Article

The Dynamics of Change in United States Foreign Policy: Contexts, Leadership, and Hegemonic Legitimacy

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Abstract: This article examines the dialectical relationship between continuity and change in the foreign policy of the United States, a hegemonic power. The article begins by exploring the agent–structure problem and the factors that affect changes in foreign policy and the legitimacy of hegemony. It compares the hegemonic leadership styles of three former United States Presidents: George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. The article aims to contrast the foreign policy approaches of the three presidents and present two main arguments. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of foreign policy, it is imperative to analyse dynamic components such as contextual factors and leadership. This includes the leaders' worldviews and their ability to adapt to unanticipated crises. The gradual decline of the United States' hegemony in the international order can be attributed to structural transformations within the international order and the erosion of its social capital and its role as hegemon. Yet, the leadership styles adopted by American presidents have a significant impact on the erosion of the nation's hegemonic leadership.

Keywords: foreign policy change; leadership; international order; hegemonic legitimacy; George W. Bush; Barack Obama; Donald Trump

1. Introduction

Currently, two phenomena influence theory and politics in international relations. The first is the increasing complexity of the processes of change and dynamism in international politics. The second is the erosion of the liberal order that results from the crisis in the legitimacy of hegemonic power's leadership.

How do these phenomena affect the continuity of the United Sates' (US) grand strategy (Balzacq and Corcoral 2022; Jervis 2021; Drezner et al. 2020) and its ability to adapt and maintain legitimate hegemony? What are the conditions that allow for significant changes in foreign policy? Do the ideas, cultural images[1], and leadership style of US presidencies matter?

This article focuses on the case of the US and seeks to clarify the relationship between the structural and agential conditions that affect continuities and discontinuities in foreign policy and the actors' adaptation processes. The main objective is to understand whether a change in leadership can result in a real change in the nation's foreign policy, or, contrariwise, whether agents and their speeches regarding change matter little to the continuity of domestic and international structures. By combining the agent–structure *problématique* with historical events, this article applies International Relations (IR) theory to address some of the factors that contribute to dynamism and change in international politics and assesses the impact of these factors on the US's foreign policy and hegemonic leadership.

Our arguments about the international leadership of US presidents are not simply about their leadership styles in office or their psychological and cognitive characteristics and preferences when faced with specific situations or issue areas in foreign policy (Greenstein 2009; Keller and Foster 2012). When we talk about leadership styles, we are referring to the role of US presidents in enhancing American symbolic power and their international

hegemonic leadership, that is, the ideas and cultural images of US presidents regarding the role (Breuning 2017; Thies and Breuning 2012) of the US in the world and the best strategies to maintain a consented hegemonic leadership.

Therefore, this article aims not only to empirically characterise the foreign policy of Bush, Obama, and Trump but also to identify the dynamics of continuity and change in their ideas, perceptions, and images in relation to the United States' hegemonic leadership role. This leadership translates into two decisive conditions: First, the ability to uphold and adapt the ideas and norms of the international liberal order to demonstrate its unique political, normative, and security value when compared to alternative projects. Second, the global intersubjective recognition of the symbolic power of the US as the decisive actor that plays the role of a benign stabilising hegemon of the order.

This article consists of two parts. The first part presents theoretical arguments about the agency–structure problem and the hegemony legitimacy in IR and explores the decisive factors that drive changes in foreign policy. The second part includes a comparison of the historical and political context of the Bush, Obama, and Trump presidencies, focusing on the continuities and changes in US foreign policy during the period of their presidencies.

This article presents two principal arguments. First, to explain the change in US foreign policy, there is a need to first understand three crucial dimensions: the importance of political and ideational contexts, the role of leadership, and the unpredictability of the dynamics of international politics. Second, more than the decline in the material power of the US, the real cause of the weakening of American leadership in the international order lies in the erosion of the legitimacy of the US hegemony and the decline of the symbolic power and loss of social capital of the US.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Change and Agency vs. Continuity and Structure

One of the most interesting social science debates relates to the relationship between agency and structure (hereafter referred to as A–S). This debate revolves around the extent to which agents are shaped, constrained, and determined by structures, and vice versa. In other words, this debate refers to the relationship between agents, who produce actions, and the historical contexts in which their actions occur. This classic problem is well captured by Marx's famous aphorism: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx 2010, p. 329).

This debate gained importance in IR with the rise of social constructivism and the assumption that foreign policy is the result of the individual ideas, as well as institutional actors' cultures and normative structures that influenced the socio-cultural dynamics of decision-making (Smith 2001; Houghton 2007; Flockhart 2016; Mendes 2020a). The A–S problem allowed IR and foreign policy analysis (FPA) to deepen inquiries into ontological and epistemological questions about the world's constituent elements and the best ways of studying them (Onuf 1989; Dessler 1989; Wendt 1999; Klotz and Lynch 2007). A recurrent problem results from an attempt to explain causal processes in the actor–structure relationship. Thus, FPA faces the critical challenge of understanding whether the determinism of the structure or the free will of the agency is dominant. Giddens believed that each of these elements influenced the other (Giddens 1984). His argument was that structure and agents constitute and modify each other actively and continuously.

Thus, in foreign policy, causality always involves agency (decision-makers) and structure (contexts). There is a continuous process of interaction between these two elements that supports their mutually constitutive relationships (Forum 2006). Simultaneously, the actor's agency is both free and constrained by the situation. The actions of decision-makers are always reflective of as well as reactive to the situation. However, there is a temporal precedence of the structure vis à vis agency. As Archer points out, individuals are born into a social context that they did not help build (Archer 1995, p. 72).

Nevertheless, we must not forget that structures are not natural. Structures are historical constructions that arise from the dynamic processes of mutual constitution between contexts and their agents. Structures are invented and institutionalised through the agency of the actors. It is only through intersubjective and collective agreement on their meanings by humans (Onuf 2013) that structures are established, maintained, or modified. In the realm of foreign policy, actors operate within two primary structures: the international system and its normative and hierarchical international order, as well as the national system and its political and constitutional culture.

What, then, is the best answer to the A-S problem in foreign policy decisions? Considering the theoretical contributions of FPA (Carlsnaes 1993; Hermann et al. 2001), this paper suggests the following three propositions. First, any leader and foreign policy decision-maker works within the pre-existing context, trying to adapt to the historical pattern of foreign policy, which exposes them to natural pressures and constraints. Second, the degree of freedom and influence that a decision-maker has to define and implement change is correlated with their capacity for political entrepreneurship. Great leaders with innovative visions for the world and strong entrepreneurial skills can make a significant difference (Byman and Pollack 2001; Rohrer 2014). Third, despite these factors, the unpredictability of events has a decisive influence on the objectives of foreign policy. This unpredictability has caused many leaders to fail or facilitated inferior leaders' success. The ability of a leader to manage an unexpected crisis is what defines a great politician. In the seventeenth century, Machiavelli called this ability *virtù*; the leader's *virtu* relates to his flexibility and ability to deal with the fortunes and misfortunes of politics (Machiavelli 2011).

Another capacity of a great leader is his ability to overcome the cognitive dissonance trap. Robert Jervis (2017) adduces two main reasons that disturb policymakers' cognitive processes and distort their situation analysis: "wishful thinking" and the "lessons of history". The wishful thinking process is the decision-maker's tendency to see the situation and evaluate options according to their beliefs and expectations. The other reason relates to past experiences and the historical lessons influencing a leader's perceptions. Influenced by false historical analogies, leaders repeatedly fail to understand the root causes of the historical episodes they select for their decisions. Instead, they insist on repeating solutions that in the past have proven to be effective, and not bothering to evaluate the available alternatives and seek the most effective solution.

