policy and alliance structures.

The concept of a “Crises’ Decade” refers to a prolonged period, typically spanning up to ten years, characterized by successive global and regional disruptions that, while not necessarily cataclysmic, exert profound and irreversible pressure on political systems, economic models, and societal norms. Unlike a “perfect storm,” which is short-lived but acutely destructive, a Crises’ Decade unfolds gradually, with persistent “strong winds” of instability that reshape the international order over time—incrementally but decisively.

The 2020s have already presented a clear pattern of such cumulative turbulence. The global outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 triggered a public health emergency and subsequent economic shocks that reverberated across borders. This was swiftly followed by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, reigniting conventional war on the European continent and altering the security architecture of the post-Cold War order. Further escalation came with renewed violence in the Middle East, a surge in global inflation, declining real incomes, and growing tension in transatlantic relations. These were compounded by ideological radicalization, deepening polarization within democratic societies, and the weakening of global governance mechanisms.

Looking ahead, this vortex of crises may intensify. The risk of a large-scale economic recession, unsustainable sovereign debt in vulnerable economies, and budgetary imbalances across advanced and emerging markets remains acute. Moreover, geopolitical flashpoints such as the Taiwan Strait, the Korean Peninsula, and a potentially expanded conflict in Eastern Europe represent latent threats. The erosion of liberal democracy, the rise of political extremism, and the decline in institutional legitimacy add further complexity to this already volatile picture. Despite these challenges, each individual crisis still allows for policy-based mitigation strategies, making the overall trajectory disruptive but not yet terminal.

A Crises’ Decade, therefore, is a liminal phase: it challenges existing paradigms without fully collapsing them. The long-term impact, while not uniformly catastrophic, is nonetheless significant. Structural changes in global governance (Zahidi 2024: 13-15), irreversible shifts in political cultures, and institutional adaptations are already underway. Climate policy, industrial strategy, technological sovereignty, and migration management are all areas undergoing redefinition.

Friedman argues that the United States is currently undergoing the overlapping breakdown of its institutional and socio-economic cycles, producing polarization, declining public trust, and recurring governance dysfunction. In this framing, the Crises’ Decade is not an anomaly but part of America’s cyclical realignment, wherein turbulence and discord precede renewal.

For the U.S., this decade-long vortex entails mounting domestic stress, partisan polarization, social fragmentation, and political violence, interacting with external

imperatives such as managing China's rise, stabilizing NATO commitments, and sustaining technological primacy. Unlike a Perfect Storm, the sequential nature of these crises allows for partial adaptation and reform, but the cumulative burden risks institutional fatigue. If the U.S. can navigate this decade by reforming electoral, fiscal, and security architectures, it may emerge stronger and more adaptive. If not, the system risks ossifying into permanent dysfunction, making it harder to meet global commitments. Thus, the Crises' Decade is best understood as a test of political adaptability and institutional reinvention.

The notion of permacrisis describes a long-term, persistent state of instability that extends over a decade or more, often shaping an entire generation's political, economic, and psychological landscape. Unlike short, intense shocks or episodic disruptions, a permacrisis is characterized by chronic uncertainty, recurrent systemic stress, and a general malaise that permeates the global order. It represents not a single event, but an enduring condition, a slow-burning accumulation of crises that never fully resolve and instead become embedded in the fabric of everyday life.

In a permacrisis scenario, instability becomes normalized. Individuals, institutions, and states adapt to fluctuating risk as a baseline condition. International relations are marked by heightened tensions, stalled diplomacy, and fragmented alliances. Economies operate under the shadow of protracted uncertainty, and societies face a continuous erosion of trust in public institutions, media, and political leadership. Although the intensity of individual crises may remain moderate, their persistence and interconnection challenge traditional mechanisms of resilience and demand continuous adaptation rather than resolution.

The impact of a permacrisis is primarily psychological and structural. It fosters a societal climate of fatigue, resignation, and defensive governance. Crisis becomes a mode of existence, not an exception. In such an environment, governments are often reactive rather than proactive (Brown, El-Erian, 2023: 73), struggling to maintain legitimacy while operating under constant pressure. Strategic foresight is replaced by tactical improvisation. Cultural values may shift toward risk aversion, political polarization, or disengagement, while innovation and long-term policy planning are stifled by permanent emergency management.

