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**Understanding the United States' Role
as a Geostrategic Actor in the Russia-
Ukraine War**

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Captain Hendrik Remmel | German Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies

Understanding the United States' Role as a Geostrategic Actor in the Russia-Ukraine War

1 Introduction: U.S.-German Relations as Part of the Debate on the Further Development of German Strategic Culture

In his foreword to Germany's very first National Security Strategy (NSS), Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz points out key strategic changes Germany is adapting to. For instance, he refers to the fundamental challenge that is facing both the European security order and the multipolar global security architecture of the 21st century.¹ Essentially, these observations relating to a changed security environment are addressed to Russia,² given its war of aggression against Ukraine, and to China, which is considered a partner, but also a competitor and systemic rival.³ In the NSS, the Federal Government repeatedly argues that, in view of these changes, the need to further develop Germany's strategic culture by means of a society-wide debate is now more pressing than ever.⁴ This being said, it is quite remarkable that the authors of the NSS do not provide a definition of the term 'strategic culture'. Nor are they able to pinpoint the nature of Germany's current strategic culture, which would mark the starting point for any further development.⁵

While the NSS is not the only document reflecting the current patterns of strategic thinking and acting in Germany, it is undoubtedly the most influential one. Capstone publications on security strategy, such as the NSS, not only serve as guidelines in terms of operationalisation for a country's different institutions and ministries involved in matters of security; they are also an instrument of strategic communication with its citizens.⁶ They are subject to lengthy intra- and extra-ministerial coordination processes and, drawing on a broad consensus in society, they are aimed at legitimising strategic goals and fields of action in the long run. A security strategy that is to be successful and effective in the long term must thus be shaped and further developed along the lines of social constructions of reality that are accepted by the majority of the population.⁷ Consequently, political decisions will only be understood and supported by the population if there is an awareness shared by all of society and a fairly consensual

1 Cf. Die Bundesregierung 2023: 5.

2 Cf. Die Bundesregierung 2023: 11.

3 Cf. Die Bundesregierung 2023: 12.

4 Cf. Die Bundesregierung 2023: 17 and 73.

5 A concise yet thorough overview of the current state of research regarding strategic culture as a concept of understanding patterns of strategic thinking and acting has recently been provided by Beatrice Heuser in the Routledge Handbook of Strategic Culture (Heuser 2023a: 17–30).

6 Jacobi 2019: 226.

7 Cf. Heuser 2023a: 17–21.

understanding of what constitutes strategic thinking and acting.⁸ It is, therefore, all the more important to identify the nature of Germany's current strategic culture, as it must form the basis of the society-wide debate that the Federal Government has been calling for.

Having completed the present study, I am currently working on a more comprehensive research paper, which will address this aspect that is lacking in the NSS. This upcoming research paper is aimed at understanding Germany's current strategic culture in order to pave the way for the debate that is to involve all parts of society. Recurring to the basic research that has already been carried out in the scope of the aforementioned research project, 'strategic culture' is defined in this study as the determining factor for patterns of strategic thinking and acting based on historical narratives, norms and values.⁹

Consequently, the sociocultural construction of what is accepted as true (historical narratives), right (values) and legitimate (norms) by the majority of society also defines the frame of reference in which a security strategy is developed and eventually put into practice. As a result, the behaviour of strategic actors – traditionally understood as nation states¹⁰ – may not only differ from culture to culture but can also be subject to change itself. The further development of Germany's strategic culture thus requires efforts that go beyond the domestic level. In particular, it requires a critical analysis of Germany's geostrategic relations with other actors, including both partners and rivals.

Engaging in a constant debate on patterns of strategic thinking and acting, which are rooted in culture, but by no means universally valid, is thus imperative. To further illustrate this point, I will subsequently discuss the behaviour of an actor that is referred to as Germany's closest security ally in the NSS: the United States of America.¹¹ I will discuss the thesis that in the past years, there has been a shift in the behaviour of the United States as a strategic actor – if not since 2011, then at least since 2014 –, making a re-evaluation of German-American relations in the fields of foreign and security policy inevitable.¹² There has been a shift of strategic focus, which can be observed

8 Cf. Bagger 2019: 113.

9 There is no standard definition of 'strategic culture' in the relevant literature. On the one hand, strategic culture serves as an umbrella term for several schools of thought in political science. (See in particular Seppo 2021 for the most comprehensive overview.) On the other hand, strategic culture refers to a sociocultural phenomenon, and is thus a subject of research. The present study takes the latter point of view, holding the position that any definition of strategic culture must be in line with a holistic and integrative approach as regards the strategic behaviour of relevant actors. (For further details, cf. the representatives of the 'first' generation of strategic culture theorists, including the political father of strategic culture, Jack Snyder (1977), and Colin Gray (1981 and 1999), who argued against tendencies within the political discipline of strategic culture that understood culture as a stand-alone parameter. According to the representatives of that first generation, culture is not only a tool that can be used to explain the strategic behaviour of an actor but should also help to *understand* it from a holistic and deterministic point of view.)

10 Even though recent scientific studies on strategic culture no longer advocate a formal-elitist understanding of who may be keepers of strategic culture, and accept the fact that networks, corporations and non-governmental organisations might also be culture-bearing units, the nation state continues to play a central role and shapes the behaviour of strategic actors in the fields of foreign and security policy (cf. Pankratz 2019: 30).

11 Cf. Die Bundesregierung 2023: 11, 20, 21, 31.

12 Of course, one can argue at length about when exactly this shift was initiated. Many experts claim that it began in 2011 with the United States' *Pivot to Asia*, which was complemented by the fact that the U.S. withdrew almost all its troops from Iraq. Others suggest that this pivot had

particularly well in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine. This war, which is of utmost relevance to Germany, will subsequently be used to support the aforementioned thesis.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine came as a shock to German society, as for the first time since the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany, Europe's security architecture – the stability of which had been taken for granted for a very long time – was challenged by a conventional war between two sovereign states.¹³ Given the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the realisation that this marked a watershed moment in history, as it was described by Germany's Federal Chancellor, the development of a German National Security Strategy became even more significant. Moreover, the publication of the Security Strategy reflects both the perceived and the actual importance that is attributed to the political and security implications of this conflict by both policymakers and society as a whole.¹⁴

Following this thesis and given the aforementioned theoretical definition of strategic culture, awareness must be raised among both policymakers and citizens in Germany that it is vital to develop an understanding of the United States' current patterns of strategic thinking and acting. On this basis, it will be possible to discuss the strategic relations between the two countries and come to a consensual re-evaluation or confirmation of the status quo, which can then be taken into consideration when reacting to challenges in the realm of foreign and security policy such as the Russia-Ukraine War.¹⁵

In this context, 'understanding' as interpreted by the discipline of strategic culture is by no means equivalent to 'understanding' in the sense of a moral assessment of a strategic actor's behaviour. It is not a matter of expressing either criticism or approval of the United States' behaviour as a strategic actor, but of being able to thoroughly grasp the deeper meaning behind its way of acting.¹⁶ In the theory of strategic culture, this approach is also known as *structured empathy* vis-à-vis a strategic actor: understanding an actor provides us with insights that allow us to draw conclusions regarding that actor's likely strategic behaviour.¹⁷

In order to ascertain the United States' current behaviour as a strategic actor in the security context and to determine the resulting fields of action for Germany that are to

already begun much earlier. (Cf. also Overhaus 2015: 5 f.) This study is based on the assumption that the shift of focus occurred in 2014, as it cannot be denied that since then the United States have shown a different strategic behaviour.