There is always a gap between the information received, its interpretation based on cultural images, and the complete facts of the situation. Unfortunately, the decision-maker often ignores this gap or minimises the authenticity of the information or its source's value and is unable to prefer information capable of invalidating traditional policy solutions (Duelfer and Dyson 2011). However, this cognitive dissonance in decision-making may be typical or abnormal. It is one thing when there is a crisis or lack of information and the leader occasionally falls into the cognitive dissonance trap. It is another when the leader has ideological preconceptions of the situation and repeatedly acts with biased political decisions, as populist leaders often do. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that foreign policy is shaped by leaders (Hudson 2018; Hermann et al. 2001) who are driven by their beliefs, worldviews, and cultural images (Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Schafer and Walker 2006, 2021; Mendes 2018, 2020b). These ideational factors have a significant impact on the leadership styles (Kaarbo and Hermann 1998; Preston 2017) of American presidents, the development of US foreign policy doctrines, and "the rise and fall of American hegemony" (Nye 2019). See Figure 1 below.
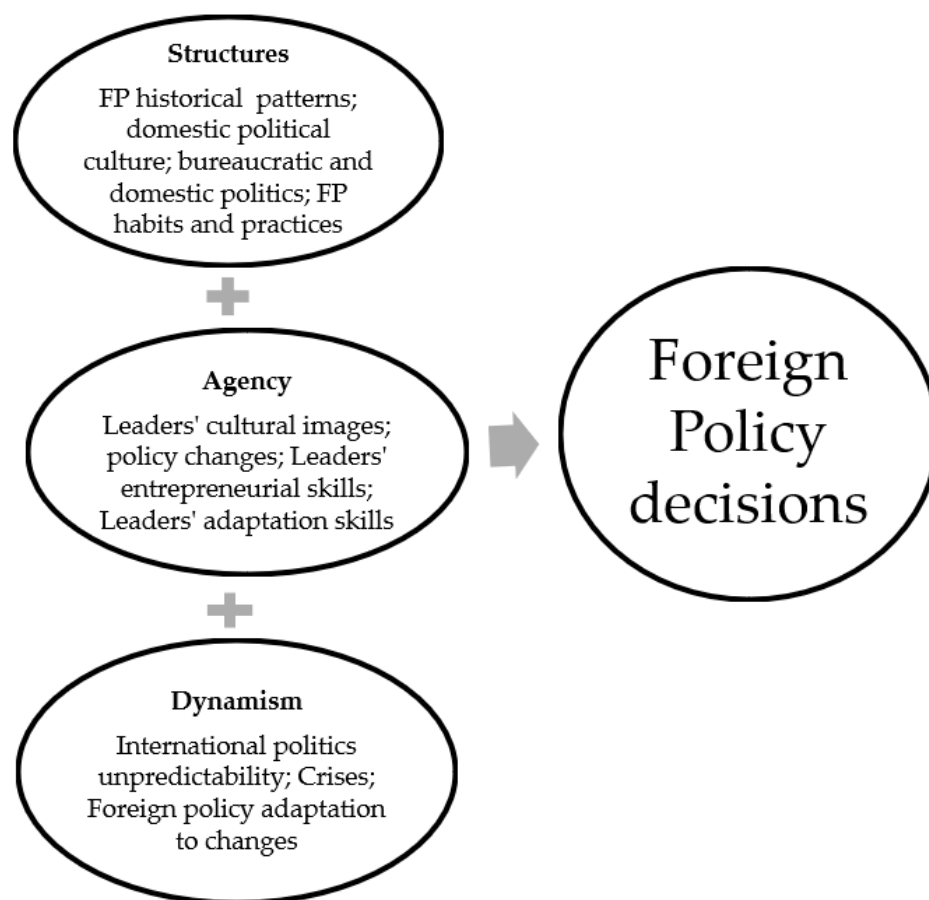
Figure 1. Elements of continuity, change, and adaptation in foreign policy (FP) (source: author).
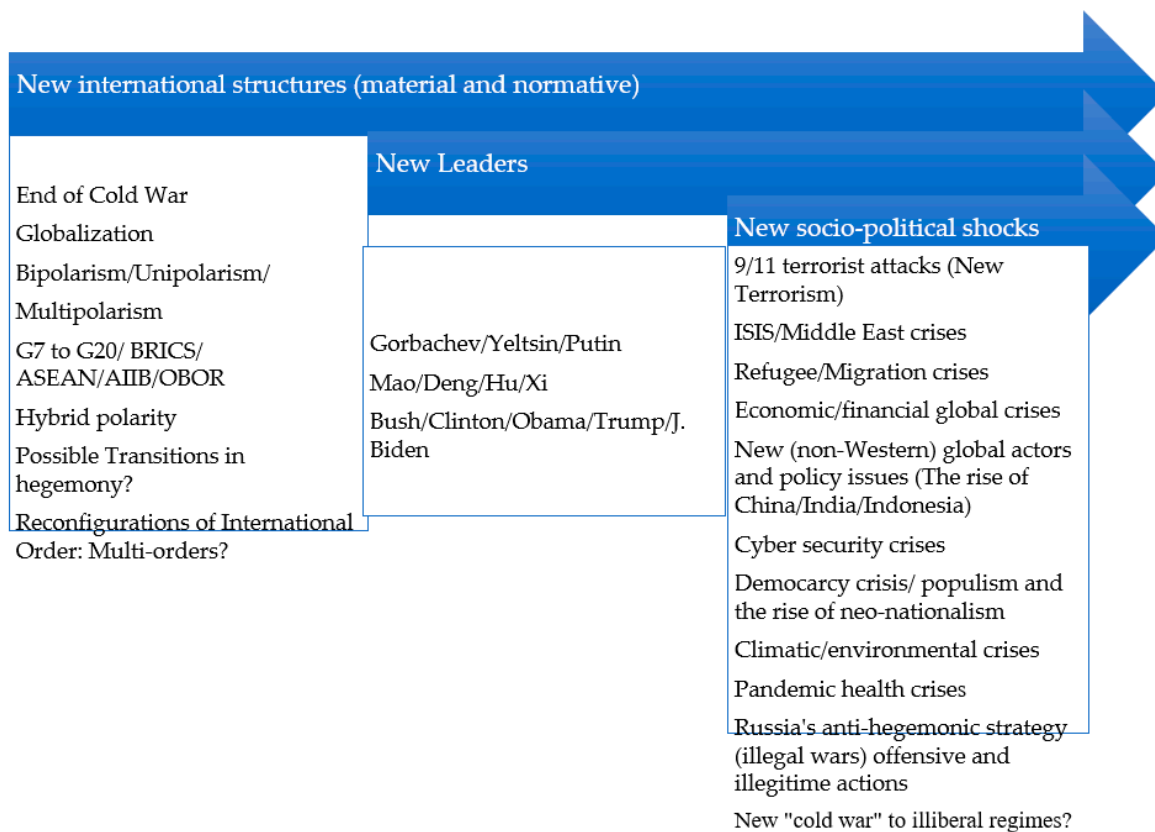
2.2. Dynamism and Change in Foreign Policy

In any given state, foreign policy tends to be marked more by continuity than by change (Rosati et al. 1995). As many tangible determinants of a state's foreign policy tend to remain constant over long periods, the space for significant and continuous changes is limited. Leaders also tend to adopt a cautious approach to the possibility of introducing substantial changes to their nations' historical foreign policy patterns. As John F. Kennedy pointed out, "Domestic policy can only defeat us, foreign policy can kill us" (Wildavsky 1995).

From a theoretical point of view, the study of change became inevitable after the Cold War ended. Since then, numerous studies have developed arguments about various aspects of change in the post-bipolar world. Some papers have examined the impact of foreign policy change on general international relations phenomena (Koslowski and Kratochwil 1994; Kratochwil 1993; Holsti 2004, 2018; Kacowicz and Miller 2018). Additionally, some studies have examined how this change is significant at the FPA level (Hermann 1990; Carlsnaes 1993; Rosati et al. 1995; Gustavsson 1999; Hill 2003; Blavoukos and Bourantonis 2014).

Nevertheless, it is commonly observed that all foreign policy decisions tend to be rigid. When a specific option in foreign policy is defined and implemented, institutional inertia and installed interests produce stabilising effects that lead to substantial obstacles to changes (Hermann 1990; Hill 2003). Although continuity is more typical in foreign policy, changes are more relevant to FPA. Explaining the dialectic of continuity and change in a state's foreign policy and identifying the conditions that lead to important turning points are critical. Turning points are moments wherein the existence of exceptional conditions pave the way for significant changes, disrupting the natural continuity of a state's foreign policy. See Figure 2 below. Three fundamental conditions favour changes in foreign policy (Gustavsson 1999; Blavoukos and Bourantonis 2014):

- Changes in international structure (material and ideational);
- Changes in political leadership (new ideas and preferences);
- The occurrence of any crisis (e.g., socio-political shocks).

