

## THE US POWER PROJECTION IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE: POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Alexey A. DAVYDOV<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The article analyses the US policies in the post-Soviet space as an example of how a great power can stimulate specific political order in a region. The author states that the US strategic framework in this space does not contradict the deterrence imperatives towards the USSR. Depending on its short-term goals in relations with Russia, US foreign policy follows a seven- or eight-year cycle of stimulation of the decentralisation processes in the region. After the dissolution of the USSR, the first clear manifestation of differences between Moscow and Washington, which occurred in 1999, was followed by three waves of tensions in 2007, 2014, and 2022. In all four cases, the US raised its strategic attention towards other former Soviet republics. In each sub-region of this space, the US applies different sets of practices that would be most efficient and suitable for each country in fulfilling current American political imperatives. Throughout the last three decades, the United States demonstrated an effective usage of different sets of “carrot and stick” political approaches, mostly carried out via ideological, economic, military, diplomatic, and multilateral foreign political means, both towards these post-Soviet states and Russia. In each state of the post-Soviet space, Washington applied a unique set of political practices and tactics, often following the same goal of undermining Moscow’s power and stimulating decentralisation processes among the former Soviet republics.

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Research Fellow, Centre for North American Studies, Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations, the Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO), Moscow, Russian Federation. E-mail: [adavydov@imemo.ru](mailto:adavydov@imemo.ru), <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8899-8746>.

## Introduction

The modern evolution of international relations, without exaggeration, presents an exclusive opportunity for any research fellow to study the unveiling trends of social development. On the one hand, recent decades of technological progress and globalisation created unprecedented economic and people-to-people interconnectivity and mutual impact of different cultures. At the same time, these revolutionary trends did not diminish the influence of fundamental factors that determine the nature of international relations. A visual example of that is the great power competition, which determines the logic of the behaviour of other international actors. Both major and smaller countries are trying to configure the surrounding system to satisfy the imperatives of their national development. Having such instinct in its strategical thinking, any state at a specific level of its national power starts to have hegemonic ambitions.

One relationship, systemically significant for the world's development, is that between Russia and the United States. Their internal bilateral logic is determined by their historical and structural complexity and has a significant constitutional effect on interstate relations in the European and Eurasian political spaces. For the last century, Moscow and Washington's strategists were the most influential architects of the modern forms of multilateral dialogue in European civilisation, which had, in some regard, an inclusive institutional framework but mostly an exclusive and competitive one.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union had a dramatic effect on the further evolution of this architecture. The 30-year period, which followed after left-wing political forces had lost their international positions, shifted this competition to the territory of what used to be the core of the so-called World Socialist System - the territory of the former Soviet republics. This three-decade-long history of the US-Russia rivalry over the structural foundations of this new political space presents a unique example of how specific foreign policy practices may determine the infrastructure of international hierarchy.

In this regard, a matter of particular interest is the related practices of the United States. As the only superpower after the Cold War competition, Washington has accumulated national might of such scale that it reached a system-forming effect on world affairs. Therefore, the analysis of the US's experience of projecting its dominance in the post-Soviet space may provide us with an insightful view of possible international trends that are yet to come, for example, regarding both the bilateral US-China rivalry and their international projects of world order platforms (the Western rules-based liberal order and the Chinese community of common destiny) or the US-Russia competition regarding the security architecture in Europe that would be formed after the Ukrainian conflict. The evolution of the US strategy has seen drastic changes in

the last decades. The triumphalism that captured the minds of Washington's political elites after the end of the Cold War led to dramatic outcomes for the whole world's development. What started 30 years ago as a global policy of engagement and involvement in multilateral economic and political cooperation, driven by the ideas of building a better future in a new liberal international world order and achieving a strong democratic peace among all nations and peoples, has now evolved into a great power competition driven mostly by self-interest.