13 Cf. Saxer 2023: 60 f.

14 Cf. Kamp 2023: 285.

15 Cf. Maull et al. 2023: 45.

16 Cf. Glenn 2009: 542 f.

17 Cf. Pankratz 2019: 37. The concept of structured empathy follows an approach established by the 'fourth generation' of strategic culture theorists. It takes the holistic and understanding-based epistemology of the first generation to an extreme, postulating that one needs to fully comprehend the culture of an actor in order to understand their way of thinking and acting. It goes without saying that such an approach cannot be implemented in a research paper such as this. However, if one's aim is to not only explain, but also understand a strategic actor's behaviour, developing a cultural understanding of that actor is indispensable. Here is a simple example that should illustrate the ideas of the first and fourth generation and shed some light on the semantic difference between 'explaining' and 'understanding' in a cultural context: It is easy to *explain* to an individual who is completely unfamiliar with the Western culture that a chair is a chair because it has four legs, a seat and a backrest. However, in order to understand why the chair exists, this uninformed individual must comprehend that the chair was built for the purpose of sitting on it.

be discussed, I have structured my paper as follows: First of all, it is important to understand why Germany should examine the United States' changing behaviour at all. For this purpose, I will briefly outline the history of Germany's strategic orientation towards the United States in matters of security since the end of World War II. Subsequently, I will identify relevant elements of the United States' strategic culture by taking a closer look at the contents of the latest U.S. national security strategies, their strategic priorities and the legitimisation of these priorities. In order to show why it is necessary to critically review Germany's current relations with the United States, I will then use the very topical example of the Russia-Ukraine War to analyse the behaviour of the United States as an actor with regard to diplomacy and military support. Based on these findings, I will finally identify fields of action for Germany that will have to be discussed within the scope of further developing Germany's strategic culture.

2 A Short History of U.S.-German Security Relations since 1945

As regards security strategy, the German government considers the United States to be its closest ally and frequently draws attention to this point in the NSS. The partnership between the two countries is repeatedly referred to as one of Germany's key security interests.¹⁸ The NSS also shows Germany's gratitude to the United States for having brought peace and security to Europe.¹⁹ In this context, the NSS highlights Germany's historical responsibility to preserve peace in Europe, a heritage that stems from the guilt it bears for unleashing World War II.²⁰ Roughly speaking, Germany's strategic orientation towards the United States is based on historical narratives and can be traced back to the beginning of the Cold War era.

In fact, it began as early as 1949, when the Federal Republic of Germany was founded. In the Cold War era, divided Germany was considered a battlefield in a potential conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.²¹ Conventional and nuclear threat scenarios, combined with the lack of other (European) alternatives, rendered West Germany's strategic orientation towards the United States indispensable, making it the country's greatest security interest.²² The consolidation of the bipolar world order after the end of World War II took place during a period in which a conventional rearmament of West Germany was out of the question. As the first version of the German Basic Law of 23 May 1949 did not provide for the establishment of armed forces, West Germany's total dependence on others in terms of security was laid down in its constitution on the very day the Federal Republic was founded.²³

Given this helplessness on the one hand and the intensifying bloc confrontation on the other, Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer rejected Stalin's proposal of 1952, which offered the reunification of Germany at the price of the country's neutrality, thus positioning the Federal Republic of Germany clearly on the side of the Western Allies.

18 Cf. Die Bundesregierung 2023: 11, 20, 21.

19 Cf. Die Bundesregierung 2023: 20.

20 Cf. Die Bundesregierung 2023: 19.

21 Cf. Heuser 1998: 179.

22 Cf. Heuser 1998: 220.

23 Cf. Barbin/Konopka 2023: 330.

The strategic alignment of the Federal Republic of Germany with the United States received additional impetus from the failure of the treaty that would have established a European Defence Community in 1954.²⁴ However, the security guaranteed by the United States came at the expense of West Germany's geostrategic sovereignty. Aside from its function as a military protective power, the United States provided economic support to West Germany as well. The implementation of the Marshall Plan led to the German *Wirtschaftswunder*, or 'economic miracle', and as a result, the U.S. also became an economic role model for West Germany.²⁵ In its National Security Strategy, the German Government makes grateful reference to this historical narrative, too, when it emphasises that without this help, Germany's present prosperity would not have been possible and that the Federal Republic had benefited greatly from the protection provided by hundreds of thousands of soldiers stationed in West Germany during the Cold War.²⁶

With the end of the occupation status and the establishment of the Bundeswehr, U.S. expectations grew that West Germany would take an active stance on security outside its borders. The first request for military support was put forward in 1964, when the United States asked for German medical and engineer forces to participate in the Vietnam War. West Germany rejected the request on the grounds of constitutional caveats.²⁷ The United States also considered the involvement of Bundeswehr forces in United Nations missions, for the first time in UNFICYP in Cyprus. In that case, the main argument against a German participation was the country's historical guilt from World War II. The West German government rejected the request, as the Federal Ministry of Defence in particular feared that Germany's past could play a role in potential military clashes between Greek and German soldiers. The United States eventually accepted financial support from West Germany, and so 500,000 USD were transferred to the United Nations.²⁸ During the 1982 Lebanon War, the Reagan administration put pressure on West Germany again, asking it to support the military operations of the United States, Great Britain, France and Italy. The United States also requested support for the deployment of minesweepers to the Persian Gulf after an Iraqi combat aircraft had attacked a U.S. frigate in 1987 and the United States had called for a stronger military presence in the region to protect trade routes.²⁹

However, West Germany maintained its restrictive stance towards deploying its armed forces outside NATO territory – also vis-à-vis its main protective power.³⁰ And yet, in spite of the domestic concerns and constitutional obstacles that came with its 'culture of military restraint', West Germany, as a rule, reviewed all requests for military support, and in particular those of the United States. The Federal Foreign Office feared that a general rejection of support requests would provoke the United States into withdrawing its troops and nuclear weapons from the territory of the Federal Republic, even though the presence of these assets remained a core security interest for West Germany. In addition to that, the German government sought to meet the United States'

24 Cf. Barbin/Konopka 2023: 329 f.

25 Cf. Heuser 1998: 187.

26 Cf. Die Bundesregierung 2023: 19.

27 Cf. Barbin/Konopka 2023: 333.

28 Cf. Konopka 2023: 90.

29 Cf. Barbin/Konopka 2023: 344.

30 Cf. Barbin/Konopka 2023: 342.

ever-growing demands at least to some extent. As a gesture of goodwill, the government sent warships not to the Persian Gulf, but to the Mediterranean in autumn 1987, although this step was backed neither by the population nor the opposition.³¹

In the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, German strategy makers had lost their bearings in many respects. The bipolar world order, which had also governed the way of thinking of leading political and military decision-makers, was no longer in place.³² Due to the fact that the Soviet Union was no longer perceived as a threat, policymakers and society at large did not see the need for defining an all-German military strategy. Rather, the intention was to reduce strategic and operational military capabilities and command and control structures and integrate them into existing NATO structures.³³ The narrative of Germany as a ‘civilian power’, which was gaining popularity in Germany after the end of the Cold War, came into conflict with Germany’s historical solidarity with – and its dependence on – the United States.³⁴ Now that the East-West conflict had come to an end, large parts of the German population, and many political decision-makers, too, saw Germany as an actor that used diplomatic and economic means to achieve geostrategic interests. With this attitude, the reunified Germany intended to do justice to its growing geopolitical weight and the respective demands brought forward by its allies.³⁵

Germany wanted to leave the employment of military forces to its allies and play only a marginal role, if any, in conflict scenarios such as in the former Yugoslavia, in the Iraq War and in Afghanistan. This political consensus in Germany led, among other things, to a massive downsizing of the Bundeswehr, extensive cuts in the defence budget and to the conviction that military force should only to be used as a last resort, if at all.³⁶ At the same time, the United States did not find it necessary to demand a greater military commitment from Germany as an ally during that period. Due to the out-of-area operations conducted by the United States in the 1990s and 2000s, U.S. military resources were tied up to a considerable extent, but this was of little importance, since at the time there was no conflict with a geostrategic competitor that could have challenged America’s hegemonic position.³⁷

