

AMERICAN STRATEGIC CULTURE AND THE PRINCIPLES OF REALPOLITIK

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Abstract: This paper examines American strategic culture within the context of realism, with particular emphasis on the influence of historical and cultural factors in shaping the foreign policy behavior of the United States. The starting assumption is that, although states operate within the same international environment, they do not respond in identical ways; rather, their decisions and strategic orientation depend to a significant extent on specific social and cultural patterns. In this context, the concept of strategic culture provides an analytical framework for understanding the American approach to global politics.

Particular attention is devoted to the phenomenon of American “exceptionalism,” which is often presented through liberal-democratic values, the promotion of human rights, and support for a rule-based international order. However, the analysis demonstrates that behind this narrative lies a consistent logic of realpolitik, manifested in the effort to preserve an American-led global order. The paper argues that U.S. foreign policy is grounded neither exclusively in idealism nor in realism, but rather represents a dynamic synthesis of both approaches, while liberal ideals often function as a means of legitimizing power politics. In this way, American strategic culture illustrates how historical experience and cultural specificities intersect with the structural constraints of the international system in shaping the behavior of a great power.

Keywords: *international relations, United States, strategy, strategic culture*

Introduction

The study of great-power politics through the theoretical lens of realism and neorealism has become a sine qua non of international politics. The realist school represents one of the foundations of international relations as a discipline, given

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that it has succeeded in classifying and systematizing the behavior of great powers within methodological frameworks that transcend time, geography, and even cultural differences. Nevertheless, major actors in international politics habitually portray to portray their adversaries within the framework of “Machiavellian” *realpolitik*, while justifying their own political decisions as consequences of historical circumstances, international injustice, or the cultural patterns that shape the way those states operate. Thus, for example, Russia most often finds justification for its foreign policy in the historical injustice allegedly inflicted upon it in Eastern Europe after the Cold War, with Moscow’s central narrative resting on the claim that its political conduct is defensive and conditioned by the aggressive behavior of Western powers. China, as a communist state, also displays strong resistance to the label of *realpolitik*, instead emphasizing the peaceful nature of its rise, which it presents as distinct from the historical development of Western powers. Finally, the United States defines its foreign policy within the framework of liberal values, while national interests are presented as a struggle for human rights and the spread of democracy.

The idea that states do not “reason” in the same way, even though they operate within the same political environment, is not new in international relations theory. In the late 1970s, when Jack Snyder published his monograph on the consequences of Soviet strategic culture for the use of nuclear weapons, the concept of strategic culture came to occupy an important place in analyses of international politics (Snyder, 1977). In brief, strategic culture explains why states do not behave in identical ways even when confronted with the same problems. In other words, the historical and cultural experience of a nation exerts a strong influence on the way its policy is formed and on the reasons why its political elite makes certain decisions.

Relying primarily on historical analysis, this paper seeks to present the development of American strategic culture which, despite its “exceptionalism,” cannot escape the principles of *realpolitik*. In this sense, strategic culture serves as an instrument for studying the distinctive political characteristics of a nation, while at the same time offering insight into why the policies of great powers do not depart from realism. The analysis of American strategic culture presented here continues the author’s broader examination of the strategic cultures of great powers undertaken in previous works (Pejić & Subotic, 2024; Pejić, 2024, pp. 75–82).

Theoretical Framework of Strategic Culture

Strategic culture encompasses a broad and contested field that remains subject to reassessment and debate, particularly in methodological terms. This is evidenced by the existence of three generations of strategic-culture scholarship, each representing a distinct interpretation of the methodological approach to the study of this social phenomenon.