The existing economic limits of resources for national development and the looming perspective of the relative decline of the US's role in economic and high-tech development in the world fuelled the antagonisation of relations between the US and Russia on the one side and China on the other. The fight for structuring the most beneficial economic, political, and security ties or undermining those of your competitor has become a universal feature of international relations in almost every region of the world. In this new harsh strategic philosophy, the US sees all post-Soviet states as a ground for great power competition, first with Russia and, on a smaller scale, indirectly with China. Common historical, economic, and political backgrounds and deep social and cultural ties between former Union republics are often seen by Washington as prerequisites for the resurrection of the Cold War threats. Therefore, by strengthening, manipulating, or undermining bilateral and multilateral institutions, the United States tries to stimulate the preferable development of trends in the region. This leads to the main research question: What methods does the United States use to steer countries' behaviour in a specific direction? The wide variety of practices presents fertile ground for studying them to formulate incentive patterns in US foreign policy. This paper is based on a comparative analysis of systemic trends that determine the US strategic imperatives towards Russia and three sub-regions after the dissolution of the Soviet Union: Western Eurasia (Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova), the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan). The logic of this case study will be focused on three questions. What conditions served as a mobilising force for coining US strategies in these sub-regions? What was the general essence of each of these strategies? What were the most essential practical measures to achieve their goals?

### **Genesis of a Strategy for the Post-Soviet Space**

The strategic framework of the United States officials and senior political analysts has never included a macro-compositional logic towards the peoples and countries that lived on the vast territory of the former Russian and Soviet

Empires. At the same time, during most of their existence, Washington never articulated verbal support for internal separatism or seriously exploited the formal status of the Soviet republics as independent states to stimulate their sovereignty or secession (Shtromas 1978; Motyl 1982; Miazga 2019). US politicians formulated a mission of liberating Ukrainians, Armenians, and peoples from the Baltic states and Central and Eastern Europe from communist captivity only on the internal national level (Republican Party 1964), which has never transferred into an official position in favour of Soviet disintegration. Until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, US strategists were mainly focused on working the odds in the major world of socialist countries, starting with exploiting Sino-Soviet differences (Radchenko 2019), covertly supporting the antigovernmental movements in the Eastern European bloc (Domber 2019, 115-136), or undermining Soviet positions in the third world countries. Thus, in dealing with the Soviet space, Washington was mostly focused on considering Moscow as the main party to talk to while undermining its positions in the broader world of socialist and socialist-leaning countries.

The fall of the USSR in December 1991 led to a significant gap, almost a vacuum, in the long-term strategic thinking of the United States towards the newly created international field. The highly structuralised strategy of containment towards the Soviet Union, which concentrated a significant part of the US military, economic, and intellectual might, did not imply a detailed approach towards a political space composed of former Union republics. The containment approach was not designed to have within itself a compositional substitution for structuring inter-state relations of new international actors (Gati 1974). The speed of internal Soviet dissolution (Kramer 2022) created a situation when the United States was unprepared to manage a completely different regional environment in the long run, which led to a great number of spontaneous and ad hoc actions. In the first half of the 1990s, the United States continued to view the post-Soviet space in a Russia-centred (or even better, Moscow-centred) logical framework, concentrated on reforming the core of the former socialist system by supporting economic and political liberalisation in Eastern Europe and Eurasia.

The first and foremost question was of a security nature. The White House supported the centralisation of all Soviet strategic weapons under one country. For that reason, the nuclear weapons arsenal of Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus was re-dislocated to the Russian Federation, which inherited the Soviet membership in the Security Council of the United Nations (White House 1993, 19). Moreover, the issue of the internal transformation of Russia from a socialist into a democratic country with a market economy was also designed to serve long-term security goals. The Clinton administration stood on Yeltsin's side both in the 1993 constitutional crisis (Marcus 1993) and in the 1996 troubled

presidential elections (Shimer 2020) to eradicate the fertile ground of communist revanche. This approach eventually gave significant fruits in the process of denuclearisation in Eurasia, demilitarisation of conventional forces in Europe, and engagement of Russia in the Western-centred institutions like the NATO-Russia Council, the Council of Europe, and the Group of Seven, later renamed the Group of Eight (Bouchet 2015, 83).