Yet, despite its corrosive effects, a permacrisis does not necessarily collapse the global system. Instead, it induces a drawn-out, confusing transition between two world orders, neither fully abandoning the previous paradigm, nor decisively shaping the next. The result is a multipolar, fragmented, and often incoherent geopolitical landscape, in which governance becomes more regionalized, and global coordination is sporadic and fragile (Brown, El-Erian, 2023: 78).

In the context of the United States, a Permacrisis would signify a long-term condition in which instability, fragmentation, and recurring shocks become normalized features of governance and society. Instead of sharp, episodic crises, the U.S. would experience enduring turbulence: sustained political polarization, chronic climate emergencies, technological disruption, and repeated challenges to electoral legitimacy. Such conditions would erode the stability of democratic institutions, embedding a culture of uncertainty and reducing public trust in federal capacity. The U.S. could find itself managing not "crises to be solved" but an ongoing state of systemic volatility, in which resilience rather than resolution becomes the strategic objective.

Economically, a Permacrisis implies structural stagnation punctuated by volatility, persistent income inequality, frequent financial instability, and climate-related

costs straining fiscal space. Geopolitically, it would erode U.S. credibility as a provider of global order, as domestic volatility undermines the consistency of external commitments. Brown, El-Erian, and Spence describe this as the “fracturing of the world,” where traditional governance frameworks are ill-suited to overlapping, persistent crises. For the U.S., the challenge lies in institutionalizing resilience through adaptive governance, multilateral burden-sharing, and long-term investments in climate and infrastructure. Failure to do so risks entrenching democratic malaise and strategic retrenchment; success could redefine American leadership as one based on resilience rather than primacy.

2. MAJOR CHALLENGES FOR THE U.S. UNTIL THE NEW DECADE Revisionism Against the Western Liberal Order (External and Internal)

Between now and 2028/2029, revisionism will remain one of the most destabilizing forces acting against the Western liberal order, both from external geopolitical actors and from within democratic societies themselves. Externally, powers such as Russia and China continue to challenge the normative foundations of the post-1945 international system, promoting alternative models of governance rooted in authoritarianism, state-centric capitalism, and regional spheres of influence. Russia’s aggressive posture, demonstrated through the invasion of Ukraine, is not only territorial but ideological, rejecting liberal democracy as a framework for international legitimacy. Meanwhile, China asserts its own rules-based system, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, while expanding its institutional influence through mechanisms such as the Belt and Road Initiative or the Global Development Initiative. Internally, liberal democracies face rising populism, illiberal movements, and institutional erosion. In Europe and the United States, far-right and far-left forces question liberal tenets such as minority rights, judicial independence, and multilateral cooperation, often echoing external propaganda or exploiting systemic vulnerabilities (Petriță, 2019: 178-192). This dual-front revisionism erodes trust in liberal institutions, fragments consensus, and risks democratic backsliding.

The Ascension of China: Expansion of Global Strategic Influence

China's rise as a global strategic actor continues to redefine power dynamics in the international system, increasingly challenging the West’s political, economic, and technological leadership. From 2024 to 2029, this ascension is expected to become more assertive, particularly as China shifts from being a rule-taker to a rule-maker on the global stage. Through its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing has entrenched its presence across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and parts of Europe, offering infrastructure investment tied to political alignment. Simultaneously, it is consolidating influence in multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations and the BRICS+ grouping, by promoting narratives centered on “multipolarity,” “sovereignty,” and “non-interference.” In the Indo-Pacific, China is expanding military capabilities and strategic coercion around Taiwan and the South China Sea, triggering security recalibrations by the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia. Moreover, China is asserting technological hegemony through global leadership in AI, quantum computing, and digital infrastructure, via companies like Huawei and TikTok. Its strategic influence lies not only in hard power but in norm-shaping, offering an alternative governance model that appeals to many non-Western states frustrated with Western liberal conditionality.