When examining the first generation of scholars, it becomes clear why the subject matter of strategic-culture research must be defined more precisely. Carnes Lord, one of the authors associated with the first generation, defines strategic culture as a phenomenon composed of traditional practices and patterns of thought that guide the way armed force is used in pursuit of political interests. Lord’s definition of strategic

culture, which locates its essence in non-material factors, is not incorrect. Indeed, it aligns with the constructivist approach to the study of international relations, which is generally characteristic of scholarship on strategic culture. The difficulty, however, lies in the sheer number of factors said to shape strategic culture, including geography, political culture, international relations (that is, the balance of power), military history, civil-military relations, and even military technology (Bloomfield, 2012, p. 439). In this sense, strategic culture comes to encompass virtually everything related to the broader concepts of strategy, the state, and politics. As Allan Bloomfield observes, Lord's approach is "monolithic" and all-encompassing, lacking more precise explanations of how particular factors shape the development of strategic culture. This approach becomes even more problematic when Lord presents American strategic culture as "primarily defensive," focusing on selected historical periods while overlooking a substantial body of contrary evidence (Bloomfield, 2012, pp. 440–441).

By contrast, Colin Gray argues that a holistic approach to the study of strategic culture is justified, insofar as it provides the broader context within which strategy, the state, and the social community develop. He emphasizes that strategy and strategic culture possess different dimensions through which they may be examined, but that measuring these variables in isolation does not yield accurate results if the wider context is ignored. To study strategic culture strictly within the framework of a "falsifiable theory," as some authors insist, is, in Gray's view, akin to a physician observing the human being as if mind and body were entirely separate. As Gray notes, strategic culture does not exist outside society; rather, institutions and human agency provide the context for the culture under analysis (Gray, 1999, p. 53). Ultimately, he concludes that the most fruitful academic solution is one that allows strategic culture to be understood as a domain of ideas and attitudes, thereby leaving the sphere of strategic behavior open to an examination of the influence that strategic culture may exert (Gray, 1999, p. 69).

Ken Booth likewise emphasizes the importance of context in the study of strategic culture. "Whether God created the world in His own image is open to debate, but human beings have certainly created the social environment in a manner that suits them." With this sentence, Booth opens *Strategy and Ethnocentrism*, one of the earliest monographs to address the development of strategic thought and the cultural dimensions of society (Booth, 1979, p. 13). Booth argues that those responsible for the security of the state and its national interests often see no alternative but to continue operating within the established frameworks of tradition and history upon which a society's political values rest (Booth, 1979, p. 22).

The second generation of strategic-culture scholars moved considerably closer to the constructivist school of international relations. Bradley Klein appears to have drawn intellectual inspiration from the works of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci. For Klein, a structuralist approach to strategic studies does not yield the most satisfactory results. In other words, the system of states that forms the basis of the structure of the international system cannot be examined independently of the reality in which it is embedded, a reality that is fundamentally a social construct. In this sense, the second generation remained close to the first: the idea of context within which strategic culture unfolds cannot be separated from the social reality in which it exists. Strategic culture shapes the behavior of a collective through shared symbols—that is, through

context—on the basis of which policy and strategy are constructed (Lock, 2010, pp. 696–697).

Guided by constructivism, second-generation authors place particular emphasis on analyzing the identity of the strategic community, that is, on the way social structure influences the formation of individual identities within a collective. The various symbols—ideas, experiences, and interpersonal relations—that shape identity constitute one of the foundations of strategic culture, insofar as they reveal a community's relationship toward others and its possible modes of action in relation to them, which is especially important when the use of armed force against a potential adversary is concerned. For this reason, as Edward Lock observes, the analysis of strategic culture necessarily entails an analysis of both the behavior of a collective and its identity (Lock, 2010, p. 698).

Third-generation authors seek to avoid treating actors' behavior itself as a variable in research; Alastair Johnston regards this as an important advance, insofar as it helps to avoid the tautological problem present in earlier generations. Unlike first-generation authors, these scholars also emphasize the significance of political and organizational culture, indicating that the third generation relies less heavily on historical context. One of the major contributions of third-generation scholarship is the comparative approach employed in its research. Thus, for example, Jeffrey Legro and Kier Lieber point in their analyses to the limitations of the structuralist approach, since it is unable to explain why certain armies adopted specific doctrines and tactics that, in a given context, were regarded as more or less risky, and even legal to varying degrees, while others rejected them. The authors conclude that it was, in fact, the organizational culture of these collectives that constituted the key factor shaping the *modus operandi* of the armed forces (Johnston, 1995, pp. 18–22).