New international structures (material and normative)

End of Cold War	**New Leaders**	
Globalization		
Bipolarism/Unipolarism/ Multipolarism		**New socio-political shocks**
		9/11 terrorist attacks (New Terrorism)
G7 to G20/ BRICS/ ASEAN/AIIB/OBOR	Gorbachev/Yeltsin/Putin	ISIS/Middle East crises
	Mao/Deng/Hu/Xi	Refugee/Migration crises
Hybrid polarity	Bush/Clinton/Obama/Trump/J. Biden	Economic/financial global crises
Possible Transitions in hegemony?		New (non-Western) global actors and policy issues (The rise of China/India/Indonesia)
Reconfigurations of International Order: Multi-orders?		Cyber security crises
		Democarcy crisis/ populism and the rise of neo-nationalism
		Climatic/environmental crises
		Pandemic health crises
		Russia's anti-hegemonic strategy (illegal wars) offensive and illegitime actions
		New "cold war" to illiberal regimes?

Figure 2. Dynamic conditions that favour change (source: author).

The simultaneous occurrence of these three conditions shows the conducive state for causing foreign policy changes. Additionally, there is a need for an interconnected approach between structural change and its political actors. While internal and international structural conditions may influence foreign policy change, they are not responsible for changes occurring. For structural conditions to decisively influence events, they must be perceived and assumed by political agents. Thus, agents must have good adaptation skills and opportunistic sagacity to take advantage of circumstances.

To devise policy changes, leaders must be political entrepreneurs. They must have a reformist orientation capable of seizing moments of opportunity and launching political proposals that favour change. The chances of the success of these innovative proposals will be higher if they occur within the context of any crisis. Crises tend to provide institutional breakthroughs and increase actors' room to execute more innovative and riskier political moves.

An international crisis is a situation that arises from an unforeseen and dangerous change in global politics. Decision-makers automatically perceive a threat to fundamental values, feel the urgency and time pressure to activate responses, and are surprised by the unpredictability of the phenomenon (Hermann 1972). Thus, a crisis results from a change that threatens basic interests, values, and norms, introduces uncertainty and insecurity, and creates a sense of urgency (Stern 2003). Rather than adopting the traditional perspective focused solely on the potential use of military means (Hermann 1972, p. 13), our approach to crises and political shocks is more comprehensive. It encompasses the broader dimension of threats to the security and stability of the international order. Thus, crises and political shocks, as discussed here, are related to international crises that impact the structure

and hierarchy of the international order. Nevertheless, a political shock is primarily characterised by the novelty and unpredictability of phenomena that disrupt the stability of the international order and pose challenges to the actions of the hegemon. International crises are significant "moments of truth" (Stern 2003) for hegemonic leadership and serve as crucial analytical elements (see images 2 and 3) for understanding their adaptability and, most importantly, they help assess the level of international acceptance and recognition of consented hegemonic leadership.

In fact, we are facing an interconnected set of crises—political, economic, environmental, social, and identity-related. Some describe this situation as a polycrisis (Tooze 2022). The crisis of international hegemonic leadership and the corresponding anti-American sentiment, which originated from Bush's neo-imperial policies and worsened under Trump's contestation of the liberal order, also contribute to the ambience of polycrisis and uncertainty.

Another important dimension of foreign policy change is political transitions or crises in internal politics. Domestic politics and foreign policy are increasingly connected, and it is imperative to recognise the domestic sources of foreign policy (Kaarbo 2015). Particularly in the US, foreign policy is a very messy, complex, and political process, inseparable from bureaucratic and domestic politics (Rosati and Scott 2023, p. 6). Thus, there is a need to understand the decisive role of changes in internal politics—including new ideologic polarisation and the rise of populism—that enable changes in foreign policy (Chryssogelos 2017; Verbeek and Zaslove 2017; Destradi et al. 2021). It is also necessary to realise that with the rise of populism, critical foreign policy decisions, such as a significant crises or war, are increasingly influenced by internal politics. Moreover, the growing politicisation of public policymaking has also influenced foreign policymaking, introducing new and more complex challenges in international politics.[2]

Although all elected leaders govern with their electoral base in mind, this phenomenon has become particularly concerning with the current ultraconservative populist governments. Indeed, many of their policies attempt to promote the universalisation of their values. In the case of foreign policy, this is even more serious since decisions are no longer understood as a state policy but as a strategy for domestic mobilisation and attracting international allies (Thiers and Wehner 2022). This ideological bias associated with political leaders' internal political survival necessities can give rise to unexpected changes in foreign policy (Destradi and Plagemann 2019).

There are various types and degrees of change in foreign policies. Hermann presents a useful typology categorising the changes into four levels (Hermann 1990). The first is a change made through adjustment or small changes made at the level of policy implementation. The second is programmatic change, which implies a change in means, even if the goals remain unchanged. The third is changing the problem/goal, which implies that the goals themselves are changed. The fourth type of change implies changes in international orientation resulting from a state's structural changes. Here, the state not only changes a policy or problem specific to foreign policy, but also its general orientation about international relations.

Though useful, Herman's categories must be related to the unpredictability of international politics and the emergence of unexpected socio-political shocks. Thus, we argue that the erosion of hegemonic legitimacy accelerates changes. This increases uncertainty and emphasises the significance of the sophistication of hegemonic leadership.

2.3. Hegemonic Leadership Legitimation: Symbolic Power and Social Capital Dynamics

As classic hegemonic theorists argue, stability in international politics requires a hegemonic power that guarantees the application of rules in the international system (Organski 1958; Gilpin 1981). The hegemon has three essential attributes: exceptional material and political capacity, which gives them the ability to invent the rules of the game; the will to lead the order and enforce the rules; and, finally, having a consenting hegemonic leadership based on an indisputable primacy of social capital in the international system.

Thus, the hegemon is committed to the sustainability of the international order, namely to the satisfaction of its key actors and institutions (DiCicco 2017). Therefore, they must perceive and accept it as mutually beneficial. Based on this logic, the maintenance of international order configurations rests on the hegemon's ability to establish a stabilising hegemony that reconciles legitimate authority with its capacity to impose its power strategies. Moreover, hegemonic stability depends on the hegemon's ability to demonstrate the benefits of stability and order to the other actors in the system. When this does not happen, hegemonic leadership can reverse itself and become destabilising for the system.

In addition to the traditional material factors of material power, several authors have identified important ideational aspects of hegemonic leadership. Cox (1987) tried to overcome the excessive materialist determinism of Marxist and realist views, introducing important ideational aspects of Gramscian inspiration. Cox (1987) underlines the political and ideological dominance supporting material factors that are decisive in constructing and maintaining the international order's institutional and ideational structures. Ikenberry and Kupchan (1990) complemented the ideas of hegemonic leadership by stressing the importance of the process of socialisation. Hegemonic leadership is not simply about material power and incentives, but mainly about the capacity of the hegemon to convince and socialise the leaders of the world about the legitimacy and usefulness of the ideas and norms defended by the hegemon. Thus, to be effective, the hegemonic leadership must rely upon shared consent about the legitimacy of ideas and practices of the international order, not just on the "cultural images" of the decision-makers but also on the beliefs of the general world population and public opinion (Hopf 2013).

We cannot consider the stabilising role of hegemonic power without considering its legitimisation. All power, especially hegemonic power, is defined by its capacity to legitimise the normative and political structure of the order that rules the relations within the system. This hegemonic power relationship must be consented to and is assumed to be beneficial by the broad majority of international actors (Buzan 2008; Clark 2011; Hopf 2013; Ikenberry and Nexon 2019; Lake 2018). The hegemony must be consented to and not contested.

The hegemon cannot ignore the dialectic between material and ideational power and the importance of values and norms in international social order construction. Building on these ideas, we argue that in a post-traditional unipolar American hegemonic world and with the emergence of a "multiplex order" (Acharya 2017), what may be decisive in accepting and consenting to hegemonic leadership relates to the capacity of the hegemon to accumulate symbolic power and social capital (Bourdieu 1977, 1980, 1986, 1991).