After the turn of the millennium, too, Germany sustained its policy of military restraint and decided to rely on the United States’ military capabilities, as became apparent by its very limited commitment in the Iraq War³⁸ and its non-participation in the military intervention conducted by the United States, Great Britain and France in

31 Cf. Barbin/Konopka 2023: 344 f.

32 Cf. Reichenberger 2019: 433.

33 Cf. Saxi 2020: 384 f.

34 Cf. Maull 2010: 56–80.

35 Cf. Schöllgen 1993: 127.

36 Cf. Seppo 2021: 125; Geis 2019: 202 f.

37 Cf. Sullivan 2023: 10.

38 This decision was fiercely contested in debates within the government and the ministries involved. The German Chief of Defence at the time, Harald Kujat, had already indicated to the United States that Germany would contribute a contingent of 10,000 troops to Operation Enduring Freedom. However, after the then Minister of Defence, Rudolf Scharping, had indirectly threatened Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder with his intention to resign should Kujat’s proposal be implemented, the contingent was reduced to a small number of special forces. In the parliamentary debates, the deployment of these special forces was labelled a police operation. Cf. Münch 2015: 165; Giegerich/Terhalle 2021: 217.

Libya³⁹. Larger military operations conducted by the Bundeswehr, such as those in the former Yugoslavia and as part of the 'global war on terror'⁴⁰ in Afghanistan, followed the logic of Germany's commitment to NATO and its solidarity with the United States but did not challenge the German population's attitude. On the contrary, the majority of Germans still considered the principle of military restraint to be appropriate.⁴¹

Against the background of the experiences gathered in Afghanistan, the Germans' appetite for an offensive defence and security commitment together with the United States was extremely low in the 2010s. According to a related survey, only 18 per cent of the respondents agreed with the statement: '*My country should assume security and defence responsibility primarily together with the United States.*'⁴² The same held true for the Germans' stance towards the employment of military force, which was supported by only 20 per cent of the respondents in the context of the Bundeswehr's participation in ISAF in 2010.⁴³

Since the turn of the millennium, if not before, Germany has therefore been regarded by many allies, including the United States, as a 'security free-rider'⁴⁴ and has lost a lot of credibility in recent years.⁴⁵ Above all, Germany has been criticised for not assuming a greater share in the responsibility for global security. Aside from Germany's continuing restraint in the deployment of armed forces, this has been reflected for instance by its long-term failure to increase its annual defence spending in order to meet NATO's two-percent target. Ever since the NATO Summit in Wales in 2014 and in the wake of the Russian attack on Crimea and the Donbas region, the United States in particular has been calling on Germany as a European actor in the field of security strategy to step up its commitment.⁴⁶ Over the past years, the lack of any substantial debate about the latest security challenges and the resulting responsibilities for Germany, which is still justified by the traditional narrative of the United States being Germany's protective power, has been increasingly criticised by scholars⁴⁷, a small number of media representatives⁴⁸, former Federal Chancellors Helmut Schmidt and Helmut Kohl⁴⁹, former Federal President Joachim Gauck⁵⁰ and high-ranking (former) military personnel⁵¹ alike.

By providing an overview of the United States' national security strategies published within the past ten years, the following chapter will show that mere criticism is no longer sufficient. The United States' geostrategic focus has shifted, which means that Germany's policy of military restraint and its strategic orientation towards the

³⁹ Cf. Mayer 2017: 14 f.

⁴⁰ Cf. Münch 2015: 156.

⁴¹ Cf. Kriemann 2021: 427; Münch 2015: 165 f.; Gareis 2006: 236.

⁴² Translated from the German original: Cf. Biehl et al. 2011: 34.

⁴³ Cf. Biehl et al. 2011: 79.

⁴⁴ Cf. Giegerich/Terhalle 2021: 203.

⁴⁵ Cf. Bunde 2019: 42.

⁴⁶ Cf. Mölling 2014: 1.

⁴⁷ Cf. Barfield 2010: 371 f.; Maull 2011: 97–113; Bjola/Kornprobst 2013: 105; Staack 2014: 173–200; Bunde 2019; Rink 2021: 56 f.

⁴⁸ Cf. Chauvistré 2009; Thiels 2019.

⁴⁹ Cf. Staack 2014: 174.

⁵⁰ Cf. Geis 2019: 212.

⁵¹ Cf. von Krause 2016: 38; Naumann 2009: 10; Naumann 2019: 188.

United States as its historical protective power can no longer be maintained as elements of German strategic culture.

3 How the United States' Behaviour as a Geostrategic Actor Has Changed over Time

In 2014, if not before, President Barack Obama initiated changes in the United States' foreign and security policy, which heralded a significant shift away from the approach to security strategy the country had been pursuing since the attacks of 11 September 2001. In a speech to graduates of the Military Academy at West Point, Obama said: *'You are the first class to graduate since 9/11 who may not be sent into combat to Iraq or Afghanistan.'*⁵² With these words, the U.S. President announced that the age of the global war on terror had come to an end. In the same speech, he set the United States' approach to security strategy on a new footing. In fact, he had already hinted at this in 2011, when he spoke about the 'pivot to Asia', i.e. the shift of focus to Southeast Asia as regards the United States' security and foreign policy interests.⁵³ The 'Obama doctrine'⁵⁴ was based on the idea that the U.S. global military posture was no longer an apt tool for implementing the United States' geostrategic concepts of world order. In order to legitimise this shift of focus, he used the three elements defined at the beginning of this paper: historical narratives – values – norms. He referred to the United States' historical role as a hegemonic power, which had to be preserved (historical narrative), to the principles upheld by the United States and its allies and the need to defend them (values) and to the legitimacy of using military force to defend these values (norms):

The odds of a direct threat against us by any nation are low and do not come close to the dangers we faced during the Cold War. [...] From Europe to Asia, we are the hub of alliances unrivaled in the history of nations. America continues to attract striving immigrants. The values of our founding inspire leaders in parliaments and new movements in public squares around the globe. [...] So the United States is and remains the one indispensable nation. That has been true for the century passed and it will be true for the century to come. [...] The United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it – when our people are threatened, when our livelihoods are at stake, when the security of our allies is in danger. [...] International opinion matters, but America should never ask permission to protect our people, our homeland, or our way of life. [...] On the other hand, when issues of global concern do not pose a direct threat to the United States, when such issues are at stake – when crises arise that stir our conscience or push the world in a more dangerous direction but do not directly threaten us – then the threshold for military action must be higher.⁵⁵

The Obama doctrine put an end to the tendencies of expansion and intervention in the Middle East, which had been pursued by diplomatic and military means but also by

⁵² Obama 2014.

⁵³ Cf. Overhaus 2015: 5.

⁵⁴ Cf. Overhaus 2015: 26.