The principal weakness of the third generation lies in its neglect of the contextual dimension as a determinant of the cultural development of society and, by extension, of strategic culture itself. Allan Bloomfield makes a similar observation when he argues that ideas and values shape the interpretation of the material variables upon which strategic decision-making is based. In other words, the ideas and values of a given society may precede the process of rational decision-making, insofar as they provide meaning to the material reality within which decisions are made (Bloomfield, 2012, p. 445). We argue that strategic culture is not a monolithic construct and that it changes over time, with a society's political culture or a collective's organizational culture capable of exerting influence upon it. Nevertheless, as Veljko Blagojević has pointed out, radical changes in strategic culture are possible, but most often as a consequence of severe historical events—traumas that affect society as a whole. Germany and its historical experience during the two world wars provide an obvious example. By contrast, if one examines powers such as China or Russia, it becomes apparent that their strategic cultures developed continuously over centuries, with changes representing more of an evolutionary continuation of established practice than a departure from it (Johnston, 1995; Pejic & Subotic, 2024). A similar pattern may also be observed in American strategic culture, where a strong element of *realpolitik* remains visible despite the liberal-democratic character of American society and its political culture.

The approach to the study of American strategic culture adopted in this paper combines different aspects of the three generations discussed above. Specifically, strategic culture may be understood as a phenomenon that frames a society's strategic discourse and is grounded in the historical experiences of that same collective. In other words, although strategic culture does not reject rationality in political decision-making, it emphasizes that the specific experiences of states and peoples shape the form that such policy ultimately takes (Pejic & Subotic, 2024, p. 319). While this analytical framework will help illuminate the particular features of American strategic culture, its principal value lies in enabling us to discern the "realist" character that it shares with other great powers.

Strategic Culture and the American Historical Experience

During the twentieth century, the United States succeeded in formulating a discourse about itself as a power that does not go to war on the "primitive" principles of realpolitik, but rather in pursuit of higher aims such as human rights and freedom. The First and Second World Wars, the Cold War, and even the 1990 Gulf War served as examples upon which this discourse was built. The idea that Washington uses its armed forces for the expansion of power or the pursuit of geopolitical interests was pushed into the background by notions of "just" war (Bacevich, 2003, p. 9). Some authors point out that, although this discourse came to prominence in international politics during the twentieth century, similar ideas had long been present in the United States. Henry Brands, for instance, argues that throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many Americans sincerely believed that the expansion of the state was inherently beneficial to human civilization because it enabled the spread of the values upon which American society rested (Brands, 1998, p. 11). The values to which Brands refers include inalienable human rights and freedoms, though understood in a distinctly American way, as Tocqueville had already observed in the early nineteenth century. Specifically, values that appear universal among Americans possess a particular "Puritan" dimension. As Tocqueville suggests, liberty for Americans does not mean that one may do whatever one wishes, but rather that one must do what is good and right. Puritanism fosters moral zeal among its adherents, which in turn leaves little room for understanding the importance of compromise in politics (Hertzke, Olson, Dulk, & Fowler, 2019, p. 23).

This distinctive worldview was reflected in the policy and strategy of the United States. As Gray observes, American strategic thinking is grounded in ideological foundations that emphasize "just" objectives in war. Americans find it difficult to wage wars that are "unjust," that is, wars that do not aspire to universal goals such as democracy, freedom, or human rights. Gray argues that this is a consequence of American culture and history, which, conversely, makes it more difficult to formulate a strategy of limited war aimed at securing strategic interests. Until the end of the Second World War, the belief that Americans could, when necessary, intervene on the side of good constituted one of the guiding principles of U.S. foreign policy (Gray, 1981, p. 26).

The rejection of *realpolitik* as an “evil” originating from the European powers was a recurring feature of American political thought as early as the eighteenth century. Even so, there were already signs in that period that idealism was not the sole principle guiding American politics, a fact that contemporary statesmen themselves understood. The acceptance of the principles of *realpolitik* became necessary if the United States was to position itself effectively in the international arena, which also confirmed that Europe’s influence on American politics could never be entirely removed. James Madison indirectly acknowledged this at the end of the eighteenth century when discussing the events that had led to American independence (Williams, 1959, p. 22). In Madison’s view, the rivalry between Great Britain and France, as well as the broader politics of power in relations among the European states, had contributed significantly to the success of the War of Independence (Gilbert, 1961, pp. 88–89).