Adapting the ideas of Bourdieu to international politics, we argue that for the hegemon to lead the contemporary hybrid multipolar international order, it must demonstrate its benign nature through the accumulation of social capital and symbolic power, which is the highest expression of power (Bourdieu 1977, 1980, 1986, 1991).

Symbolic power integrates social and political capital and the ability to frame and construct reality, influencing the formation of practical and institutional systems for obtaining political power and legitimacy. Through this constitutive power, the hegemon normalises shared ideas and norms about the power hierarchies and the legitimacy of the rules of the game of a given international order. However, the hegemon must possess significant social capital to obtain this power. Social capital translates into the ability to build networks of followers who recognise and accept hegemonic leadership as benign (Bourdieu 1980, 1986; Mendes 2021a, 2021b).
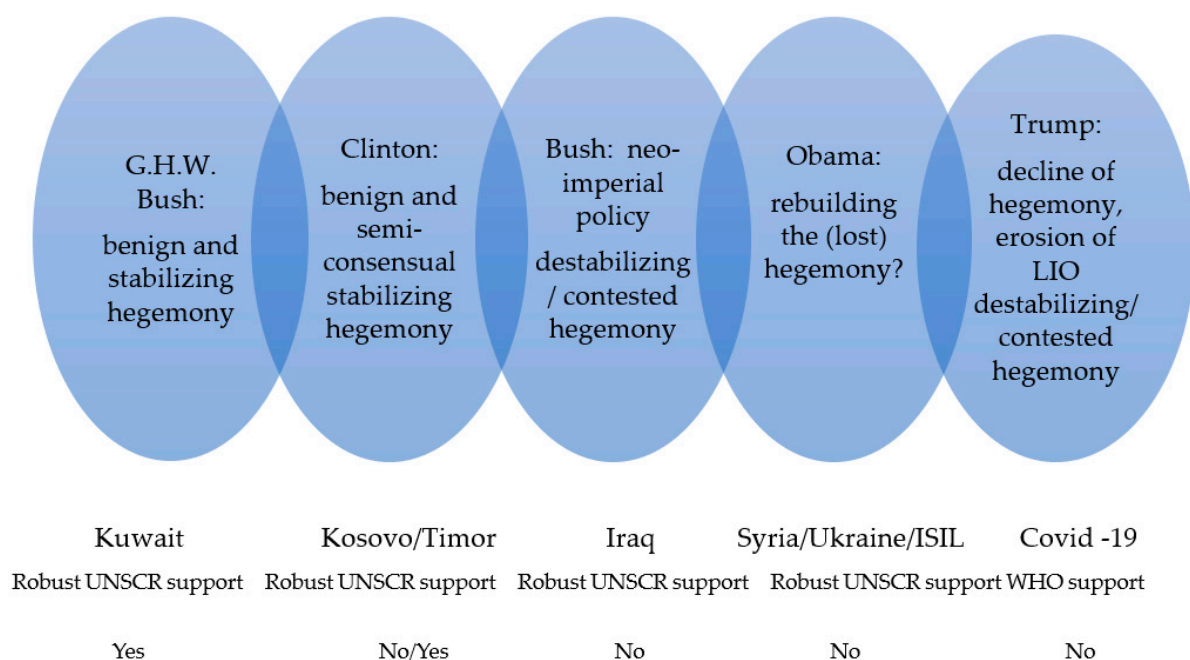
Our arguments about the importance of the hegemon's symbolic power and the accumulation of social capital are connected to social and hierarchical arguments regarding the significance of status in international politics (Volgy et al. 2011; Renshon 2017; Murray 2019). As these works also emphasise, in addition to material power, states seek social recognition of their status as great powers. In this sense, the hegemon requires social recognition of its status and its "moral authority" (Wohlforth et al. 2018) to lead with legitimate consent. This reinforces our idea that hegemony is intersubjective. The current

hegemonic leadership highlights the significance of the US being recognised as a legitimate hegemonic power in response to the challenges presented due to shifts in the international order. This hegemonic recognition should not be limited to diplomatic leaders and decision-makers but should also be supported by widespread perceptions among citizens. Thus, the recognition of hegemony must be disseminated and shared globally, relying on a robust network of social and normative capital, where the majority of actors acknowledge the legitimacy of the hegemon's symbolic power.

Beyond the hegemonic structural transition dynamics (Tammen et al. 2017), it is crucial to understand the hegemon's capacity to build and maintain networks of followers. In a world of hegemonic power transition, it is decisive that both the hegemon and its rivals accumulate symbolic power that translates to the maximisation of followers. What is really at stake is not so much whether China will overtake the US as the most materially powerful state in the system, but whether this transition will mean the decline of the West's identity and symbolic power and its ability to attract followers and supporters of the liberal order (Hopf 2013; Yan 2018; Weiss and Wallace 2021; Rodriguez and Thornton 2022).

The narrowing of the material power gap between the global North and the global South, with the rise of other emerging power poles, especially Asia and its main power, China, reflect an inevitable historical evolution. The traditional and dominant Western European–American power pole must adapt to the new context.[3]

Above all, the United States, which remains the state with hegemonic leadership capacity, must have the ability to adapt by trying to foresee and shape the possibilities of maintaining the liberal order in the future. See Figure 3 below.

G.H.W. Bush: benign and stabilizing hegemony	Clinton: benign and semi-consensual stabilizing hegemony	Bush: neo-imperial policy destabilizing / contested hegemony	Obama: rebuilding the (lost) hegemony?	Trump: decline of hegemony, erosion of LIO destabilizing/ contested hegemony
Kuwait	Kosovo/Timor	Iraq	Syria/Ukraine/ISIL	Covid -19
Robust UNSCR support	Robust UNSCR support	Robust UNSCR support	Robust UNSCR support	WHO support
Yes	No/Yes	No	No	No

Figure 3. US hegemony and crises: UN support and recognition.

3. Historic–Political Contexts

3.1. George W. Bush: Neo-Imperialism and Hegemonic Legitimacy Erosion

Before 9/11, US foreign policy focused on maintaining hegemonic power status through adaptive measures and control. The Bush administration suggested a shift towards unilateral internationalism through rhetoric, while still gradually adapting to the "unipolar moment" (Krauthammer 1990–1991; Layne 2006). The US pursued a strategy of benign hegemonic stability during the Bush administration, similar to the approaches of the previous administrations of George H. W. Bush and Clinton. The conventional US "grand strategy" prioritises multilateralism but may take unilateral actions to protect American

national interests (Posen and Ross 1996; Porter 2018). However, in the long run, the US was able to take unilateral actions without damaging its consented hegemony and social capital in the international order.

Despite the strategic continuity in US foreign policy across administrations, adaptive changes have occurred. Under George H. W. Bush, the US led the UN with a stabilising hegemony that was widely accepted by the international community. The Gulf War exemplifies the effectiveness of a multilateral hegemonic leadership approach based on consent. During Clinton's administration, despite his commitment to normative internationalism, the consensual and multilateral leadership faced resistance against its hegemonic power. The Kosovo situation highlights the challenge of lacking UN Security Council support for US claims. Despite US assertive multilateralism under Clinton, it remained a hegemonic leader and stabiliser of the international system.

On 11 September 2001, terrorists attacked the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon Building in Arlington, Virginia, using three civilian aircraft as weapons. The Bush administration's response to the attack included a "revolution" in US foreign policy that included elements of Herman's changing of the problem/goal and altering international orientation. The transformative shift brought about by this event led to the emergence of a novel US foreign policy doctrine (Daalder and Lindsay 2005; Hermann 1990). The US developed a new defence and security strategy, the Global War on Terrorism (GWT), in response to the unprecedented attack on its soil (USA 2002).

The US prepared for war in Afghanistan and later in Iraq (Woodward 2004). The legitimacy of the war in Afghanistan was widely accepted, but the war in Iraq faced less consensus both domestically and internationally. The debate among American scholars and politicians remains whether Iraq was a "necessary war" or optional war (Haass 2010). GWT comprises two key ideas. The first was that a military hard-power response would have the ability to deter global terrorist networks. The second was the need for an internationalist foreign policy to transform international order through the imposition of democratic regimes. These ideas were based on illusions about the US power's unilateral primacy, without significant concerns about the possibility of its hegemonic capacity to stabilise the deteriorating international order.