The West's Strategic Dilemmas in Responding to Revisionist Provocations

Despite its economic and military dominance, the United States and its Western allies have struggled in recent years to deliver unified, powerful, and strategically coherent responses to revisionist challenges posed by actors such as Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran. This difficulty stems from several factors: political polarization within key Western democracies (Kahl and Wright 2021: 384-392), strategic divergences between the U.S. and European allies, institutional fatigue (Corpădean, 2022: 76-94). in multilateral organizations, and a declining consensus on the values underpinning the liberal international order. While NATO has shown revitalization in the wake of Russia's war on Ukraine, fractures remain evident, particularly on burden-sharing, defense investments, and engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, the U.S. foreign policy establishment is increasingly divided between advocates of global leadership and proponents of strategic retrenchment, a division amplified by domestic electoral cycles. In the Global South, Western efforts to isolate revisionist powers have been met with limited success, as many emerging states reject binary alignments and perceive the liberal order as self-serving. Consequently, the West often resorts to reactive crisis management rather than long-term strategic planning, undermining its ability to deter aggression or set a compelling vision for global governance.

The Axis of Anti-Western Authoritarian Powers: Assertiveness and Strategic Convergence

In the evolving international system, a de facto axis of anti-Western authoritarian regimes (Sabbagh, 2024), comprising Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, has grown increasingly assertive, coordinated, and confrontational. While differing in ideology, geography, and strategic priorities, these states are united by a common interest: resisting the dominance of the Western liberal order and undermining U.S.-led global influence. Their cooperation has expanded beyond rhetorical solidarity into concrete forms of strategic alignment, including arms transfers, cyber collaboration, disinformation campaigns, and joint diplomatic efforts in multilateral forums. Russia and Iran have strengthened military and economic ties, particularly in the context of the Ukraine war and sanctions evasion. China and Russia have deepened energy, defense, and technology cooperation, with frequent joint military exercises and a shared narrative against "Western hegemony." North Korea, increasingly emboldened, has resumed weapons testing and reportedly supplied munitions and even troops to Russia, further integrating into this informal bloc. These regimes reinforce each other's international legitimacy while projecting a vision of sovereignty and authoritarian resilience. Their growing coordination poses a multidimensional challenge, not only militarily, but ideologically and normatively to the principles of open societies, democratic governance, and multilateral rules-based cooperation. The summit between President Trump and President Putin in mid-August 2025 is an attempt to partially remove Russia from this axis. Donald Trump has often stood out as one of the supporters of promoting Russian-American relations. This foreign policy strategy is inspired by Henry Kissinger's trilateral diplomacy (Kissinger, 2018: 616) reasoning that promoted the conjunctural alliance in order to counterbalance the main competitor. The US in the Cold War relied on a Sino-American agreement (taking advantage of the Sino-Russian ideological rupture) to counterbalance the Soviet Union. Currently, Russia can become the necessary force for the West to counterbalance the Beijing regime. Of course, this scenario is very optimistic and unlikely, but the idea is important to be imprinted in the American foreign

policy strategy and in the case of the possibility of achieving this goal with a post-Putin administration.

The Wars in Ukraine and the Middle East: Strategic Ruptures and Harsh Lessons

The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, particularly the ongoing Israeli, and Palestinian conflict and the potential regional spillovers, have become twin epicenters of instability, highlighting the return of hard power, the fragility of international norms, and the erosion of Western strategic authority. In Ukraine, the brutal scale of Russia's invasion has shattered illusions about a post-ideological, rules-based Europe, revealing critical vulnerabilities in deterrence, defense planning, and supply chains. Meanwhile, the war between Israel and Hamas, with its dramatic humanitarian toll and risk of regional escalation involving Iran, Hezbollah, and others, has exposed the limitations of Western diplomacy in addressing deep-rooted ethno-political conflicts. Both wars underscore a broader lesson: that the international system is entering a phase where military force, territorial ambition, and zero-sum logic once again dominate geopolitical calculations. At the same time, the asymmetry in US responses, especially in the Global South's perception of "selective morality," has damaged the credibility of liberal internationalism. These conflicts also accelerate systemic shifts, diverting resources, polarizing societies, and reinforcing alliances among authoritarian powers, thus shaping a more unstable global order.