One of the principal advocates of *realpolitik* who also exerted significant influence on the formation of American strategic culture was Alexander Hamilton. Addressing the Federal Convention in 1787, Hamilton explained that the state they were attempting to establish could not be guided exclusively by idealistic principles: “If the purpose of government is to secure prosperity and peace for the domestic population, it will not succeed unless it possesses sufficient strength and power in international politics to command the respect of other states.” Hamilton rejected the notion that commerce and economic interdependence among states necessarily reduce the likelihood of war; rather, in his view, they merely alter the objectives for which wars are fought. He believed that proponents of idealistic principles in politics created the illusion of a utopia that was unsustainable in practice. Foreign policy, above all, is an instrument of state power and a means of its enlargement. States naturally regard one another with suspicion, recognizing in their neighbors a potential threat. The concept of the balance of power occupied a central place in his vision of international politics as one of its foundational principles (Gilbert, 1961, pp. 111–114).

That American strategic culture implements the principles of *realpolitik* when necessary may also be observed in the instrumental use of liberal-democratic ideas in pursuit of wartime objectives. Thus, during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, formally abolishing slavery in the United States. Although Lincoln personally held political convictions opposed to slavery, his decision also aimed to sow confusion and weaken the economy of the Confederate states and, at the same time, to win the sympathy of European powers that shared similar political views. The suspicion that this was a shrewd political tactic rather than a measure guided solely by moral ideals is reinforced by the fact that Lincoln publicly maintained that the Civil War primarily concerned the preservation of the territorial integrity of the United States, while the issue of slavery had been introduced only secondarily as one of the means of prosecuting the war. Lincoln also opposed several generals who, before his formal decision, had attempted to emancipate the Black population on their own authority (Army Historical Series, 1985, p. 230).

American idealism constitutes only one side of U.S. foreign policy and its strategic culture. Despite the democratic foundations upon which the United States was built, it understood that foreign policy could not be separated from the principles of *realpolitik* characteristic of the great powers of Europe. Thus, the United States participated in

the Berlin Conference of 1884, at which Africa was repartitioned among the European powers, marking the beginning of the so-called new imperial era. Although the United States did not receive its own “share” of Africa, its participation in the conference demonstrated an understanding of the imperial interests of contemporary Europe (Kimmage, 2020, p. 50).

That the United States also thought in terms of realpolitik is further illustrated by its rivalry with Spain at the end of the nineteenth century. With the development of the Monroe Doctrine and the decline of Spanish power, conflict between the two states eventually became unavoidable. By prevailing in the Spanish-American War of 1898, the United States succeeded in establishing predominance in the Caribbean and in acquiring distant territories such as Guam and the Philippines, which to this day remain important logistical nodes in America’s global strategy of power projection (Chambers, 1999, pp. 246–247).

Robert Kagan argues that the notion of the United States, in its formative period, as a state that rejected power politics and recoiled from war and similar political instruments is fundamentally inaccurate and amounts to a romanticization of history. The Founding Fathers were well acquainted with the concept of realpolitik and with its importance for the pursuit of strategic interests, as was subsequently demonstrated when the United States went to war with other states and peoples on its own continent. At the same time, because of its relative weakness, the American leadership often propagated principles opposed to realpolitik when confronting the European powers. For Kagan, this was a shrewd strategy of survival through which the United States secured its place in international politics (Kagan, 2003, p. 10).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, President Woodrow Wilson’s administration continued to apply the Monroe Doctrine in order to secure complete U.S. predominance in the Western Hemisphere. As Andrew Bacevich observes, the “lofty principles” of democracy did not prevent Wilson, during the First World War era, from safeguarding Washington’s interests in the hemisphere first through the invasion of Haiti in 1915 and then through the occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1917. During the same period, the U.S. armed forces carried out regular expeditions into Mexico in order to bring that country’s domestic politics into line with American interests. Ultimately, these undertakings were regarded as both justified and necessary, fully consistent with the principles of the Monroe Doctrine (Bacevich, 2003, p. 16).