The Bush doctrine had several ideological influences, including American neo-conservatism (itself a fusion of conservative and voluntarist ideas), and a particular Manichean perspective of international politics. Additionally, the doctrine was informed by a religious and messianic vision typical of conservative American republicanism (Jervis 2003). The amalgamation of these ideas with those of the US founding fathers forms the basis of the US political identity, encompassing a voluntarist reading of its Christian and demo-liberal values and a vision of its exceptional role in the world. The Bush doctrine added a neo-imperial view to traditional US political identity. This vision was a fusion of post-bipolar ideas of the "end of history" and the expansion of "democratic peace" with new ideas regarding unipolar supremacy and the possibility of imposing democracy through rapid regime changes. Thus, the Bush doctrine expanded the ideas of US internationalism and exceptionalism and gave new meaning to US unilateralism, which many characterised as imperial (Cox 2004; Nexon and Wright 2007).

However, it is essential to emphasise that all the ideas that fuelled the Bush administration's vision placed excessive emphasis on hard power, relegating the legitimacy of the hegemon's symbolic power to a secondary position. Many of the strategies of the Bush doctrine were based on unilateral traditional geopolitical and military responses.

By risking the legalisation of "pre-emptive war", particularly preventive attacks not legitimised by the United Nations (UN), the Bush doctrine succeeded in positioning the US as a potential violator of other states' sovereignty. This excessive aggressiveness of hegemonic power resulted in a significant problem regarding the nation's effectiveness in stabilising the international system. With the adoption of neo-imperial unilateralism, the US, which had until then played the role of stabilising the international order, has come to be perceived as a destabilising power.

With its neo-imperial attitude, the Bush administration impaired the legitimacy of the stabilising US hegemony and sparked debate on hegemonic destabilisation or the possibility of any other power's counter-hegemonic balancing responses. The reaction to Bush's neo-imperial attitude undermined the unipolar US military power in the world after the invasion of Iraq and generated a lively debate on the role of the US's hegemonic leadership, which had until then been rarely called into question.

The factor that threatened Bush's neo-imperial doctrine was the administration's inability to demonstrate that the GWT was stabilising and benign for the international order. However, despite this obstacle, Bush's doctrine and its three pillars—"pre-emption", "regime change", and the Manichaean division of the world between friends and enemies—enjoyed a few glory days (Gregg 2003). It was only after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan came to an impasse that the doctrine faced backlash from a multitude of critics.

This poses the question of whether it is feasible to initiate a worldwide conflict without compromising the legitimacy of US hegemony. It is evident that such an objective cannot be attained unilaterally by relying solely on the pre-eminence of hard power and striving to establish a neo-imperial international order. Furthermore, it cannot be accomplished through leadership that espouses unsophisticated perspectives of the world founded on messianic and Manichaean concepts or through political decisions that stem from dissonant cognitive processes and misperceptions (Jervis 2017), such as the belief in the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

3.2. Barack Obama: The End of Unilateralism and the Renewing of American Leadership Legitimacy

Many Americans, along with the rest of the world, welcomed Obama's election because he represented a rejection of Bush's worldview. It was likely Obama's desire to change US foreign policy that led to his premature receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize. Obama announced his intention to reverse the course set by his predecessor. This included ending military operations in Iraq; initiating negotiations with US opponents such as Iran, Syria, and Cuba; ending torture practices; releasing Guantánamo detainees; renouncing unilateralism and preventive wars; rebuilding ties with allies; and re-engaging with multilateral initiatives such as the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty suspended during the Bush presidency.

Above all, Obama promised to approach terrorist threats with a new perspective. He acknowledged the problem of global terrorism but also recognised that there are many other vital issues in international politics beyond the fight against terrorism. Obama promised change. Obama's speeches and published documents regarding US foreign policy reveal that his views differ from those of Bush (Obama 2006, 2007). According to Obama:

> "These threats demand a new vision of leadership in the twenty-first century—a vision that draws from the past but is not bound by outdated thinking. The Bush administration responded to the unconventional attacks of 9/11 with conventional thinking of the past, largely viewing problems as state-based and principally amenable to military solutions. It was this tragically misguided view that led us into a war in Iraq that never should have been authorized and never should have been waged. In the wake of Iraq and Abu Ghraib, the world has lost trust in our purposes and principles". (Obama 2007)

However, once elected, there was a gap between Obama's inspiring speeches and the reality of politics on the ground. Obama outlined the principles guiding American foreign policy through four key ideas (White House Archives n.d.). The priority of this policy was the security of the American people, although Obama rejected the view that the security of the US implied abdicating the values of freedom and democracy. The second idea was that the US would use all its means and power to achieve its foreign policy goals. However, for this to happen efficiently, these goals required a bipartisan support base in the US Senate. Third, while Obama acknowledged that there were situations where only the use of force would be valid, he stated that the US must first be prepared to engage in a policy of

dialogue and negotiation with its adversaries. Thus, Obama committed to the initiatives of "Renewing American Leadership" by "Pursuing Comprehensive Engagement" in addition to endeavouring to "Strengthen Institutions and Mechanisms for Cooperation" (USA 2010).

Obama's most important trait was his effort to redefine the American vision of the world and reposition the US as the leading power based on ideas adapted to the emerging challenges of the twenty-first century (Brzezinski 2012). Obama changed the way in which several problems were framed. He began by stating that Islam was not the enemy and that the GWT could not be the defining feature of the US's role in the world. This meant new thinking, abandoning the aggressive neo-Manichaean and neo-imperial unilateralism of US foreign policy.

Regarding the GWT, Obama advocated a significant reform. While his initiatives led to the development of a policy focused on combating terrorist networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the campaign against military insurrection in the territories controlled by the Taliban became a part of his strategy. Thus, the war in Afghanistan was framed as politically advantageous to help build stable states and societies rather than merely a military operation.

In Iraq, Obama defended a gradual strategy of withdrawing American troops. He planned to end the war responsibly, seeking to delegate Iraqi security efforts to Iraqis (White House Archives n.d.). However, this effort failed because of the root problem of viewing Iraq as a military rather than a political problem, leading to the US and the Iraqi governments' joint failure to promote policies of inclusion and stabilisation in the post-Saddam/Ba'ath regime.

In the Middle East, Obama committed to supporting democratic reforms to secure peace and work toward a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian problem. Under Obama, the US tried to be perceived as an impartial mediator to achieve a stable peace settlement between Israel and Palestine, although this effort did not prove very successful. In Iran, Obama introduced a new policy of negotiating with Tehran on its nuclear policy that created diplomatic openings to negotiate in other matters involving this regional pivot state.

In Latin America, Obama sought to restore US leadership through a mutually respectful relationship between North and South American states. Obama defended the development of a soft-power policy that respected the historical and cultural sensitivities of Latin American countries and stimulated a new strategic alliance for the Americas. In his words:

> "However, even more than interest, we are bound by shared values. In each other's journey, we see reflections of our own. Colonists who broke free from empires. Pioneers who opened new frontiers . . . This is our common history. This is a common heritage site. We are all Americans". (Obama 2011)

Finally, Obama recognised the need for the US to develop its contacts with Cuba, with the objective of normalising its relations with this neighbouring state.

Another key idea of the Obama presidency was the revitalisation of US alliances with Europe and Asia, and a closer connection to the Islamic world. The US attempted to resume a collegial transatlantic partnership with Europe and overcome distrust over the division between the "new" and the "old" Europe during the Iraq war.

Concerning Asia, Obama acknowledged the rise of its economic significance and championed a strategic alliance between emerging Asian markets and the US. China plays a unique role in this policy. Under Obama, the US attempted to establish a privileged relationship with China on major global issues. China was no longer seen as an economic partner, but rather, regarded as an important diplomatic actor (Acharya 2014).