Despite Washington's verbal support for Russia's democratisation and liberalisation, the country did not invest substantial efforts in real internal society transformation from a long-term perspective. For example, the amount of economic development aid provided by the United States to former republics of the Soviet Union from 1992 to 1997 made up \$12.4 bn (in 2022 constant prices), which consisted of less than 10% of all US foreign aid at this period and was 20 times lower than the assistance given for Europe's post-war reconstruction from 1947 to 1952 (ForeignAssistance.gov). A similar trend can be seen in the commodity turnover that by 1997 reached \$9.8 bn, or 0.63% of global US trade (US Census Bureau n.d.), and US direct investments in the post-Soviet countries during the same year were \$3.5 bn, or 0.41% of US investments globally (BEA n.d.). Nevertheless, until the end of the 1990s, the official logic of engagement and cooperation between Russia and the United States was the constituting line of the whole US vision. Although the scale of economic cooperation reflected low US strategic interest in increasing its presence in the Eurasian market, Russia had been the main beneficiary in the development of bilateral economic ties: in 1997, Russia received 56% of all aid delivered to the former Soviet republics, 78% of trade, and 39% of investments. Even the US provision of financial aid to Chechen separatists (Clinton 1995) and differences over Bosnia (Erlanger 1994) had no fundamental effect on the US-Russia rapprochement. Many even categorised the whole strategy dealing with the post-Soviet space as mostly a "Russia first" strategy since stimulating a Yugoslavia-like decentralisation scenario was mainly considered catastrophic (Talbot 2000, 155).

The main stumbling block in bilateral relations became the issue of NATO expansion, which had largely determined the whole subsequent logic of the US strategy in Eurasia. The factual end of the Cold War competition did not eradicate what may be the most significant consequence in the long term—a zero-sum logical framework. The dissolution of the Soviet Pole could not stop the inertia of the bipolar thinking model and automatically led to a reaction of the US political elites to support its unilateral expansion (Krauthammer 1990). Right from the start of the new era, the first US National Security Strategy directly stated NATO's mission to play a central role in filling the macro-regional organisational vacuum of the post-Cold War order in Europe (White House 1994, 21-22).

Washington's establishment overtly formulated the limits of Russian activities in the new realities. In his 1994 State of the Union address, President W. Clinton stated that the United States "... will seek to cooperate with Russia to solve regional problems, while insisting that if Russian troops operate in neighbouring states, they do so only when those states agree to their presence and in strict accord with international standards" (Clinton 1994). The Republican opposition in Congress articulated its views with the same logic: "...Our foreign policy towards Russia should put American interests first and consolidate our Cold War victory in Europe. We have a national interest in a security relationship with a democratic Russia. Specifically, we will encourage Russia to respect the sovereignty and independence of its neighbours; support a special security arrangement between Russia and NATO—but not Moscow's veto over NATO enlargement..." (Republican Party 1996).

The issue of NATO admission of the former Warsaw Pact members and Soviet Union republics was highly sensible for Moscow. George F. Kennan rightfully pointed out that such a move could trigger a strong militaristic reaction, therefore undermining the long-term American interest of pacifying Russia (Kennan 1997). To address these concerns, a specific compromise was formulated in the NATO-Russia Founding Act in 1997. At that moment, it presented the highest point of Russian-American dialogue over the new security architecture in Europe. The Act established a permanently working NATO-Russia Council—a mechanism for joint policy coordination, information exchange, and peaceful settling of disputes. Moreover, while it directly said that Russia had no veto over NATO's internal affairs, the Act also prescribed not to proliferate nuclear arsenals and not to establish additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces on the territory of new NATO members (US Department of State 1997).

The turning point came in March 1999. The acceptance of the former Comecon and Warsaw Pact members Hungary, Poland, and Czechia into NATO on March 12 and the almost simultaneous bombing of Belgrade two weeks later triggered substantial changes in the US strategy in the post-Soviet space. Looking at this sequence of events through the Cold War's symbolic lenses, it was the first act of decomposition of the former Moscow-centred political field in the new era, in which Washington-centred institutions deliberately turned former socialist countries against each other. It led to the gradual antagonisation of US-Russia relations and significantly increased the level of distrust later.

Traditionally, the annually updated strategic documents under the Clinton administration, while referring to the post-Soviet space, were mostly focused on Russia-centred issues. From 1993 to 1998, Belarus and Kazakhstan were only mentioned in the context of arms control, nuclear non-proliferation, and disarmament, while all other countries (besides Ukraine) were not mentioned.