Donald Trump's Return to Power: Strategic Shockwaves and Systemic Recalibration

The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States for a second term in 2024 marks a turning point with unpredictable but potentially destabilizing effects on the international order. His return reactivates the "America First" doctrine, signaling a shift away from traditional multilateralism and alliances that have underpinned global stability since World War II. Within days of taking office, Trump reaffirmed his skepticism toward NATO, questioned continued U.S. support for Ukraine, and hinted at unilateral redefinitions of America's global commitments. This posture is already causing alarm among European allies, who fear a transatlantic decoupling (Greve, Smith and Tait, 2025) and are being pushed toward greater defense autonomy. Simultaneously, authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China may interpret Trump's foreign policy retrenchment as strategic permission to act more aggressively in their spheres of influence. On a normative level, Trump's re-election fuels a global narrative of democratic fatigue and the normalization of illiberal governance, weakening the West's ideological coherence. As the world adjusts to a more unpredictable U.S. presidency, global actors, both allies and rivals, are being forced into accelerated strategic recalibration.

Rising Tensions in Asia and the Indo-Pacific: The Return of Maritime Geopolitics

In the next years, the Indo-Pacific region is set to become the world's most volatile geopolitical arena, where great power rivalry, nationalist ambition, and unresolved territorial disputes collide. Central to this dynamic is China's growing assertiveness in the South and East China Seas, Taiwan Strait, and broader Pacific sphere, supported by an expanding blue-water navy and an increasingly sophisticated military-

industrial base. U.S. strategic commitments to allies like Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines are being tested, particularly as China pressures Taiwan militarily and diplomatically (Naumescu, 2022: 128). Simultaneously, North Korea's nuclear provocations and missile tests add a layer of permanent instability. As Robert D. Kaplan warned in *Asia's Cauldron*, the South China Sea is not merely a regional issue, but "the throat of global sea routes," through which one-third of the world's maritime trade passes, making it a flashpoint with global consequences. The Indo-Pacific's crowded sea lanes, overlapping claims, and historical grievances create what Kaplan described as a geopolitical "cauldron," where even minor incidents could escalate uncontrollably. In this environment, strategic miscalculation, rather than deliberate war, is the greatest threat. As the U.S., China, and regional powers engage in competitive deterrence, the region risks becoming the 21st century's primary zone of systemic confrontation.

Russia's Hybrid War Against the West: Disinformation, Societal Vulnerabilities, and the Rise of Extremism

Russia's ongoing war against the West is not limited to tanks and missiles, it is waged through a complex web of psychological, digital, political, and economic tactics designed to exploit the very openness of liberal democratic societies. One of the most effective tools in this strategy has been the weaponization of information (Herța, 2017: 135-143): disinformation campaigns, cyber operations, and coordinated manipulation of social media ecosystems. These efforts target societal cleavages, ideological, cultural, or generational, amplifying distrust, fragmenting public discourse, and delegitimizing democratic institutions. The spread of fake news and conspiracy narratives, often facilitated by Russian-linked troll farms or proxy media, has not only distorted debates on migration, health policy, and national identity but also eroded confidence in mainstream journalism and electoral processes. Democratic societies, by virtue of their transparency and freedom of expression, are particularly vulnerable to such tactics. This internal erosion of democratic consensus is, in itself, a strategic victory for revisionist powers like Russia, which aim not to defeat the West militarily, but to weaken it from within. In U.S. this situation is more visible than ever before.