⁵⁵ Obama 2014.

economic power projection during the previous thirteen years.⁵⁶ They were replaced by patterns of strategic thought that were primarily geared towards maintaining the United States' geostrategic supremacy in an increasingly multipolar world order.⁵⁷ Since then, it has been the United States' declared aim to contain the spheres of influence of other actors in such a way that they do not affect U.S. security interests.⁵⁸

In this context, the Obama administration rejected the historical comparison with the Monroe doctrine of 1823, which was aimed at preventing European countries from exerting influence on the American continent.⁵⁹ The former National Security Advisor to the Trump administration, John Bolton, on the other hand, explicitly stated that the Monroe doctrine was 'alive and well'.⁶⁰ As for a revival of the Monroe doctrine, one could rightly argue that the global war on terror was only an anomaly in the process of the United States' withdrawal from Europe and the Middle East, which, in fact, had already begun with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. troop presence in Europe had been constantly decreasing. It was not until 2023 that it exceeded the number of 100,000 permanently stationed service members again, which is still far below the number of 350,000 U.S. troops in the 1980s.⁶¹

For the present analysis, however, it is irrelevant whether or not leading politicians and scientists have put the changes that have taken place in the United States' strategic behaviour since 2014 in a broader historical context such as the 200-year-old Monroe doctrine or the end of the bipolar world order, which had happened 25 years before. For Germany, the decisive factor is that since 2014, with the affirmation of the Obama doctrine of 2011, the United States has not returned to its previous geostrategic focus, not even in view of the renewed threat to European security interests by Russia's attack on Ukraine.

Despite the imperial ambitions that have been evident in Europe since 2014, the United States has been increasingly focusing on the Indo-Pacific and the People's Republic of China as its geostrategic rival in recent years. The national security strategies published by the U.S. administrations of Presidents Obama, Trump and Biden present a coherent picture of this development. I will subsequently present an overview of how the strategic priorities have evolved in the national security strategies of the past eight years in order to illustrate the United States' shift in strategic focus.

Under President Barack Obama, the National Security Strategy of 2015 addressed global terrorism as the persistent primary challenge to the United States in the field of security. However, this strategy also was the first to focus on the Asian-Pacific region as another important field of security-strategic action. At that time, the U.S. administration hoped to build a stable strategic partnership with China, even though it was sceptical of China's military modernisation.⁶² Prior to the publication of the 2015 National Security Strategy, two fundamental security policy documents, the Strategic

56 Cf. Mardell 2023.

57 Cf. Saxer 2023: 60 f.

58 Cf. Schaller 2019: 31.

59 The US Department of State 2013; see also Schaller 2019: 31.

60 Cf. Filkins 2019.

61 Cf. Overhaus 2015: 27.

62 Cf. The White House 2015: 24.

Defense Guidance of 2012 and the Quadrennial Defense Review of 2014, already pointed in the same direction.⁶³

In 2017, under President Donald Trump, the focus clearly shifted to China and Russia as the primary and secondary rivals with regard to the United States' security interests.⁶⁴ For the very first time, the strategy of pursuing economic rapprochement with China as well as a liberalisation of the relations between the two countries was abandoned. China was openly declared a geostrategic threat to the United States, whereas Russia was described in more moderate terms as an actor trying to undermine, but not to challenge, the United States' hegemony. Immediate security threats from the Middle East, however, had obviously faded into the background.⁶⁵

Under President Joe Biden, the United States continued to pursue this agenda and established the goal of maintaining its hegemonic position vis-à-vis its geostrategic rival China as its primary strategic objective. In December 2021, shortly before the publication of the National Security Strategy, President Biden emphasised his intention to defend democracies against authoritarian influences such as those exerted by China.⁶⁶ Furthermore, the Biden administration underlined the importance of the Indo-Pacific when it published its Indo-Pacific Strategy in February 2022.⁶⁷

Given the United States' shift of focus towards the Indo-Pacific, Russia's full-scale invasion came at a most inconvenient time. Shortly before the publication of the new National Security Strategy, which had been scheduled for April 2022, the U.S. administration felt compelled to make adjustments to the NSS with regard to Russia's role in the global security order. Thus, its central strategic umbrella document was published as late as in October 2022. Even though Russia – due to its military aggression against Ukraine – now plays a much more prominent role in the current U.S. National Security Strategy than originally envisaged, China continues to be the United States' primary geostrategic antagonist and the Indo-Pacific its main security-strategic focus.⁶⁸ The United States aims at maintaining the current world order, as is reflected by its 2022 National Security Strategy:

[...] democracy is always a work in progress—but that will not stop us from defending our values and continuing to pursue our national security interests in the world. The quality of our democracy at home affects the strength and credibility of our leadership abroad—just as the character of the world we have affects our ability to enjoy security, prosperity, and freedom at home. [...] Our goal is clear—we want a free, open, prosperous, and secure international order. We seek an order that is free in that it allows people to enjoy their basic, universal rights and freedoms.⁶⁹

From the U.S. perspective, China is the only geostrategic actor that has sufficient economic, military, technological and diplomatic resources to pursue its global strategic

63 Cf. Overhaus 2015: 27.

64 Cf. The White House 2017: 2, 46 f.

65 Cf. The White House 2017: 25 f.

66 Cf. Maull et al. 2023: 24.

67 Cf. The White House 2022b.

68 Cf. The White House 2022a: 23 f.

69 The White House 2022a: 7 and 10 f.

objectives, thus potentially posing a threat to the United States' strategic interests.⁷⁰ Since Russia's imperial behaviour is almost exclusively based on military capabilities, the country is not regarded as an equal rival but rather as an actor seeking to destabilise the world order, as already became apparent in the United States' 2017 National Security Strategy.⁷¹ Therefore, the 2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States, which was published after – and on the basis of – the National Security Strategy, also focuses on the Indo-Pacific. In terms of regional focus, China is followed by Europe (Russia) and only then by the Middle East, Africa and South America.⁷² The regional prioritisation established in the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy, both of which focus on the Indo-Pacific with China as the United States' main rival (an approach first mentioned in 2014, further defined in 2017 and consolidated in 2022), combined with the loss of significance of the global war on terror, which had been the country's top priority after 2001, are clear indications of the shift in the United States' geostrategic focus.

In light of the above, those who say that these changes represent a return to the Monroe doctrine are not wrong, as the United States' principal strategic objective is to contain China and maintain the current U.S. sphere of influence. The operationalisation of this containment strategy, however, is fundamentally different: The aim of the Monroe doctrine was to protect a specific sphere of influence (South and Central America) against a non-specific actor (European states). In the United States' current security-strategic thinking, however, the aim is to contain a specific actor (China) in an unspecific, globalised and multidimensional area. This can hardly be looked upon as a revival of the Monroe doctrine. This argument is of particular relevance because the Biden administration pays relatively little attention to the continent of South America – in contrast to the Monroe doctrine, which regarded South America to be fundamental – and is mainly trying to restrict China's influence on that region.⁷³

With a view to the recent U.S. national security strategies, the decision not to give strategic priority to the war in Ukraine, as it currently does not pose a threat to the United States' vital security interests, is therefore a logical one from the point of view of the United States' strategic culture. Given the increasingly vehement demands for a greater assumption of geostrategic responsibility by the European regional powers, and in particular by Germany, we can see a coherent picture of the United States' patterns of strategic thinking and acting.

In the following chapter, I will provide examples of how U.S. actions in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war have followed these patterns. As a subject for analysis, this conflict is particularly suitable for consideration from a German perspective. For the first time since the end of World War II, two sovereign states are engaged in armed conflict on European soil. This is a threat to the one strategic objective that has been vital to the Federal Republic of Germany since its foundation – maintaining a peaceful security architecture on the European continent.⁷⁴ In view of the rapid change that has taken place in the United States' behaviour as a strategic actor since the end of the Cold

70 Cf. The White House 2022a: 23 f.

71 Cf. The White House 2022a: 25.

72 Cf. The U.S. Department of Defense 2022: 37 f.

73 Cf. Dueck 2023: 5; Schaller 2019: 31.

74 Cf. Die Bundesregierung 2023: 11 f.

War, it seems indispensable to take a closer look at how Germany's historical protective power is behaving with regard to a conflict that has shaken the foundations of the sense of security among the German population.