Ukraine was the second state after Russia that presented vital interest for the United States, not only in security issues of strategic stability but also in its internal democratic and market transformation. Since 1997, Ukraine has been as important as Russia in developing a partnership with NATO and being integrated into the new post-Cold War European security order. Nevertheless, American cooperation with other than Russia's newly independent states (NIS) did not serve any strategic framework or goal on any comparable level. However, Moscow's major dissatisfaction with the US policies over Yugoslavia and NATO expansion significantly shifted Washington's strategic thinking. The 1999 National Security Strategy contained criticism of Russia's practices in dealing with Chechen separatists and terrorists. "The conflict in Chechnya represents a major problem in Russia's post-Communist development and relationship with the international community; the means Russia is pursuing in Chechnya are undermining its legitimate objective of upholding its territorial integrity and protecting citizens from terrorism and lawlessness". Moreover, for the first time, the NSS formulated clear imperatives and significantly broadened the agenda towards other NIS. The Clinton administration directly stated its concern regarding the withdrawal of Russian forces from Moldova and Georgia under the Conventional Armed Forces Treaty. It also stated Washington's interest in supporting Moldovan, Armenian, Georgian, Kyrgyz, Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, and Ukrainian admission to the World Trade Organisation and in developing Caspian energy resources in a partnership with Azerbaijan, Turkey, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan (White House 1999). And although it would be an exaggeration to characterise the 1999 NSS as anti-Russian, it clearly showed the first non-Russian-centred approach to building relations with post-Soviet states.

### **Transitional Phase of the Post-Soviet Strategy: Neither Friends nor Foes**

At the beginning of the XXI century, the post-Soviet space presented peripheral strategic significance for the United States. After the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Washington concentrated almost all its attention towards the global fight against international terrorism: the military operations in Afghanistan and then in Iraq and democracy promotion policies were of prime interest. Russia tried to use this major US geopolitical challenge to readjust bilateral relations. President Putin was the first foreign leader to express solidarity with his American colleague, portraying Russia's war in Chechnya as part of the same fight against terror (Kremlin 2001). Moreover, Russia brought several trust-building measures to demonstrate its readiness for security cooperation. Those measures included the withdrawal of Russian troops from

Vietnam and Cuba (Putin 2001) and facilitation to build US bases in Central Asia (Nixey 2021). Despite Moscow's objections, the G.W. Bush administration unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in December 2001, clearly pointing out the inequality of the partnership. On the formal level, the White House under Republicans presented its relations with Moscow as being of a strategic nature, praising the process of democratic transition, cooperation on issues of mutual interest like the fight against terrorism, and continuing arms reduction, which were led under the newly signed Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) of May 2002. However, episodes of ignoring Russia's voice would be seen as symptomatic in the further evolution of bilateral relations concerning the building of a new security architecture in Europe or on a global scale.

Slowly but steadily, the United States was developing its bilateral ties with all former Soviet republics. The White House, under Republicans, tripled US mutual trade with these states (from \$11.5bn in 2001 to \$35.9bn in 2007) (US Census Bureau n.d.), almost tripled its direct investments in them (from \$7.5bn to \$21.5bn) (BEA n.d.), and almost doubled economic assistance (from \$1.4bn to \$2.73bn) (ForeignAssistance.gov). Moreover, while still being in absolute numbers, i.e., fewer than one per cent of the US's trade and investments worldwide, the growth of economic cooperation with the region rose faster than the world's average pace. All this cooperation was developing in the framework of a previously articulated strategy of democracy enlargement and engagement, not having a substantive upgrade or sub-regional planning detailing and involvement. Russia viewed US policies in the region as practical attempts to transform the architecture of international relations in the post-Soviet space as a part of a larger strategy to impose a new order in Europe and globally. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, another wave of NATO's expansion in the Baltic and Eastern Europe in 2004, a series of colour revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), rhetorically and partly financially supported by the US, and mil-to-mil US cooperation with Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia, and Azerbaijan (Woods 2008) were clear examples of these. In addition, increased criticism over the state of democracy in Russia and in key US strategic documents (White House 2006, 2) has only solidified Moscow's fear of being consciously encircled by either pro-Western regimes or conflict zones (Mitchell 2012, 92-100).