Socio-Economic Pressures on Western Democracies: Living Costs, Demographic Strain, and Economic Competitiveness

Western liberal democracies, of course including U.S., are increasingly constrained by a convergence of socio-economic pressures that threaten long-term stability (Mișcoiu, 2022: 51-58) and global influence. One of the most pressing challenges is the sharp rise in the cost of living, driven by inflation, energy volatility, and housing shortages, which has eroded the purchasing power of the middle class, traditionally the socio-political backbone of democratic systems. In parallel, Western societies face structural demographic problems, including rapidly ageing populations, shrinking workforces, and mounting public pension deficits. These demographic shifts (Brie, 2018: 245-248) place immense strain on state budgets, especially as demands for healthcare and social assistance rise while tax bases contract.

How the Trump Administration approaches these rather delicate subjects?

Under the Trump administration, the United States treats revisionism in transactional terms (Nye, 2020: 185) rather than as an existential threat to the liberal order. Trump is reducing commitments to NATO and conditioning support for Ukraine,

which gives Russia room to maneuver and undermines Western unity. Internally, his polarizing rhetoric fuels illiberal (Mearsheimer, 2019: 35) currents and erodes trust in institutions, amplifying the very weaknesses that external revisionists exploit. These things can trigger a systemic crisis of the current world order.

Washington also addresses China's rise through direct economic confrontation (Allison, 2022: 166): tariffs, technological restrictions, and the promotion of "America First" in industry. Instead of building sustainable multilateral coalitions, the administration is focusing on bilateral agreements and relocating supply chains. This strategy intensifies the trade and technology conflict, but weakens coordination with allies, leaving Beijing with the opportunity to expand its influence through the BRI and BRICS+. We are witnessing a spectacular return of minilateral diplomacy, based on smaller diplomatic cooperation in terms of the number of participants, but more flexible and effective in certain cases.

Today, the West's strategic dilemmas are accentuated by Trump's policy of asking allies to take on more defense costs and threatening to withdraw American support. NATO is kept functional, but without the cohesion of after 2022, and American foreign policy remains marked by ad-hoc reactions rather than long-term planning. This incoherence weakens the West's ability to deter revisionist aggression.

Trump is trying to open channels with Russia to detach it from China, inspired by the logic of Kissinger's trilateral diplomacy. So far, the results are limited: Moscow maintains cooperation with Beijing, Tehran and Pyongyang. In contrast, American pressure on China has further strengthened the authoritarian axis. Thus, the attempt to redraw the geopolitical balance produces ambivalent effects and strains relations with European allies.

In Ukraine, Trump is reducing military aid and pressuring Kyiv to negotiate with Moscow, which strengthens Russian positions on the ground. In the Middle East, the administration offers staunch support to Israel but ignores mediation in the conflict with the Palestinians, amplifying the perception of double standards in the Global South. This combination of realpolitik and unilateralism weakens the moral legitimacy of the US and reinforces anti-Western discourses.

As for Southeast Asia, Trump emphasizes visible military deterrence: more freedom of navigation operations, arms sales and bilateral partnerships with Japan, the Philippines and Taiwan. However, support for extended multilateral partnerships is minimal, which reduces regional crisis management capacity. This strategy further militarizes the region, but without providing solid mechanisms to avoid escalation. The most important U.S. deal in the Pacific remains the trilateral AUKUS format that brings together the U.S., Australia and the United Kingdom.

Although federal agencies continue to combat cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, Trump's ambivalent messages towards Russia undermine institutional efforts. The lack of a firm presidential stance creates the perception of vulnerability and gives the Kremlin room to exploit (Blake, 2020: 201) American societal divisions. Thus, US resilience to hybrid warfare remains limited.

Regarding the socio-economic pressure in America, the Trump administration is addressing the problems through protectionism, tax cuts and deregulation, aiming at a rapid decrease in inflation and stimulating American industry. However, the measures do not address structural issues such as population ageing, inequalities or housing shortages. In the medium term, these vulnerabilities deepen, even if policies bring electoral gains in the short term.

3. POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS FOR THE U.S. IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER

1. Continued Primacy through Selective Engagement

A plausible trajectory for the United States is to sustain its primacy by concentrating power projection and diplomatic capital in regions and domains deemed strategically indispensable. This approach, often referred to as selective engagement, would prioritize the Indo-Pacific and Eastern Europe, where revisionist actors such as China and Russia pose the most direct challenges to U.S. interests and to the survivability of the liberal order. By reallocating resources toward naval modernization, cyber defense, and advanced technological development, Washington could maintain its role as the central security guarantor in high-stakes regions, while reducing commitments in theaters of peripheral significance such as Africa or the Middle East. Such concentration may preserve deterrence credibility and allow the U.S. to remain the pivotal actor in shaping regional balances of power.

However, selective engagement risks deepening perceptions of U.S. retrenchment in regions where Washington scales back, creating vacuums of influence that competitors will readily exploit. Moreover, maintaining primacy even in selected regions will require significant political cohesion at home and sustainable bipartisan support for defense spending, both of which are increasingly fragile. Should allies doubt the durability of American commitments, selective engagement could inadvertently trigger hedging behavior, weakening the very alliances on which U.S. primacy rests. Thus, while selective engagement allows Washington to conserve power, it remains vulnerable to domestic polarization and to the reputational costs of perceived abandonment.

2. Transactional Minilateralism (Trumpian Approach)

Under the current Trump administration, the U.S. is visibly gravitating toward a form of transactional minilateralism, wherein alliances and partnerships are judged less on shared values and more on immediate reciprocity and material contributions. Trump has consistently emphasized that NATO allies must increase defense spending, while signaling openness to pragmatic, even conciliatory, dialogues with Russia if such moves weaken Beijing's global position. This shift reflects a fundamental redefinition of America's role in the world: from the architect of a value-based order to a power broker leveraging asymmetrical deals to maximize U.S. advantage. In practice, this has translated into a series of short-term bargains (Ciot, 2021: 39-43), arms sales, tariffs, security guarantees, linked directly to financial or political concessions from partners.

While transactional minilateralism may yield tactical gains, such as temporary relief in defense costs or reduced confrontation with one adversary, it erodes long-term trust in U.S. commitments. Allies increasingly perceive Washington as unreliable, leading Europe to accelerate discussions on strategic autonomy and Indo-Pacific partners to hedge by accommodating Beijing. Moreover, this approach undermines America's traditional claim to normative leadership, reinforcing the legitimacy of authoritarian actors who also pursue transactional diplomacy. Over time, the risk is that U.S. influence becomes narrower, more contingent, and less institutionalized, reducing Washington's ability to set the agenda in global governance.

3. Retrenchment and Neo-Isolationism

Another potential path for the U.S. in the evolving order is retrenchment, or a new form of neo-isolationism. Here, Washington would deliberately scale back its

overseas military commitments and shift resources toward domestic renewal, border protection, and industrial competitiveness. The rhetoric of “America First” resonates strongly with this orientation, presenting a vision of national strength built on internal sovereignty, economic self-sufficiency, and limited entanglement in costly foreign wars. By reducing global responsibilities, the U.S. could redirect significant financial resources toward infrastructure, healthcare, and managing socio-economic divides, theoretically strengthening the domestic foundations of its power.

Yet, history suggests that large-scale U.S. retrenchment destabilizes rather than stabilizes the international system. Withdrawal from forward deployments in Europe or Asia would likely embolden revisionist actors, accelerating crises that eventually drag Washington back into confrontation under less favorable conditions. Moreover, allies forced into self-reliance may recalibrate their security policies in ways that dilute U.S. influence permanently, fostering a multipolarity unfavorable to American interests. Neo-isolationism therefore offers short-term domestic relief but risks long-term strategic erosion, as adversaries exploit vacuums, and global norms shift away from liberal principles.

4. Shared Leadership and Coalition Building

Alternatively, the United States could pursue a strategy of shared leadership, recognizing that its unipolar moment has passed but that durable influence can be preserved through cooperative hegemony with like-minded states. This path emphasizes strengthening NATO cohesion, revitalizing transatlantic dialogue, and expanding coalitions with democratic partners in Asia such as Japan, India, and Australia. Rather than shouldering unilateral burdens, Washington would invest in institutional innovation, reforming the UN, WTO, and climate governance frameworks, while building “clubs” of democracies to set standards in technology, security, and economics. By embedding leadership in multilateral structures, the U.S. could extend its influence by legitimacy rather than coercion.