4 Understanding the United States' Behaviour as a Strategic Actor in Ukraine

As regards the war in Ukraine, the United States is pursuing three objectives that are closely linked to its changed focus in security and foreign policy:

- To thwart a Russian military victory in order to prevent setting a geostrategic precedent for China, especially with regard to Taiwan.
- To avoid a geographic or nuclear escalation of the war.
- To increase the integration of European allies into NATO's security architecture, and to have the European countries assume responsibility for their continent.

In order to understand how these strategic objectives have been implemented in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, it seems appropriate to examine the employment of U.S. strategic resources in the war. For this purpose, I have divided the United States' efforts into two categories: efforts in the field of diplomacy and public information on the one hand and military-economic efforts on the other.

4.1 Walking the Diplomatic Tightrope

Diplomatic-strategic communication is particularly suited to illustrate the nature of the United States' current strategic culture, which focuses on the preservation of its position as a hegemonic power in a security architecture that is characterised by rivalries. In response to Russia's increasingly aggressive diplomatic tone and loud public rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine and the Russian troop build-up on the Ukrainian border starting in spring 2021, the United States decided to first exert diplomatic pressure on Russia. U.S. diplomats assured their Russian colleagues that the United States would impose comprehensive sanctions on Russia, should it invade Ukraine.⁷⁵ As these efforts remained unsuccessful, the issue was dealt with at higher diplomatic levels and was eventually taken care of by the U.S. President himself. In April and June 2021, Biden tried to de-escalate the situation in bilateral talks with Russian President Putin, while also publicly emphasising that the United States stood firmly with Ukraine and was determined to support the country in maintaining its sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁷⁶ Until shortly before the beginning of the full-scale invasion, U.S. diplomats intensified bilateral talks (which were held for instance on 10 January 2022 in Geneva), in which they sought to prevent the imminent war by making concessions, such as offering a withdrawal of U.S. cruise missiles from Romania and Poland.⁷⁷ These efforts are an impressive indication of the limited interest on the part of the United States when it comes to regional powers such as Russia challenging the existing global security

⁷⁵ Cf. Bugayova et al. 2023: 7; Schimmelpfennig 2023: 1 f.

⁷⁶ Cf. The White House 2021.

⁷⁷ Cf. Bugayova et al. 2023: 7.

architecture. Also, it becomes clear that diplomatic measures such as threatening to impose sanctions, which had often been a viable means of enforcing security-strategic interests in the past, seemed to have only a limited preventive effect in view of a fundamental challenge to the existing world order.⁷⁸

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, U.S. President Joe Biden has repeatedly emphasised the United States' sustained and permanent support for Ukraine, most recently at the NATO Summit in Vilnius: *'Our commitment to Ukraine will not weaken. We will stand for liberty and freedom today, tomorrow, and for as long as it takes.'*⁷⁹ In addition, he stressed that it was entirely up to the Ukrainian government to decide when and how the conflict with Russia could end.⁸⁰ Despite the fact that the United States had intensified its diplomatic efforts to prevent a war since almost a year before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it exhibits a strikingly cautious, sometimes even reserved, behaviour on the diplomatic stage these days whenever Ukraine demands specific diplomatic assurances.⁸¹ The latest example of the United States' current diplomatic behaviour is Biden's refusal at the NATO Summit in Vilnius to pave the way for Ukraine's quick accession to NATO.⁸² Since the beginning of the intensified Russian aggression against Ukraine in April 2021, the United States has been walking a tightrope between diplomatic efforts to ensure Ukraine's survival as a sovereign state on the one hand and to prevent the conflict from escalating on the other.⁸³

This is also reflected in the most dangerous scenarios that the U.S. National Security Strategy lists for the war in Ukraine: an escalation of the conflict and the use of nuclear weapons on the one hand and the eradication of Ukraine's statehood on the other.⁸⁴ In connection with the United States' shift of geostrategic focus since 2014, its unequivocal diplomatic support of Ukraine has been a signal not only to Russia but, above all, to China. It conveys the message that using military aggression as a strategic means to expand one's geopolitical power will not come cheaply and cannot serve as a blueprint for a military power struggle in the Indo-Pacific, and specifically a military takeover of Taiwan.⁸⁵

From the United States' point of view, an expansion of the conflict towards NATO territory and/or the use of nuclear weapons by Russia would require the U.S. to employ considerably more strategic resources in this currently regional conflict, and possibly even to provide military assistance in accordance with NATO's mutual defence clause. Given Russia's withdrawal from arms control treaties and its rejection of new nuclear reduction talks, the repeated nuclear threats by the Russian President against the West⁸⁶ as well as statements by leading Russian political representatives claiming that the country was de facto at war with the Western nuclear powers, the United States is acting

⁷⁸ Cf. Klein/Schreiber 2022: 3.

⁷⁹ The White House 2023b.

⁸⁰ Cf. Rudolf 2022: 1 f.

⁸¹ Cf. Fischer 2023: 8.

⁸² Cf. Borchard 2023.

⁸³ Cf. Rudolf 2022: 1.

⁸⁴ Cf. Charap/Priebe 2023: 11; The White House 2022a: 26.

⁸⁵ Cf. Chadwick 2023.

⁸⁶ Cf. Charap/Priebe 2023: 3.

with the utmost diplomatic delicacy.⁸⁷ In the event of an escalation of the conflict, be it an attack on NATO territory or the use of nuclear weapons by Russia, the United States would be forced to intervene in order to maintain a credible strategic deterrence vis-à-vis China.⁸⁸ Aside from devastating consequences for Europe, such a strategic involvement of the United States in a conflict with Russia would almost inevitably result in a loss of power in the Indo-Pacific and thus vis-à-vis China, because the United States, due to Europe's limited military capabilities, would be required to commit great numbers of troops and capabilities in Europe. The United States is well aware of the danger posed by Russia's escalation potential and, above all, of the resulting consequences for its geostrategic objectives. Therefore, the U.S. is scaling its diplomatic efforts as well as the type and scope of its support to Ukraine accordingly.⁸⁹

For its part, China is very cautious in its behaviour on the diplomatic stage, but by no means does it take a neutral stance on the conflict. For one thing, China has never publicly condemned Russia's attack on Ukraine and is thus taking a stand against the United States' position.⁹⁰ Even though China has emphasised its commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity in general and criticised Russia's threats to use nuclear weapons, its overall position is much closer to Russia than to Ukraine.⁹¹ Nevertheless, China takes care not to align too closely with Russia and, above all, not to voice public support for Russia, as this could amount to a diplomatic loss of face and result in considerable damage in the fields of security and economic policy, particularly if Russia should lose the war. However, a rapprochement between China and the West in this respect is also unlikely, not only because the conflict represents a good opportunity for China to get insight into the West's capacity to act strategically in matters of security, but also because it increases China's scope for diplomatic action.⁹² Despite its seeming restraint, China is capitalising on the conflict in diplomatic terms by using its pretence of neutrality as a geopolitical bargaining chip with regard to the rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. China has pointed out that any military support from the United States for Taiwan's independence efforts would prompt China to render comprehensive support to Russia.⁹³ In addition, China is eager to position itself as a global peace mediator, including in the Russia-Ukraine war. Leaving no room for doubts about its fundamental pro-Russian attitude, China participated in the Jeddah meeting in Saudi Arabia in August 2023, during which the participants discussed a peace plan proposed by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.⁹⁴

From the United States' point of view, the two most dangerous scenarios with regard to the war in Ukraine pose a threat to the core of U.S. strategic culture and must be avoided at all costs. However, there is a second diplomatic-strategic line of operation the U.S. is following: In view of the unlikelihood of a diplomatic solution to the conflict in the short and medium term, the countries in Europe must be obligated to provide as much long-term support to Ukraine as possible. At present, there seems to be no chance