The accumulated Moscow's discontent with the developing state of relations was eventually directly formulated in Vladimir Putin's speech in Munich in February 2007 (Putin 2007). Regarding its consequences, the speech became a turning point in the evolution of the US's perception of Russia, initially perceived as a difficult but non-threatening partner and later seen as a stumbling block in Washington's global ambitions (US Department of State



2007). Nevertheless, the United States was heavily involved in two military campaigns at that moment. The G.W. Bush administration initiated a reorientation of its troops from Iraq to Afghanistan (Belasco 2009). It made additional efforts to secure the results of its policies in the Greater Middle East for the longer term (Davydov 2022, 344-365). Moreover, a dramatic decline in relations with Moscow could potentially undermine the bilateral dialogue on strategic stability and leave the prospects of substituting the SORT with a new arms reduction treaty vague. Therefore, Washington decided not to invest heavily in the escalation of the war in Georgia in 2008 (Suchkov 2014) nor in supporting the pro-Western political forces of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (Markedonov et al. 2020).

Instead, the new administration of Democrats took a lighter confrontational tone in its rhetoric towards Russia while gradually reorienting towards developing bilateral ties with its neighbours. The first initial vision of B. Obama's White House on Russia remarkably contrasted with how the previous administration presented it in its final years. For example, while George Bush, in his final State of the Union in 2008, concentrated on criticising Russian and Belarussian democracies and praising revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine (Bush 2008), Barack Obama did not even mention post-Soviet states in his first address before Congress (Obama 2009). Democrats continued in the same line their Republican colleagues formulated their position towards Russia and the post-Soviet space in the National Security Strategy in their first term in the White House. While the NSS of 2000 and the NSS of 2006 were criticising Russia and supporting its neighbours, their successive NSS of 2002 and the NSS of 2010, did not mention the former Soviet republics and even drew a bright prospect for cooperation with Moscow (White House 2010, 44).

The White House, under Democrats, proposed a "reset" in Russian-American relations to harmonise them. Just like at the beginning of the Bush administration (Bush 2002), such a positive approach from Washington led to new progress over several traditionally discussed topics. Unsurprisingly, the primary interest of the Medvedev and Obama administrations was the signing of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in 2010 (New START). Both parties made significant progress cooperating in the Afghan war: Russia made available not only its airspace but also its territory for the transfer of NATO's troops and weapons (Baker, 2009) and did not object to a dramatic increase in US troop deployment in Kyrgyzstan. Russia even became the second largest exporter of weapons to Afghanistan after the US. According to SIPRI, the quantity of supplies provided from 2009 to 2014 is estimated at 24% of total weapons imported to this country (SIPRI n.d.). Besides that, Moscow and Washington had fruitful cooperation on the Iran nuclear program (United Nations Security Council 2010) and on jointly pressuring North Korea (United Nations Security Council 2013).

Even differences over the US's role in Libya did not impede joint actions against the use of chemical weapons in Syria (Putin 2013).

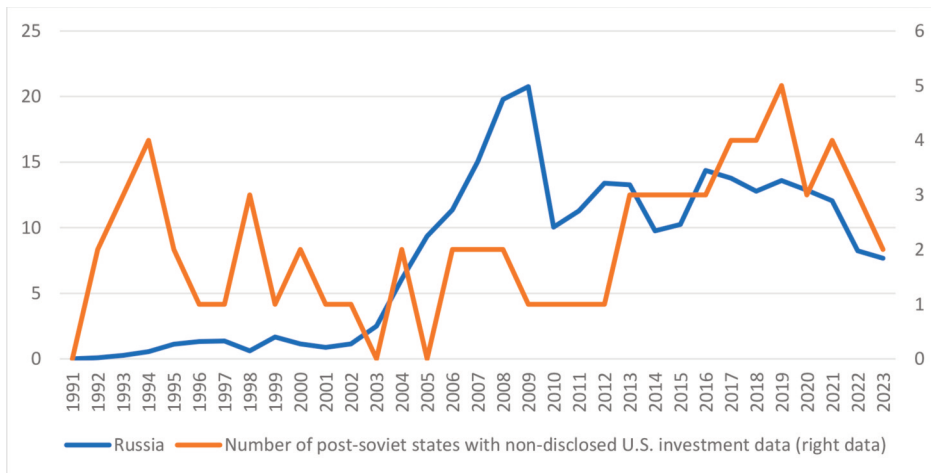
Nevertheless, all cooperation during the first four years of Obama's presidency mainly concentrated on reaching geopolitical goals of mutual interest outside the post-Soviet space. Even the long-awaited cancellation of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment led to the adoption of a new discriminatory Magnitsky Act. There was no notable advancement in altering the relationships' long-term standing or substantive quality. On the contrary, under the first Obama administration, the bilateral economic ties began stagnating and even deteriorating. After reaching its \$42bn peak in 2011, the bilateral commodity turnover went down to \$34.4bn by 2014 (US Census Bureau n.d.; Pic. 1). During the Bush presidency, US investments went from \$0.9bn in 2001 to their peak of \$20.7bn in 2009, which is a total growth of 23.5 times (BEA n.d.). When Obama came into office, the investments decreased to \$10bn due to the 2008 economic crisis but have never returned to previous numbers. Moreover, after 2009, the US started investing more in other post-Soviet states. According to the US Bureau of Economic Analysis, the number of countries with undisclosed investment data increased from two to five. It included Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan (Pic. 2). Finally, the US official development aid to Russia after 2007 gradually declined to zero, while aid flows to other former Soviet republics remained on the same level (Pic. 3).