The strength of this approach lies in its ability to counterbalance authoritarian blocs by offering a compelling, inclusive vision of governance and prosperity. Shared leadership reduces overextension by distributing burdens, while maintaining the liberal order’s normative appeal. However, it requires compromises that the U.S. has historically resisted, greater policy coordination with allies, willingness to subordinate unilateral preferences to collective decisions, and acceptance of reduced absolute dominance. In the Trump era, where skepticism toward multilateralism is strong, this direction appears less likely in practice, yet it remains the most viable path to sustaining long-term systemic legitimacy.

5. Technological Hegemony and Norm-Setting

Regardless of political leadership, one of the most sustainable paths for U.S. influence lies in maintaining technological hegemony and the ability to shape global norms. By leading in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, biotechnology, and renewable energy systems, the U.S. can preserve a disproportionate share of global power even in a multipolar environment. Control over critical supply chains (semiconductors, rare earths, digital infrastructure) allows Washington to wield leverage that transcends geography. Furthermore, by setting international standards in data governance, cyber norms, and green transition policies, the U.S. can establish itself as the central regulatory and technological hub of the global economy.

The advantage of technological hegemony is that it does not require the same degree of military dominance or constant crisis intervention; influence is exercised through networks, platforms, and standardization. Yet, the strategy demands sustained investment in R&D, strong partnerships with allies to maintain secure supply chains, and robust protection against intellectual theft. If the U.S. fails to protect its innovation ecosystem or cedes standard-setting to China, its technological edge could erode quickly, leaving it vulnerable to relative decline. In this sense, the race for technological supremacy is not just an economic contest but the decisive battleground for defining the future global order.

CONCLUSIONS

The evolution of the international order in the 2020s illustrates a moment of acute systemic vulnerability, where overlapping crises converge with structural transformations of power. The analytical paradigms of the Perfect Storm, the Crises' Decade, and the Permacrisis provide useful lenses through which to interpret the volatility of contemporary geopolitics. Each framework highlights different temporalities of disruption, short, medium, and long term, and each suggests distinct implications for governance, resilience, and the capacity of states to adapt. For the United States, the challenge lies not only in navigating the immediate turbulence but also in anticipating the enduring consequences of a world in transition from one order to another.

At the core of this transition stands the question of American leadership. Revisionist actors, rising authoritarian coordination, and the erosion of liberal-democratic consensus have destabilized the foundations of the U.S.-led order. The Trump administration's embrace of transactional bilateral/minilateral underscores the fragility of traditional alliance systems, even as the United States retains unparalleled military, technological, and financial assets. The key issue is no longer whether the U.S. can remain powerful, but whether it can sustain legitimacy and cohesion as the anchor of global stability. The decline in trust, both at home and abroad, risks hollowing out the very basis of hegemonic endurance.

Looking forward, several trajectories remain possible. Selective engagement may preserve American primacy in critical theaters, but at the cost of abandonment elsewhere. Transactional minilateralism delivers tactical advantages but undermines long-term credibility. Retrenchment promises domestic renewal yet risks creating strategic vacuums easily exploited by adversaries. Shared leadership offers the most sustainable basis for legitimacy, though it requires concessions that run counter to current political currents in Washington. Finally, technological hegemony stands as the most enduring and plausible instrument of U.S. influence, enabling agenda-setting power without the need for perpetual military intervention.

What ultimately unites these scenarios is the recognition that the United States cannot escape systemic transformation. Whether through a perfect storm, crisis's decade, or permacrisis, the future global order will be marked by fragmentation, uncertainty, and competition. The extent to which Washington can adapt, by balancing domestic renewal with credible external commitments, by investing in technological supremacy, and by rebuilding alliances on more equitable foundations, will determine whether the U.S. remains a central architect of world politics or is relegated to one power among many. In this sense, the present turbulence is both a threat and an opportunity: it may erode the remnants of unipolarity, but it also compels the innovation and coalition-building necessary to shape a new, more resilient order.

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