The success of such a policy encouraged the American administration to adopt an active stance on numerous international issues. In conversation with Walter Lippmann, Wilson vividly explained why it was necessary for the United States to participate actively in addressing problems in international politics. Using the metaphor of a fence post as the pillar of international order, Wilson stated: “If you want to preserve a fence post, you have to keep painting it. You cannot paint it once and expect it to last forever—eventually it will rot.” among the broader public, which later enabled the administration to promote the idea of the League of Nations and a concept advocating a more “just” approach to international politics (Brands, 1998, p. 49). Moreover, for some authors, such as Colin Dueck, the League of Nations was not an institution built exclusively on democratic foundations. Rather, through the creation of the League, Washington employed the language of liberalism in order to impose its own hegemony

upon other states (Brands, 1998, p. 245). U.S. participation in the League of Nations was meant to serve as a guarantee to other actors that the principles it championed would, in fact, be realized in practice (Dueck, 2006, pp. 47–48).

Although democratic values continued to dominate the discourse of American foreign policy, after the Second World War Washington accepted an international reality grounded in divided spheres of influence. This was also understood by George Kennan, who warned against the dangers of interventionism and interference in the politics of other states at the very moment when it was becoming evident that the United States might assume the role of hegemon. The American diplomat who devised the strategy of containment called for restraint and for leadership by example. Kennan argued that only in this way could the United States exercise legitimate influence over other states, and that the desire to help others at any cost could amount to poor policy that benefited no one (Brands, 1998, p. 305).

The strategy of containing the Soviet Union required the United States to adjust its foreign policy to the principles of *realpolitik* to a considerable degree, above all to the imperatives imposed by the structure of the bipolar system. Within the American public, the prevailing view was that the United States should confront Russia and China, increase its military budget and the production of atomic weapons, and ensure a strong military presence in Europe and the Far East. In essence, the plan set out in NSC-68 largely became the strategic vision of the American nation as a whole (Levering, 2016, p. 54). *Realpolitik* within American strategic culture became especially visible through substantial material investment in the armed forces and through the changes that followed in foreign policy. Although at first glance an expanded military budget may not seem surprising in the case of the United States, Washington had long sought to keep defense expenditures at a relatively low level. As Samuel Huntington notes, the dominance of liberal thought from the end of the Revolution until the mid-twentieth century resulted in the armed forces occupying a comparatively disadvantaged position in society. The development of military institutions was likewise neglected, largely as a consequence of the absence of an external threat (Huntington, 2000, p. 144).

The most significant changes in American strategic culture could be observed in the sphere of foreign policy precisely during the period in which Washington built partnerships and alliances with states whose ideological orientation did not reflect the democratic principles of American politics. Thus, for example, the United States maintained close relations in East Asia with South Korea and Taiwan, both of which at the time had strongly authoritarian systems and showed no clear signs of democratic transformation. Both states constituted important geostrategic nodes through which Washington sustained its presence in that part of the world. Nor should one overlook partnerships with Iran, Turkey, Chile, and Iraq, cooperation with the military junta in Greece, and the opening to China. Kissinger's diplomacy, which laid the foundations for cooperation between Washington and Beijing, probably represents the high point of American *realpolitik* during this period (Levering, 2016, p. 139). By drawing China away from the Soviet Union, Washington further strengthened the strategy of containment by removing one of the largest communist states from the Soviet orbit.