Picture 1: The US trade in goods with Russia from 1991 to 2023, in billion US dollars



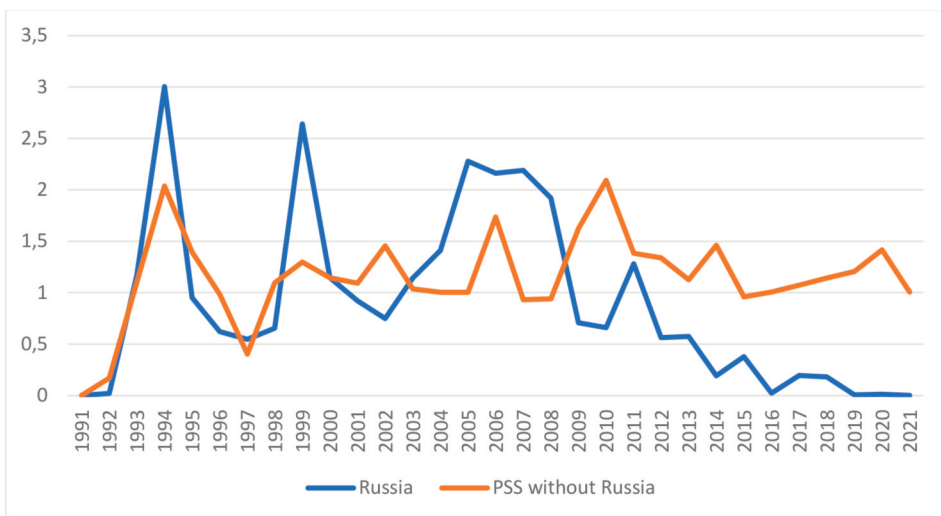
Source: US Census Bureau n.d.

Picture 2: The US direct investments in Russia and number of post-Soviet states with non-disclosed US investment data from 1991 to 2023, in billion US dollars



Source: BEA n.d.

Picture 3: The US official development aid to Russia and other post-Soviet states from 1991 to 2021, in constant 2022 billion US dollars

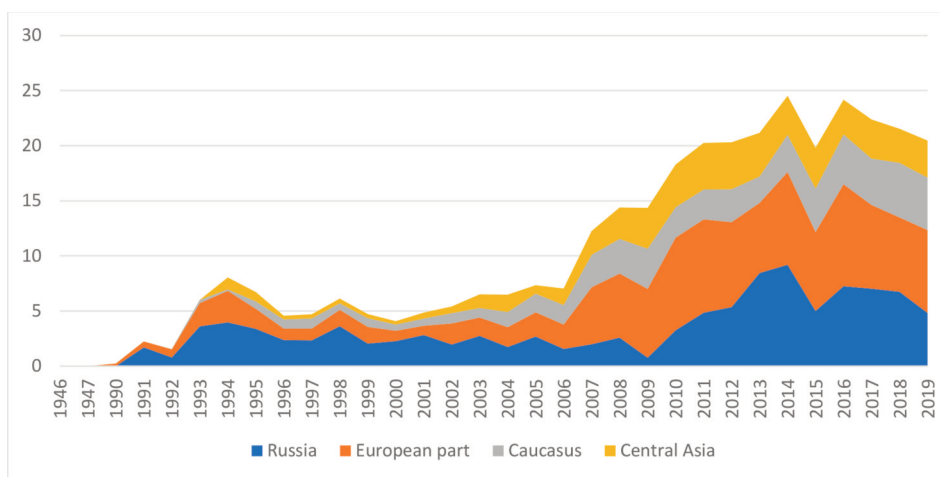


Source: ForeignAssistance.gov. 2024.