87 Cf. Albertson/Sokov 2023: 15.

88 Cf. Babst 2023: 22 f.; Schimmelpfennig 2023: 3.

89 Cf. Frederick et al. 2023: 2.

90 Cf. Maull et al. 2023: 24.

91 Cf. Fischer 2023: 6.

92 Cf. Maull et al. 2023: 40.

93 Cf. Maull et al. 2023: 34.

94 Cf. Fischer 2023: 5 f.

of a ceasefire that would be accepted by both Russia and Ukraine, let alone lead to a sustainable settlement of the conflict.⁹⁵ Russia is playing for time in this conflict. In order to achieve his strategic goal of destroying Ukraine as a state, Putin is preparing his country for a protracted war in which the support provided by the West will eventually decrease and an increasingly weak Ukraine can ultimately be defeated militarily.⁹⁶

Therefore, the United States is exerting diplomatic pressure on its European allies in particular. It wants them to provide Ukraine with strategic resources such as money and military capabilities in the long term, and to increase their own defence capabilities at the same time.⁹⁷ The repeated demands for compliance with the two-per cent spending target agreed at the NATO Summit in 2014 is only one example of the United States' efforts in this respect.⁹⁸ For almost a decade, the U.S. has been focusing on the Indo-Pacific, and it has a substantial interest in its European allies assuming geostrategic responsibility for matters on 'their own doorstep'. From a diplomatic point of view, there is no foreseeable solution to the conflict as long as both warring parties are determined to cling to their negotiating positions and none of them is defeated militarily. In addition, U.S. strategists in particular doubt that Russia would give up its imperialist ambitions in the long term even if a peace settlement was reached.⁹⁹

4.2 Unconditional Support?

In the context of arms deliveries and other support services, a coherent picture is emerging with regard to the United States' diplomatic behaviour. The U.S. administration regularly and publicly states the scope of the actions it has taken to support Ukraine, especially with regard to the provision of military capacities.¹⁰⁰ When taking a closer look at the support provided to Ukraine, however, it becomes clear that although in absolute figures, most of the assistance and especially of the military equipment is provided by the United States (Germany is in second place), the situation is different in terms of financial support. The U.S. is spending only 0.33 per cent of its annual GDP on support for Ukraine, which means that, according to its GDP, the United States ranks only 16th among Ukraine's largest supporters. As regards military, humanitarian and financial support for Ukraine, all Eastern European, Baltic and Scandinavian countries – with the exception of Romania and Hungary – have spent a share of their GDP that, in some cases, is five times as high as that of the United States. It is remarkable that Germany (0.542 per cent) and Great Britain (0.486 per cent) are supporting Ukraine with shares of their GDP that are only slightly higher than that of the United States. Interestingly, France and the Southern European countries do not seem to recognise the need to provide substantial support to Ukraine (France has spent 0.063 per cent of its GDP, Spain 0.070 per cent, Portugal 0.146 per cent and Italy 0.068 per cent, respectively).¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Cf. Heuser 2023b: 42.

⁹⁶ Cf. Fischer 2023: 7.

⁹⁷ Cf. Raine 2023.

⁹⁸ Cf. Saxi: 2020: 402 f.

⁹⁹ Cf. Raine 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. The White House 2023a.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Kieler Institut für Weltwirtschaft 2023. These figures have changed only marginally since December 2023.

Although the deliveries of U.S. weapons and military equipment were absolutely vital for Ukraine’s survival especially at the beginning of the war, they represent only a small share of the capacities that are practically available in the States. That the United States is willing and able to spend much more on weapons and military equipment when a relevant strategic objective is at stake became clear in the most recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁰²

With regard to arms deliveries that would not only ensure Ukraine’s survival but also enable a military victory over Russia, the United States’ commitment falls far short of its potential. For example, the United States has delivered only a very limited number of battle tanks, armoured infantry fighting vehicles and deep strike weapons (HIMARS); the same applies to mobile air defence and engineer equipment. Also, the U.S. has generally refused to deliver combat aircraft such as F16 fighter jets. All these military capabilities are of the greatest operational value when employed together in multi-domain operations – the very type of operation that U.S. experts have recommended so strongly for Ukraine’s counteroffensive.¹⁰³

What has not been mentioned very often in this context is that from the United States’ point of view, neither the scope nor the kind of U.S. arms deliveries were at any time sufficient to conduct this type of military operation.¹⁰⁴ This contradictory attitude became particularly obvious during the preparations for and throughout Ukraine’s counteroffensive, which began in early summer 2023. In an interview of December 2022, General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, commander-in-chief of Ukraine’s armed forces at that time, stated that for a military operation on that scale to be successful, the Ukrainian army needed 300 battle tanks, 600 to 700 armoured infantry fighting vehicles and 500 artillery systems from its supporting countries.¹⁰⁵ The coalition of the willing clearly fell short of these demands, since it delivered only one third of the required systems.¹⁰⁶

Several examples serve to illustrate that the United States in particular has been giving only a marginal share of its own major military equipment to Ukraine: To date, the United States has delivered only 31¹⁰⁷ of its 2,645¹⁰⁸ active Abrams battle tanks to Ukraine. However, they were not yet available for the Ukrainian counteroffensive in early summer 2023. 109¹⁰⁹ out of 2,500¹¹⁰ active M2 and M3 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles have been delivered to Ukraine so far. As for the highly efficient High Mobile Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) that Ukraine has repeatedly asked for¹¹¹, the United States has so far supplied the country with only 20 out of 410 active systems, and promised to deliver 18 more.¹¹²

102 In 2011, for example, the United States spent 0.68 per cent of its annual GDP on the conflict in Afghanistan – a share that was more than twice as high as that which is now being spent on aid to Ukraine (cf. McCarthy 2019).

103 Cf. Bugayova 2023: 2 f.

104 Cf. Rimmel 2023.

105 The Economist 2022.

106 Cf. Rimmel 2023.

107 Cf. The Department of Defense 2023.

108 Cf. International Institute for Strategic Studies 2023: 37.

109 Cf. Department of Defense 2023.

110 Cf. International Institute for Strategic Studies 2023: 37.

111 Cf. Gady/Kofman 2023: 8.

112 Cf. Peck 2022.

Without a doubt, the United States would be able to deliver many more battle tanks and infantry fighting vehicles to Ukraine. By delivering these systems, the United States – unlike all European countries – would not be required to place repeat orders with the defence industry to replenish their stocks in a multi-year process, as thousands of both the battle tanks and the infantry fighting vehicles are available in U.S. strategic depots.¹¹³ The 31 Abrams tanks that arrived in Ukraine after almost a year can be interpreted as a little diplomatic trick to persuade Germany to approve the delivery of Leopard battle tanks. In January 2023, the United States indicated that Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz had made his approval to send German Leopard tanks to Ukraine contingent on the delivery of U.S. Abrams tanks.¹¹⁴ With its promise to deliver some of its battle tanks, even if only 0.01 per cent of its total stock, the United States managed to put those European countries with Leopards in their arsenals in a situation where they could no longer make their support to Ukraine dependent on America's course of action. This ensured that Germany and other European states *had* to assume greater responsibility for this war in Europe. Similar dependencies had already become apparent in the run-up to the delivery of infantry fighting vehicles.

In contrast, the HIMARS systems play a key role in almost all conflict scenarios in the Indo-Pacific and are produced only in small quantities by the U.S. defence industry (20 systems in 2022).¹¹⁵ Despite increased production capacities, the HIMARS example shows that the United States clearly allocates its strategic resources according to its priorities, keeping its HIMARS available for a potential military conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific.