After the Cold War, American culture acquired global dimensions. Many Americans viewed the collapse of the Soviet Union as a triumph of democracy and liberal values (Gray, 1994, p. 591). It appears that during this period the presence of realpolitik within American strategic culture receded in prominence, even though Washington undertook numerous military operations across the globe. On the one hand, this may be understood as a consequence of the “liberal hegemony” established by the United States at the end of the twentieth century. On the other hand, some authors argue that such behavior is itself an integral component of American strategic culture. Colin Powell, for example, affirmed the Wilsonian idea of the global reach of American democracy: “The world is moving to the beat of democracy and the free market. The collapse of communism and the boundaries that once divided us has been brought about by the revolutionary phenomenon of globalization. And at the center of it all stand the United States” (Bacevich, 2003, p. 223). By contrast, Klein maintains that American strategic culture is fundamentally oriented toward the projection of power. As he explains, such a culture developed because of specific geographical, industrial, and historical circumstances that enabled Washington to build armed forces of exceptional technological capability (Klein, 1988, pp. 136–139). Klein also expresses skepticism regarding purportedly defensive American intentions, which are frequently advanced through political rhetoric and military doctrine. In his view, such rhetoric functions as a “screen” for U.S. military positioning, while the underlying objective remains the preservation of hegemony through the use of armed force (Toje, 2008, p. 17).

The persistence of realpolitik in American strategic culture after the end of the Cold War may also be observed in relations with other great powers, above all Russia and China. Thus, the administration of George H. W. Bush did not alter its political course toward China despite the Tiananmen Square massacre, while Ukrainian nationalists were threatened with the suspension of all assistance should they take steps toward secession from the Soviet Union, even though they insisted on ideas of national liberation and the construction of a democratic order. The administration of Bill Clinton likewise sought to preserve stable relations with China, going so far as to become one of the early supporters of its accession to the World Trade Organization despite the fact that Beijing at that time did not fully satisfy the formal criteria. Finally, it is also important to note the deepening of bilateral relations between Moscow and Washington after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when the U.S. armed forces required access to Central Asia, and specifically to Afghanistan.

The apparent absence of realpolitik in American strategic culture after the Cold War may also be interpreted as a consequence of the absence of a major threat. The preceding discussion suggests that American strategic culture most readily embraces the postulates of realpolitik when confronted with rivals capable of undermining its international position, as was clearly the case during the Cold War. Although Washington did not renounce the use of armed force in foreign policy after this period, its approach to international problems was more often framed in idealistic terms. Military interventions in the former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, and North Africa, as well as political interventions in Ukraine, were justified through the narrative of protecting human rights and promoting democracy. Although some scholars warn that ideological narratives serve as a screen for strategic interests, as Sebastian Rosato argues

(Rosato, 2011), the ultimate outcomes of these American undertakings and their consequences raise the question of whether the United States in fact pursued clearly defined geopolitical interests that could have been realized through such interventions.

With the rise of China as a strategic challenger and the arrival of the Trump administration, *realpolitik* appears to have become a central aspect of American foreign policy. The growth of Chinese economic and military power over the past two decades prompted the American leadership to reassess the so-called policy of global engagement and to devote greater attention to the Indo-Pacific region. The redirection of material and diplomatic resources toward this region began during Obama's second term, while subsequent U.S. administrations continued along the same strategic path (Pejić, 2024, pp. 122–145). This aspect of *realpolitik* may be observed, above all, in the gradual reduction of American military engagement in other parts of the world, such as the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the drawdown of troops in Iraq, states that had previously been seen as primary targets of the U.S. global engagement strategy. At the same time, the United States has sought to pursue a pragmatic policy in the Indo-Pacific aimed at expanding regional partnerships, with the strengthening of bilateral relations with Vietnam standing out as a particularly illustrative example (Pejić, 2024, pp. 145–155).

The administration of President Trump, which began its term in 2025, strongly indicates that U.S. foreign and security policy in the coming period will be grounded in the principles of *realpolitik*, even where this may entail certain negative consequences for broader American interests. The president has repeatedly argued that the traditional values of American foreign policy do not improve the position of “ordinary” citizens and, on the contrary, may impose costs and limit opportunities for the further development of the United States. The dismantling of major U.S. foreign assistance programs and the curtailment of state-funded international media outlets may formally be interpreted as an effort to redirect financial resources toward more practical purposes, but in substantive terms they also suggest an attempt by the current administration to break with the continuity of the existing political culture. Its economic strategy, presented as an initiative of reindustrialization, strongly recalls a revival of mercantilist policies, which thus far have produced limited results. Finally, instructions reportedly issued by the State Department to U.S. diplomatic missions around the world—to refrain from criticizing electoral processes and the state of democracy in particular countries and instead confine themselves to congratulating election winners—clearly point to a turn toward a more realist model in the foreign-policy conduct of the United States (Cowley & Barnes, 2025).