One of the most traumatising episodes happened during the parliament and presidential elections. The day after the State Duma elections of 2011,

numerous protesters went to Moscow's squares on December 5 to protest against the alleged falsifications of votes (Nichol 2011). The US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, almost instantly categorised the elections as “not free, nor fair” (US Department of State 2011a). The Russian government considered this action as an intervention in its internal affairs because it continued the previous line of Washington's criticism of the whole election process (US Department of State 2011b) and coincided with the rumours that Biden favoured Medvedev over Putin in running for his second term (BBC 2011). That also coincided with a larger trend of the United States significantly increasing its democracy promotion programmes in Russia and other post-Soviet states. While budgeting of these programmes raised steadily but slowly during most of the Bush administration, since 2009, the White House has drastically increased their financing (Pic. 4), eventually leading to USAID being expelled from Russia in September 2012 (Bouchet 2013). Moreover, a peculiar thing to notice: in 2011, the National Endowment for Democracy, in its annual reports, changed the region of Ukraine and Belarus from Eurasia to Central and Eastern Europe, clearly showing its strategy being more orientated towards forcing dissociation trends in these two countries from the post-Soviet space (NED n.d.).

Picture 4: The financial flows of National Endowment for Democracy Programmes in post-Soviet states from 1990 to 2019, in million US dollars

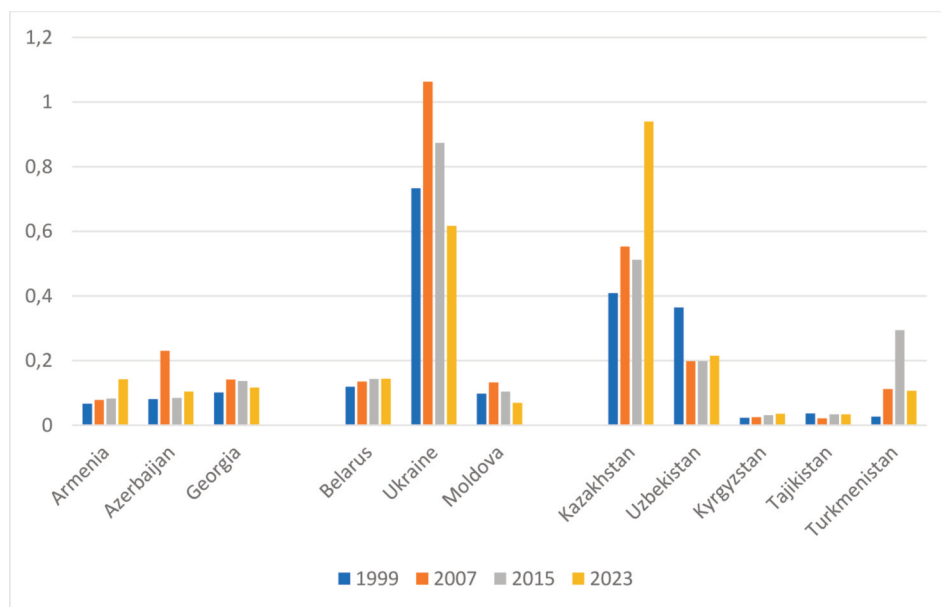


Source: ForeignAssistance.gov. 2024.

From that period until 2014, the Obama administration mainly followed an already established path in building its relations with other post-Soviet states, which, in the majority of cases, pursued a dispersed set of disconnected goals.

In Central Asia, the only country Washington was developing full-fledged bilateral relations with was Kazakhstan. It implied a whole range of issues besides securing nuclear materials and fighting international terrorism. The White House lobbied for Kazakhstan’s accession to the WTO and the repeal of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment. The US also became the primary investor in Kazakhstan (Obama 2010), while Kazakhstan ended up being the first trading partner of the US in the sub-region (Pic. 5). Nevertheless, at that moment, this engagement was not driven by a directly formulated agenda.