Another special case concerns the relationship between the United States and Russia. Obama argued that it was necessary to change the traditional American view of Russia. He tried to deepen economic and political relations between the US and Russia and to abandon the old ideological bias of seeing Russia as a geopolitical enemy. However, during Obama's last term, US–Russia relations deteriorated considerably with Putin's growing assertion

of regional and counter-hegemonic power. At the end of Obama's last term, US–Russia relations were at their lowest level since the end of the Cold War.

Regarding nuclear policy, Obama advocated an active policy of reducing nuclear arsenals, starting with the US. More importantly, he urged world leaders to believe in the possibility of achieving a world free of nuclear weapons (Obama 2009). Finally, Obama's agenda addressed ecological issues and climate change. He tried to implement policies that linked energy security with more environmentally sustainable solutions.

All these ideas corroborate the perception that Obama had a sophisticated worldview and was better able to adjust to the new problems of the current international order. He acknowledged that traditional political movements of the hegemonic imposition of power, involving the use of force or economic sanctions to implement international policies and norms coercively, had become increasingly difficult without a strong backing of legitimacy to sustain US hegemony.

While it remains essential for states to develop traditional diplomacy among leaders, solutions to global problems must be backed by public diplomacy decisively involving civil societies and transnational movements, supplementing international social capital. Unlike Bush, Obama was aware of the dangers of a unilateral foreign policy and the importance of multilateralism and public diplomacy, as well as of the *legitimacy of the hegemon* to stabilise the international order.

Because of the importance of the political structure and the propensity for the continuity of public policies, Obama failed to discard all of Bush's policies because this was not practically possible. However, Obama showed that he could think strategically and see the forest, not just the trees. He had a sophisticated worldview based on the central idea of the role of the US in the leadership of a liberal international order (Ikenberry 2011).

Obama began his term with excess optimistic idealism that sometimes came to the fore and caused embarrassment—as demonstrated by the Syrian "red line" crisis. During his term, Obama tempered his liberal idealism with a pragmatic attitude. Rather than retraction from the global role of the US, Obama promoted a rational redefinition of US interventionist voluntarism. Learning from the lessons of history, Obama tried to correct the misguided military campaigns of Bush's GWT. Obama wanted the US to remain a leading power, while ensuring that its influence and projection of power should not follow a unilateral path contrary to international norms. In several critical situations, from Syria to Ukraine, Yemen to Iran, Obama chose to rely on drones, sanctions, and negotiations rather than traditional military actions.[4]

Regarding the Middle East, Obama concluded that the problems in this region were too complex to be solved through interventions of the great powers, however well-intentioned they may be (Rose 2015). The Obama administration abandoned bold and direct manoeuvres in favour of an indirect policy that was prudent in avoiding direct engagement with troops on the ground. However, this policy generated much criticism, especially from those nostalgic for the offensive movements and zero-sum game of the Cold War. Many even said that the US had abandoned a grand strategy for its foreign policy (Posen 2014), or worse, that Obama had chosen a foreign policy designed to produce American decline (Krauthammer 2009). These ideas resonated with Trump and assisted in the generation of his idea: "America First".

It must be noted that politics cannot always please Greeks and Trojans alike. Despite Obama's mistakes, such as the military withdrawal from Iraq without any guarantee of stability or the failure to use American power during the Arab Spring, at the end of the day, Obama had more victories than mistakes. For example, in Asia, through the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Obama was able to simultaneously implement two influential ideas: reinforcement of the development of the global economy and the consolidation of the demo-liberal order.

Through active and persistent diplomacy, Obama also managed to re-establish diplomatic relations with Iran and Cuba. Both cases involved a paradigm shift in the form of relationships with states formerly considered enemy states. He abandoned the straight-

forward policy of isolation and sanctions and shifted the foreign policy attitude toward diplomatic dialogue based on trade-offs. Obama believed that the critical aim for the US was to engage in dialogue and bring closed societies into contact with open societies, thus promoting the maintenance and expansion of the liberal international order. In this context, Obama trusted that in the long run, the strategy of promoting open societies would eventually reach Iran, Russia, and China.

However, such long-term strategies face significant difficulties, including the problem of reconciliation with short and dynamic internal political cycles and continuous and unpredictable changes in international politics. It can be pragmatically considered that until these closed societies become open, countries such as Iran, Russia, and China might adopt aggressive policies undermining the liberal international order. Although China has adopted the doctrine of "Peaceful Rise" (Zheng 2005; Kacowicz and Miller 2018), there are signs, albeit more modest than those in Russia, of anti-hegemonic movements.

While Obama was aware of the rights and duties of hegemony, his stance differed from his predecessor's, as he did not hold Manichean views, nor did he believe it was possible to impose democracy rapidly and through hard power, a contradiction in terms. Instead, Obama held a cosmopolitan, multilateral, and institutionalist worldview. Obama believed that the US should take the lead through multilateral cooperation, even if this represented limits and constraints on the ambitions of the hegemon's offensive power. Obama's statement in his last UN address expresses his belief:

> "We can only realize the promise of this institution's founding—to replace the ravages of war with cooperation—if powerful nations like my own accept constraints. Sometimes, I am criticized in my own country for professing a belief in international norms and multilateral institutions. However, I am convinced that in the long run, giving up some freedom of action—not giving up our ability to protect ourselves or pursue our core interests, but binding ourselves to international rules over the long term enhances our security. And I think that is not just true for us". (Obama 2016)

3.3. Donald Trump: Populist Neo-Nationalism and the Erosion of the Liberal Order

3.3.1. The Deconstruction of the Multilateral Vision and the Contradictions of America First

As an outsider to the political system, Trump became an accidental leader who, due to his popularity as a businessman and television star, managed to capture countless followers. His inflammatory rhetoric, which blended misleading facts, emotional appeals, and oversimplified ideas, showcased a populist disdain for elites that resonated with many Americans (Lee 2016). In addition to his populist leadership style (Thiers and Wehner 2022; Schneiker 2020) and effective communication strategy, Trump aligned himself with the populist and conservative tendencies of the far-right wing of the Republican Party (Bernhard and O'Neill 2019).

At the end of the day, Trump was an opportunistic leader who capitalised on a time of relative decline in the US. He was able to tap into the nationalist discontent of more conservative Americans and use it to his advantage, including not only the traditional ideological conservatives linked to Jacksonian populism and the Tea Party (Mead 2017; Clarke and Ricketts 2017) but also middle- and lower-class Americans who have felt the impact of the side-lining of the US's role as an industrial power due to accelerated economic globalisation and the emergence of China as an industrial power.

Their views on international politics and the United States' role in leading the international order were unsophisticated and rooted in simplistic notions associated with ultraconservative nationalist narratives. Trump advocated for a return to neo-nationalist isolationism, dismantling Obama's foreign policy of attempting to regain international hegemonic leadership. Trump was the first US president after World War II to question the utility of the liberal order that had been established and maintained by American hegemonic leadership (Stokes 2018).

This questioning of the liberal order resulted from his simplistic understanding of the cost–benefit ratio involved in maintaining the political, normative, and security structures of the liberal order. In his view, the US had no benefit from continuing to lead this order. The liberal order benefited other states, particularly the United States' longstanding allies, but it was detrimental to American interests. According to Trump, for America to become "great again", it must free itself from the constraints of the multilateral options offered by the liberal order (USA 2017). As he argued in his inaugural speech,

> "For many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry; Subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military; We've defended other nation's borders while refusing to defend our own; And spent trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay. We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon. (. . .) The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed across the entire world. But that is the past. And now we are looking only to the future. (. . .) From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this moment on, it's going to be America First". (Trump 2017)

During Trump's presidency, there was a tendency to undermine liberal democratic ideas, practices, and values. This was evident in the shift away from the strategic principle of prioritising democratic allies over non-democratic actors. The major international agreements of the Obama administration, which included economic partnerships with Asia and Europe, global pacts, and various multilateral and bilateral agreements, have either been questioned or abandoned. From Trump's perspective, these agreements were detrimental to the United States because they did not prioritise American interests. His focus was on an accounting balance sheet that highlighted cost-sharing within defence alliances (NAT0). This nationalist vision may have been appealing to its domestic electoral base, but from the perspective of the liberal order's hegemonic leadership, it represented a regression to a time when the United States lacked the capacity to lead the international order. Herein lies the main contradiction of the "America First" vision.