The most visible aspect of Trump's *realpolitik* can certainly be observed in Washington's relations with the traditional allies of the United States, which at the same time constitutes a certain paradox, given that the country's global rise and international credibility have long rested to a considerable extent on strong bilateral and multilateral ties. Concepts such as the proposed purchase of Greenland, pressure on European partners through demands for higher defense spending and the imposition of tariffs, as well as positions on Ukraine implying a willingness to sacrifice its interests for the sake of ending the war in Europe, may all be interpreted as manifestations of *realpolitik*. At the same time, however, they raise serious questions about the long-

term consequences for American global interests and for the credibility that the United States has carefully built since the end of the Second World War. The key question in this context is whether the presence of realpolitik in Washington's strategic culture is merely a temporary phenomenon, shaped by the policies of the current administration, or whether it reflects deeper structural changes in international relations and in the global position of the United States vis-à-vis its rivals.

Conclusion

American strategic culture is rooted to a significant extent in the values of liberalism and democracy, which is a consequence of the specific historical circumstances in which American society was formed. Unlike most other states, especially the European ones, the United States did not experience alternative forms of political order in the course of its development. As a young nation that from the outset based its political and social development on democratic principles, the American political elite did not possess direct historical experience with alternative models of political organization.

Such historical circumstances create the misleading impression that realpolitik is somehow alien to the American political tradition. On the contrary, as the foregoing analysis has shown, although the United States often displays an aversion to the principles of realpolitik, it cannot in substance free itself from them in the process of formulating foreign policy. It also appears that the principles of realpolitik gain particular weight whenever the United States is confronted with rivals capable of posing a serious challenge to its vision of the international order.

Realpolitik within American strategic culture is not exclusively tied to the ideological orientation of the administration in office. During the Cold War, for example, Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, representatives of different political camps—Republican and Democratic—articulated U.S. foreign policy in different ways, yet with the same ultimate objective: the containment of Soviet power. This example confirms the suspicion discussed by Rosato, namely that the genuine geopolitical interests of states cannot be ignored, while ideology functions as an instrument for their realization. The anarchic nature of the international system conditions the behavior of all actors, and especially of the great powers that constitute the main pillars of its structure. Therefore, although the influence of liberalism and democracy on American strategic culture cannot be denied, it is equally mistaken to assume that a state with such capacities can disregard the principles of realpolitik in shaping its grand strategy. In this sense, the “uniqueness” of American strategic culture lies not exclusively in liberal-democratic values, but rather in the ability of American leaders to integrate those ideological principles, with relative success, into the pursuit of broader strategic interests.

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S u m m a r y

This paper examines the development and specific features of American strategic culture within the broader theoretical framework of realism. The central assumption is based on the idea that states, although operating within the same international environment, do not formulate decisions in identical ways, but rather in accordance with their historical experiences, cultural characteristics, and institutional legacies. Strategic culture is therefore understood as an analytical tool that enables the interpretation of distinctive behavioral patterns of great powers, as well as an indicator of the limits of deviation from realpolitik.

The paper first outlines three generations of research on strategic culture, ranging from ideational definitions, through constructivist approaches emphasizing identity and symbols, to comparative analyses focusing on organizational culture. The analysis then turns to the American case, where liberal-democratic discourse intersects with realpolitik practice. A historical overview—from the founding of the United States, through nineteenth-century expansion, to its hegemonic position after the Second World War and the Cold War—demonstrates that U.S. foreign policy employs a liberal narrative as a means of legitimization, while in essence following the logic of power.

The conclusion highlights that American strategic culture, despite its proclaimed “exceptionalism” and idealistic framework, remains deeply conditioned by realist logic and the structural constraints of the international system.

Keywords: *international relations, United States, strategy, strategic culture*

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