But that is not all: Even though Russian military doctrine attributes great importance to the use of artillery and despite support from other countries, Russia's presumed production capacities will not allow its armed forces to use as much artillery as they did in the first months of the war. While Russia fired 12 million artillery grenades in 2022, the number dropped to about seven million in 2023. The annual production rate is currently estimated to be two and a half million artillery grenades.¹¹⁶ This is important both for Ukraine's wear and tear strategy and with a view to any future offensives, because it means that compared to the beginning of the war, Ukraine would now need far fewer resources to bring its own artillery fire rate closer to that of Russia. The United States is the only supporting country that does not have to fear ammunition shortages with regard to the 155mm artillery grenades fired in large quantities by the Ukrainian armed forces and, in contrast to the European countries supporting Ukraine, the United States has significant strategic ammunition reserves.¹¹⁷

The low level of support compared to the military capacities that are actually available reflects the United States' refusal to supply weapons of that type and/or in those quantities that Ukraine needs to achieve a favourable result in this war.¹¹⁸ As a normalisation of the relationship between the West and Russia seems unlikely in the foreseeable future, Europe must establish a credible military deterrence regardless of

113 2,000 Abrams battle tanks and 2,000 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles (cf. International Institute for Strategic Studies 2023: 37).

114 See also: von Marschall 2023; Schulz 2023; von der Burchard et al. 2023.

115 Cf. Cancian 2023.

116 Cf. Watling/Reynolds 2023: 11 f.

117 Cf. Gady/Kofman 2023: 14 f.

118 Cf. Remmel 2023: 6.

the outcome of the war in Ukraine. In accordance with the changed U.S. approach to global security, the responsibility for the security architecture in Europe now rests with the European states themselves.¹¹⁹

To sum up, it can be said that the military support provided by the United States corresponds to the objectives it pursues in the Russia-Ukraine War: It supplies enough weapons to prevent Russia from winning on the battlefield, but too few to provoke Russia into a (nuclear) escalation of the conflict. In addition, the nature, scope and timing of U.S. commitments regarding arms deliveries to Ukraine reflect the United States' determination to have the European countries assume greater regional responsibility.

4.3 What Strategic Objectives can the United States Achieve in the War in Ukraine?

America's shift of focus in geostrategy also serves as an explanation as to why the United States has limited its support of Ukraine to providing strategic resources far below its potential. Given its geostrategic rivalry with China, the United States regards the Russia-Ukraine conflict as secondary and, in the long run, as a European problem.

This approach is further confirmed by China's behaviour, which is based on first conclusions drawn from the conflict: At present, the People's Republic of China is stepping up its search for ways to diversify its sales markets and import sources in order to reduce its financial and economic dependence on the Western hemisphere. By doing so, China hopes that in the event of an intensifying rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, it will be less affected by potential Western sanctions than Russia is now in its war against Ukraine.¹²⁰ So even though China seems to be deterred in the short term, it is developing strategies to avert risks in the event of an escalation of the conflict with the United States. Moreover, the example of China's commitment on the diplomatic stage shows that the country wants to have a say when it comes to issues of geostrategic security. All these tendencies are by no means exclusively attributable to the Russia-Ukraine War. However, they have been catalysts for China's ambitions and they further confirm the development of the United States' patterns of strategic thinking and acting since 2014. In the medium and long term, the United States will therefore consolidate its shift of strategic focus which can be traced back to 2011 and 2014. Furthermore, in accordance with its strategic culture, it will try to limit China's global influence on U.S. spheres of interest.¹²¹

All this indicates that the United States is not an unconditional supporter of Ukraine's victory. The Biden administration has analysed the conflict in its overall geostrategic context. It has compared the current lines of development with the objectives resulting from its change of strategic focus initiated in 2014 and, on this basis, is allocating its strategic resources accordingly in terms of type and scope so as to be able to achieve these objectives. Russia will not be able to challenge the United States' geostrategic hegemonic position, but it will make efforts to weaken the U.S., should the conflict in Ukraine escalate or should Russia win the war. Without a doubt, the United

¹¹⁹ Cf. Heuser 2023b: 48 f.; Saxi 2020: 402 f.

¹²⁰ Cf. Maull et al. 2023: 38.

¹²¹ Cf. Maull et al. 2023: 43.

States would be able to counter Russia's efforts to challenge the European security architecture. However, this would mean an increased commitment on the European continent as long as Europe is not able or willing to provide for its own security. The fact that the three largest economies in Europe, i.e. Germany, France and Great Britain – the latter two even being nuclear powers –, are providing support to Ukraine on a comparable or even lower level than the United States has led to a situation where the U.S. administration sees itself confirmed in its current considerations and which plays into the hands of critics within the U.S., who feel emboldened in their view. In fact, the discussion within the United States about its assistance for Ukraine is moving away from an 'all-in' scenario, with more and more voices calling for an end to the support. Recent effects of these tendencies can be observed in the U.S. Senate, where further financial assistance for Ukraine is being blocked.¹²²

On the one hand, the United States' current behaviour as a strategic actor and its approach to resource allocation are aimed at preventing those two potential outcomes of the Russia-Ukraine War that would have the most dangerous consequences for the United States' strategic goals. On the other hand, and in view of the absence of peace prospects for Ukraine, America's efforts are aimed at transferring the main responsibility for maintaining the European security architecture to its European allies. This will give the United States enough scope for strategic action to be able to direct sufficient diplomatic, military and economic resources towards its systemic rivalry with China.

4.4 Interim Conclusion – The End of an Era

The present study has demonstrated that in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, the behaviour of the United States as a strategic actor can only be understood by recognising the fact that the United States' strategic culture has led to a shift of geostrategic focus which has taken place since 2014, if not before. It must first be understood that since the end of World War II, U.S. values, norms and historical narratives, which form the core of the United States' strategic culture, have served to legitimise the use of strategic resources to maintain American hegemony. The threat posed to its supremacy in the Indo-Pacific, especially by China, has put an end to an era in which Germany's individual security-strategic interests were identical to those of its chief ally.

During the Cold War, Germany readily adopted the preservation of the United States' geostrategic supremacy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union as a strategic objective, because it helped to preserve its own vital security interests. At the same time, the United States' geostrategic focus was never on Europe in order to preserve the Federal Republic of Germany as a sovereign state, but to ensure a credible deterrence towards the Soviet Union. Despite the different motives behind it, Germany's strategic alignment with the United States was therefore logical.

As a result, Germany was able to rely on the U.S. security strategy in a bipolar world for almost half a century. Despite the increasingly strong demands made by its allies, and especially the United States, it was sufficient for Germany to focus mainly on its role as a civilian power until late in the 20th century. The rationale behind Germany's decision shortly before the turn of the millennium to deploy its military to out-of-area

¹²² Cf. Utz 2023.

operations was to demonstrate loyalty to the Alliance, above all vis-à-vis the United States. Many argumentation patterns explaining Germany's military restraint, such as the historical guilt of unleashing World War II, are being used to this day. They are one of the reasons why Germany has a credibility problem, even though it has participated more frequently in military operations over the past three decades.

For the first time since its foundation, however, the Federal Republic of Germany has now been confronted with a conventional war between two sovereign states. It is a war that threatens Germany's vital security interests and that is not given top priority by Germany's geostrategic protection power, the United States. Ever since the NATO Summit in Wales, the United States has been calling upon Germany to put an end to its military restraint and assume strategic responsibility in Europe. Yet, Germany has more or less ignored these demands, and the consequences of this attitude, which are only logical from a U.S. point of view, have become obvious since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The United States has to support Ukraine and prevent an escalation of the conflict at the same time, which means the conflict will not be decided by military means in the short and medium term if neither of the actors involved changes their behaviour. In the long run, it even makes a Russian victory more likely.¹²³ Against the background of increasingly frequent debates in the United States about a readjustment of the relations with its allies, an unbiased discussion of the current relations between Germany and the United States is inevitable.¹²⁴

5 Conclusions for the Debate on the Further Development of Germany's Strategic Culture

Based on the results of this study, I propose three security-strategic conclusions that should be taken into account in the debate on the further development of Germany's strategic culture. They are not to be understood as potential solutions, let alone undisputable dogmas, but rather as perspectives and possible options for action that deserve consideration in the scope of strategic foresight.