By advocating for a policy of returning to a past where the United States did not have international leadership responsibilities, Trump demonstrates a defensive move that reflects the challenges the US faces in assuming its role as a global hegemon. On the other hand, his nationalist vision of "America first" is incompatible with the idea of providing stabilising hegemonic leadership. In this type of leadership, the consent of all other actors is present because they recognise the benefits that come with it. This is based on the logic of interdependent reciprocity, rather than on nationalism.

Due to his ideological bias against the multilateral liberal order, Trump never seemed to fully grasp the challenges of international hegemonic leadership. Thus, Trump chose not to take on that responsibility, not least because the narrative of an anti-liberal order was necessary to appeal to his populist electoral base. Thus, whether out of nationalist conviction or as a populist strategy for domestic political survival, Trump pursued a foreign policy that dismantled several normative ideas and practices of the liberal order (Wojczewski 2020).

Finally, it should be emphasised that the social capital of American leadership has reached its lowest level. According to a 2018 Pew survey that covered 25 countries, 70 percent of those countries expressed "no confidence" in Trump. Additionally, 70 percent of the countries surveyed believed that the US does not consider the interests of other countries, either "not too much/not at all" (Wike et al. 2018). Another example is the Soft Power Index (Soft Power Index 2019), which ranks countries based on their ability to attract and persuade others through cultural, political, and economic means. According to the index, the US dropped from first place in 2016 to fifth place in 2019.

Unlike the anti-Americanism during the Bush era, which primarily questioned the neo-imperialist foreign policy decisions, the current criticism under Trump's administration is

focused on the fundamental role of American democracy itself. The symbolic power of the leadership of the demo-liberal Western model has been undermined by Trump's ideas and actions. This began with his abandonment of promoting the expansion of the democratic model, followed by his close relations with authoritarian and populist ultraconservative regimes, and culminated in the US's withdrawal from global pacts and the erosion of multilateralism. Even at the domestic level, the quality of democracy in the US is declining. According to Freedom House (2019), President Trump "deviated from established norms of ethics and transparency, verbally attacked crucial democratic institutions such as the news media and the judiciary and made inflammatory and often inaccurate statements on a wide range of issues".

The social capital of the United States, as an example and leader of the liberal order, has been damaged not only in the Global South but also in the Global North. EU and G7 leaders have been critical of its confrontational, populist, and nationalist vision and leadership style. The most symbolic example of the decline of US social capital under Trump manifested in his 2018 UN speech, when Trump stated at the beginning of his speech:

> "Today, I stand before the United Nations General Assembly to share the extraordinary progress we've made. In less than two years, my administration has accomplished more than almost any administration in the history of our country". (Trump 2018)

The diplomats and leaders present at the General Assembly reacted spontaneously to this statement, bursting out laughing. This unprecedented moment, in which a North American president delivers a speech at the UN, reflects the damage that Trump has inflicted upon the international image of the US.

3.3.2. A Chaotic and Nationalist Foreign Policy

Trump has rejected Obama's ideas, branding the foreign policy of both Obama and Hillary Clinton as "a complete and total disaster", with "no vision", "no purpose", and "no direction" (Trump 2016). Interestingly, these were several of the ideas by which many analysts characterised Trump's foreign policy doctrine, also described as "chaotic" (Jervis et al. 2018), "incoherent" (Deyermond 2023), "imprudent", and "incompetent" (Drezner 2020). The inquiry into the existence of a Trump doctrine or a coherent conceptual framework guiding Trump's foreign policy has been a subject of debate (Friedman and Zenko 2017; Ettinger 2020; Bentley and David 2021).

On 21 October 2020, a report prepared for the use of the Committee on Foreign Relations in the US Senate affirmed:

> "President Trump's foreign policy has been marked by chaos, neglect, and diplomatic failures. Former Trump administration officials admit the President's impulsive, erratic approach has tarnished the reputation of the United States as a reliable partner and led to disarray in dealing with foreign governments". (USA 2020)

This is also why Trump was considered an irrational decision-maker (Walt 2017), as he introduced an erratic direction to US foreign policy that challenged the traditional hegemonic role of the liberal order. This was evident in the major challenges facing global governance and the diminishing role of the United States in multilateral normative regulation. Under Trump's leadership, the United States withdrew from several multilateral agreements, including the Paris Climate Agreement, the Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) aimed at controlling Iran's nuclear program, and the Human Rights Council. Additionally, the Trump administration has threatened to withdraw from the World Health Organization (WHO) (Haass 2020). Beyond the symbolic significance of the USA's withdrawal from the Paris agreement, what is more relevant is that Trump holds contradictory ideas about climate change and has denied the existence of an environmental threat (BBC 2020).

The Trump administration believed that the biggest challenge for the United States was to contain China's global emergence, as stated in the 2017 National Security Strategy (USA 2017). However, its confrontational stance and excessive emphasis on economic factors were not effective. At the end of the day, the initiation of a trade war with China did not yield the intended results (Shan 2019). The traditional approach of confrontation and attempting to impose sanctions hierarchically has only contributed to the instability of the liberal order. As a Chinese diplomat, Wang Yi claims: "United States is broadly engaged in unilateralism and protectionism and is damaging multilateralism and the multilateral trading system. It has already become the world's biggest destabilizing factor" (Reuters Staff 2019). Unlike Obama, who aimed to socialise China into the liberal order, Trump's confrontational strategy has accelerated China's pursuit of autonomy and its criticism of US hegemony.

Trump's decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) eroded US influence in the Asia Pacific region. By reversing the strategic idea of partnering with the Asia Pacific, he has squandered an opportunity to socialise this region into the liberal order and counter China's alternative hegemonic vision. On the other hand, Trump's failure to address human rights violations in Xinjiang and Hong Kong undermines the US's leadership role in promoting liberal values. Trump has struggled to adapt to China's economic emergence and to recognise that US leadership must be framed not only in economic terms, but also in ideational, normative, and symbolic terms, such as promoting democracy, freedom, human rights, and international norms.

With North Korea, Trump experimented with a new strategy: direct diplomacy with Kim Jong Un. Regarding the North Korean dictator, Trump said, "we fell in love"(BBC 2018). Despite this romance, there has been no reduction in North Korea's nuclear missile threat. Despite the novelty of a bilateral summit between their leaders, attempts to limit North Korea's nuclear policy have been fruitless.

In his dealings with Russia, Trump attempted a new reorientation and placed a bet on a privileged relationship with Putin. However, he downplayed the ideational and normative aspects, failing to assertively criticise Russia's neo-imperialist enforcement policy towards its neighbours. This policy includes reprehensible practices such as the poisonings of Sergei Skripal and Alexei Navalny, Russian support for Assad's brutality in Syria, and Russian intervention in the 2016 and 2020 US elections. However, the Trump administration continued Obama's initiatives to contain Russia, including imposing sanctions and making the unprecedented decision to provide lethal assistance to Ukraine. This decision was undermined by Trump's illegal pressure on Zelensky, which resulted in damage to Trump's reputation and strained relations with Ukraine (Walt 2021).

Regarding the Middle East, there have been several changes and reforms. Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, promising to secure a better agreement and reduce Iranian influence in the region. Apparently, there was a larger goal: to change the regime. In practice, Iran continued to enrich uranium, and neither of the goals was achieved. In the fight against the Islamic State, Trump continued the US-led military operation that was launched in 2014. In the Syrian war, Trump demonstrated tactical speed but strategic inconsistency. He threatened to use force to stop Assad's atrocities and launched missile strikes in response to Assad's chemical weapons attacks. However, in the end, he withdrew US troops from Syria without achieving significant results, which ultimately led to the resignation of Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis (Seligman 2018).

A significant development in the region during Trump's presidency was the agreement between the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Israel. This marked the first time that these countries established normal diplomatic relations with Israel. However, these agreements were not accompanied by a comprehensive vision for the Middle East. In practice, these agreements have not had a positive influence on the conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Lebanon. Furthermore, they have failed to address the underlying structural issues preventing Israeli–Palestinian peace. Trump's endorsement of conservative Israeli stances,

including relocating the capital to Jerusalem, hindered the idea of the US acting as an unbiased mediator in the conflict (Foreign Affairs 2021).