Number One: German policymakers, their advisors and society in general must understand that Germany's security-strategic orientation towards the United States can no longer be based on the parameters of the Cold War and the global war on terror. In 2014, the United States responded to the increasing challenges to the rule-based world order and, based on its patterns of strategic thinking and acting, derived for itself coherent security interests that were different from those of the past. With almost ten years of delay, Germany has now initiated a comparable process by issuing its National Security Strategy. However, the NSS does neither adjust nor question the existing relationship between Germany and the United States in terms of security strategy. As for the United States, having to bear the financial and military burden of enforcing European and North American Alliance interests is contrary to its shift of strategic focus, and ultimately also contradicts its strategic culture. Therefore, more and more political voices in the United States are calling for a further intensification of the refocusing process that began in 2014 and an even more radical orientation towards the

¹²³ Reisner 2023: 5.

¹²⁴ Sullivan 2023: 11.

Indo-Pacific. President Biden's current problems with regard to maintaining support for Ukraine are only the most recent example of these tendencies.¹²⁵ In addition, there are growing concerns within the United States as to whether the politically deeply divided country will continue to be able to assert its geostrategic goals and interests in multiple conflicts given the domestic challenges it faces.¹²⁶ Germany must be aware of this development and should seek to build a strategic – but not unconditional – partnership with the United States based on similarities and differences in both countries' strategic objectives.

Number Two: Irrespective of its relationship with the United States, Germany must assume its share of strategic responsibility for ensuring security in Europe. A Europe capable of military and nuclear deterrence and equipped with a sustainable support strategy for Ukraine would form the basis for a stable security architecture on the continent, even without the United States. Moreover, this would relieve the United States of the military, economic and diplomatic burden it is shouldering, not only in the Russia-Ukraine War, but also with a view to potential future conflicts in Europe and its periphery. This would allow the United States to enforce its vital geostrategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, which, in turn, would be beneficial for Germany's security interests as well. An autocratic system like China controlling the trade routes, sales markets and technology centres in the Indo-Pacific would have a massive negative impact on Germany's economy, which is absolutely dependent on free trade. In addition, it cannot be assumed that China would put aside its expansionist ambitions after having enforced its geostrategic dominance in that region.¹²⁷ With its military capabilities, Germany is not capable of fighting China in a conflict in the Indo-Pacific. However, it is dependent on maintaining the current order in that region. Therefore, it would definitely be in Germany's interest to comply with the United States' demands for an increased German commitment in the field of security policy in Eastern Europe. If Germany wants to be a reliable partner of the United States in terms of security strategy, it must play the leading role in the implementation of a European security architecture *by the Europeans* themselves. The most obvious partners for such efforts would be the European nuclear powers, Great Britain and France, as well as Poland, which will soon have the largest conventional army in Europe. However, increased diplomatic efforts might be needed to win them over for such an undertaking. In particular, this holds true for France, given the country's apparent restraint in supporting Ukraine.

Even though the United States has demonstrated great predictability in terms of foreign policy vis-à-vis its allies in the past, the influence of the growing faction of U.S. conservative populists with their calls for scaling back the comprehensive support for Ukraine is detrimental to the European states. Consequently, the strengthening of European deterrence towards Russia would not only ensure the United States' strategic capacity to act against China, but would also increase Europe's sovereignty and thus its geopolitical weight in our multipolar world.

Number Three: As a consequence of the first two conclusions, Germany must understand that in a multipolar world order, the dependence on a single dominant strategic partner will restrict its geostrategic capacity to act, and it must draw the

¹²⁵ Cf. also Wertheim 2023.

¹²⁶ Cf. Gates 2023: 38.

¹²⁷ Cf. Giegerich/Terhalle 2021: 204.

appropriate lessons from this. But this should by no means result in a decoupling from the United States in terms of security strategy. If Germany wants to be a dominant strategic actor in the Western hemisphere at the military, economic and diplomatic level, one of its strategic goals must be to establish a partnership with the United States that is in line with German interests. Nevertheless, it would be worthwhile for Germany to diversify its coalitions outside existing alliances and partnerships such as NATO and the EU.¹²⁸ By doing so, Germany would remain relevant to the United States as an influential ally and become resilient to periods of domestic political turbulence in the United States.¹²⁹ For example, a re-election of Donald Trump as U.S. President could lead to such turbulent times in the foreseeable future, and thus to an aggravation of centrist tendencies in the U.S. regarding global security that might involve steps such as leaving NATO.¹³⁰ In terms of the Indo-Pacific, Germany has begun to make efforts in this direction by intensifying its military, economic and diplomatic relations with South Korea, Australia and Japan.¹³¹ The strategic objective of these efforts, however, remains unclear at present. Has Germany aligned its efforts in the Indo-Pacific with those of the United States, as it has done in the Russia-Ukraine War, without even asking itself whether German and U.S. strategic objectives and interests are in fact identical? Assuming that Germany aims to retain the United States as its most important security ally and strives to become more independent at the same time, wouldn't it be more profitable to set own accents in security policy by focusing for instance on North Africa? These questions can only be answered by going back to the beginning of this analysis: Without understanding and, as a result, questioning the current state of its strategic culture, Germany will not be able to define its own strategic objectives, to identify ways of achieving these objectives and to back them with the necessary resources in order of priority.

Since 2014, tendencies have become apparent in the United States' strategic culture pointing to a growing radicalisation in terms of conceiving security strategy exclusively from a U.S.-centric point of view. Regardless of whether these tendencies will be reinforced or not after the 2024 presidential election, one thing remains clear: Germany must transform its strategic culture. As part of this process, fundamental patterns of strategic thinking and acting in the security context need to be reviewed, as well as the German-American relationship itself. The following key questions may steer the desired debate in the right direction: How is Germany's strategy to be conceived in an age of rivalling major and middle powers? What are Germany's strategic objectives? How are

128 This applies not only to the United States but also to NATO members Turkey and Hungary. Although they are not toying with the idea of withdrawing from NATO, they regularly emphasise their strategic partnership with Russia and block measures within NATO (and, in the case of Hungary, also within the EU), thus preventing a uniform approach. (Cf. also Babst 2023: 28 f.).

129 Another perspective, which was not mentioned in this paper but which is indispensable for the much-needed debate on the type of partnership that should subsist between Germany and the United States, is without a doubt that from within U.S. society. The increasing polarisation of U.S. society and the socio-economic tensions have already left their mark on the United States' commitment in terms of foreign and security policy as they tie up considerable financial resources. A constant assessment of these developments is indispensable for strategic foresight. (Cf. Overhaus 2021: 41).

130 Trump's former National Security Adviser, John Bolton, announced the United States' withdrawal from NATO in the event of Trump's re-election in 2024. Cf. Alexandridi 2023.

131 Cf. Maull et al. 2023: 42 f.

they to be achieved and what will be the best way to prioritise and allocate strategic resources in order to achieve them? Which historical narratives, values and norms that have long shaped German thinking and acting in the context of security and strategy are still valid and can be maintained in view of changing global framework conditions?

If Germany is to stand its ground in this watershed moment in history and turn its *Zeitenwende* into a success, we need to find answers to these questions.

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