Regarding Latin America, Trump has dismantled the policy of gradual reconciliation and trade integration between the countries in the region. The most obvious sign of the region's alienation and discomfort with Trump arises from his anti-immigration policies and his preference for building walls instead of bridges to connect with the region. There was one exception, and that was Brazil. An exceptional ideological and political rapprochement was achieved with Bolsonaro here. The two populist leaders aligned their strategies with the objective of undermining socialist regimes, particularly those in Cuba and Venezuela. However, their confrontational approach and harsh measures towards refugees have eroded the United States' social capital in the region. In the end, Mexico did not pay for the border wall. The attempt to overthrow the Venezuelan regime has failed, and the new restrictive policy towards Cuba has also failed to bring about democratic change.

Regarding the transatlantic alliance with Europe, President Trump expressed the most disdain for NATO of any US president since its founding in 1949. This has resulted in increased tension between the United States and several NATO members. As a result, President Trump's relationship with European leaders has become strained. Although the target of investing 2% of GDP in NATO by European states was set by Obama in 2014, it was Trump who insisted on this demand to European partners. This policy made sense; however, Trump's populist and confrontational style were detrimental to strengthening the political partnership with Europe, which reached one of its lowest levels (Aggestam and Hyde-Price 2019).

In the end, Trump's leadership and his populist and nationalist ideas resulted in several changes in US foreign policy. His parochial and anti-globalist worldview, coupled with his populist and confrontational approach, have weakened multilateralism, and eroded the foundations of the liberal order. Trump characterised himself as someone who reacts quickly and aggressively, attempting to leverage his unpredictability and the strengthening of US military power, which was one of his accomplishments (USA 2017; Walt 2021). However, when confronted with complex and worldwide circumstances, he lacked the ability to adapt and make informed decisions. The most striking example of this incapacity was his response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Domestically, this inability resulted in over 200,000 deaths (Abutaleb and Paletta 2021). At the global level, Trump failed to lead the US in the multilateral effort to combat the pandemic. This weak response by Trump has also contributed to the decline of the United States' social capital and hegemonic leadership.

4. Conclusions

In foreign policy, three relevant and interrelated conditions enable changes. The first is changes in the structure of international order in terms of hierarchical and ideational normative power. The second is changes in leadership and the consequent cultural images and worldviews of foreign policymakers. The third is the occurrence of crises that provoke political shocks and provides exceptional justification for foreign policy alteration. Thus, reorientations and changes in US foreign policy are explained by transformations in the international order, leaders' capacity to adapt and enhance the hegemon's symbolic power, and the unpredictability of socio-political crises.

In addition to these three conditions, we must consider two other relational contextual conditions. First, periods of hegemonic transition and ideational and normative contestation of international leadership encourage and accelerate the emergence of crises. Second, new and unpredictable socio-political shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or unexpected wars, have no anticipated solution plans, thus enabling rapid changes and bold decisions, which implies increased uncertainty, misperceptions, and mistakes.

Concerning the cultural images and hegemonic leadership styles of Bush, Obama, and Trump, we draw some conclusions. Bush changed the orientation of US foreign policy and adopted a unilateral hegemonic leadership. With the GWT, his leadership style was neo-

imperial and reflected the unipolar moment. However, his neo-conservative ideas based on unliteral hard-power international interventions and Manichean worldview compromised the US's role as a benign and stabilising hegemon.

Obama reverted the neo-imperial approach of Bush and the anti-Americanism. His leadership style was more sophisticated, pragmatic, and multilateral. Obama's agenda was broader, less unilateral, more focused on specific problems, and less grounded in rigid geopolitical and ideological preconceptions. Obama better understood the paradox of US power (Nye 2002), the emergence of a hybrid multipolar order, and that US hegemony, despite its powerful position, should comply with multilateralism and international law, since they are irreplaceable instruments to legitimise the use of hard power.

The Trump administration represented a new and hazardous way of conducting international politics. Leaders and decision-makers with unsophisticated worldviews tend to introduce unnecessary risks to international order. If Obama represented a change and reversed some of Bush's policies, Trump advocated a true Copernican revolution in American foreign policy, which had impacts on US international leadership. Unlike Bush, who despite acting unilaterally, was aware of the importance of American hegemony in the construction of the liberal order, Trump was the first post-war US president to question the usefulness of the liberal order constructed by American hegemonic leadership since then.

Leaders matter; however, the constraints of structure and its impact on agency cannot be ignored. Political leaders face structural constraints that limit their political will and restrict their ability to implement policy. Therefore, the messianic visions of a leader should be understated. Even with sophisticated leaders, the possibility of war will not disappear, and the tragic unpredictability of a new political shock is ever-present. We must assume complex and unpredictable conditions in international politics. Changes are impossible to predict or control. History does not obey the rules of efficiency (March and Olsen 1998), and political shocks can occur at any time. Contrary to what many people think, change is the only constant in international politics. In the space of twenty-five years, the United States experienced a unipolar moment with a consented hegemonic leadership, a neo-imperial moment when its leadership began to be contested, and an illiberal neo-nationalist moment that translated into worsening of the conditions of symbolic power and social capital for continuing to play a role in international leadership.

Nevertheless, leadership's capacity to promote prudent and multilateral responses to global crises enhances the chance of the US maintaining the role of a stabilising hegemon. However, the American presidents must be aware of the dynamics of the new multiplex order, and the importance of not deteriorating the US's symbolic power and its social capital, particularly in the Global North, but also in the Global South. If leaders persistently fall into the cognitive dissonance trap and cannot adapt their ideas and doctrines to the dynamic and unpredictable process of international politics, then any hard-power decisions will impair the legitimacy of the hegemon.

Another dimension crucial to maintaining the symbolic power of a consented hegemonic leadership is adopting accommodative and multilateral policies, not confrontational and unliteral policies. The confrontational strategies of Bush and Trump were decisive factors of anti-Americanism and the decline of the social capital of the American hegemony.

Finally, the traditional economic correlation between power and material capabilities is inadequate in fully understanding the present condition of hegemonic leadership. The United States remains the predominant global superpower. Nevertheless, this is not enough for the US to assume a leadership role in the world. The US did not erode its position of benign hegemony due to its failure to implement hard power. The real problem was the loss of symbolic power and the growing global agreement that the legitimacy of the leader–follower dynamic, which relies on the hegemon leader's social capital, is jeopardised by the unilateral policies and parochial leaders of the United States.[5]

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Notes

[1] We introduce the concept of cultural images to operationalise the connection between identity, ideas, and behaviour in foreign policy. On the one hand, cultural images are ideas and beliefs that shape the perceptions of decision-makers and construct their worldviews, ultimately influencing their behaviour. On the other hand, they (re)produce habits, practices, and historical discourse that influence the decision-makers' guidelines and actions in foreign policy. Cultural images reflect the identity and political culture of the actors and function as ideational roadmaps that decision-makers use to interpret reality and legitimise their options (Mendes 2018, 2020b).

[2] For an inside view of US foreign policy formulation, particularly the influence of Congress and the impact of ideological polarisation, see (Carter and Scott 2021).

[3] Another aspect of this new context is the emergence of regional powers. The dynamics of hegemonic transition seem to favour the emergence of regional powers (Destradi 2010; Georgios Maris et al. 2022).

[4] Obama refused to recognise Russian intrusion into Ukraine's sovereignty as legitimate but did not escalate to a military option with unpredictable and risky consequences.

[5] Biden understands this problem and is attempting to regain international hegemonic leadership, especially in the global north. In this way, the current US presidency confirms the arguments of this article. First, there has been a change with the replacement of Trump, both in terms of foreign policy ideas and practises and in terms of international perceptions of the role of the US as the leading hegemonic power in the liberal order. Second, the political shock of the war in Ukraine posed challenges and opportunities for the US to reaffirm its symbolic power and social capital as a consenting liberal hegemonic power. Third, this relative hegemonic reassertion has not been unanimous, and there are still challenges regarding the future and leadership of the international liberal order, as well as questions about possible transitions of power and hegemonic leadership in the international order (Lake 2020; Lake et al. 2021; Flockhart and Korosteleva 2022).

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