Picture 5: The US trade overflow with post-Soviet states, in billion US dollars

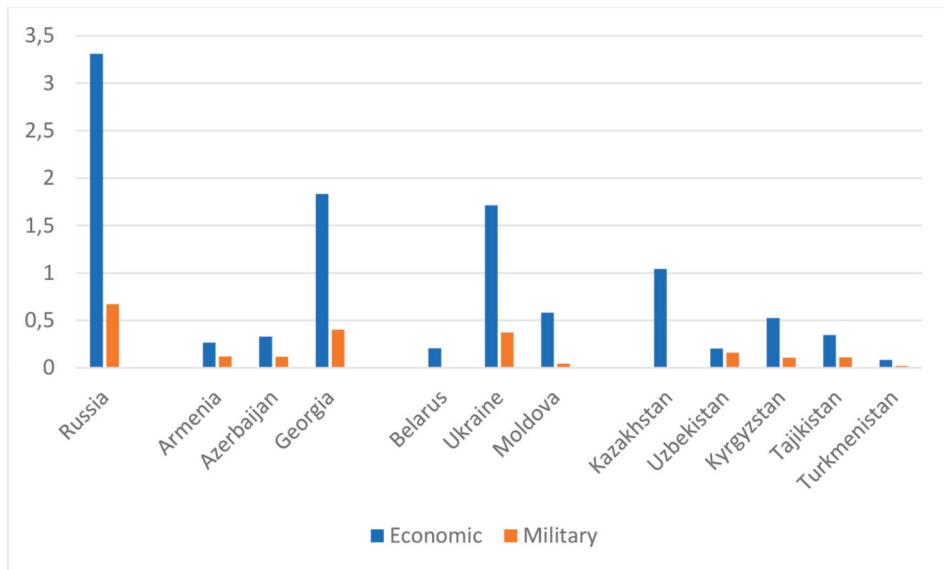


Source: US Census Bureau n.d.

The US strategy in the Caucasus and the European part of the post-Soviet space had a more articulated angle. While Washington’s reactions towards the events or trends in Belarus (2010 presidential elections), Armenia (the issue of the 1915 genocide and normalisation of relations with Turkey), and Azerbaijan (projects of gas delivery to Europe) did not lead to serious long-term consequences for the overall strategy, US support of Ukraine, Georgia, and, less intensively, Moldova’s integration into the Euro-Atlantic community has been consistent and straightforward, with Tbilisi and Kiev as the largest recipients of economic and military foreign assistance (Pic. 6). The view of US policies in the

region as purposefully aiming to impose a security order unilaterally without Moscow's consent was only strengthened by that tendency (German 2017).

Picture 6: The US economic and military aid to all post-Soviet states from 2009 to 2014, in constant 2022 billion US dollars



Source: ForeignAssistance.gov. 2024.

### Active Decomposition Strategy of the Post-Soviet Space

By 2014, the bilateral relations between Barack Obama and recently reelected president Vladimir Putin had been seriously poisoned by mutual distrust. The US actions during the 2011 election campaign were mainly considered an attempt to intervene in Russia's domestic affairs.

In addition, Russia gave asylum to the American whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013, which only raised tensions between Russia and the US (Troianovski 2020). The intensifying American cooperation with nearby states, especially in the security sphere, and the military operations in the Arab region were increasingly perceived through the lenses of traumatic events in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Moreover, the policies, not only of Russia but of other former Soviet republics to build multilateral cooperation within the Eurasian Economic Union or the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, were seen in Washington as Moscow's attempts to revive the Soviet Union, which the United States openly vowed to prevent (Financial Times 2012).

In 2013, another political crisis in Ukraine started in a completely different environment. The Maidan protest in favour of the Euro-association, the violation of the agreement on the settlement of the Ukraine crisis (Guardian 2014), the coup, and the eventual Crimea's incorporation into the Russian Federation gave birth to two fundamentally different narratives from the part of Russia (Baranovsky 2015) and the United States (McFaul 2020). The crisis had a constituting effect on the whole US strategy in the post-Soviet region.

The renewed US approach has formulated an upgraded long-term framework towards Russia in a more restrictive manner. It consisted of imposing sanctions on Moscow for its actions, viewing Russian gas exports as a political tool and potential threat to European energy security, and paying attention to Russia's involvement in the neighbouring countries. Although the 2015 NSS did not exclude prospects for bilateral cooperation in areas of common interest, the main narrative has fundamentally shifted (White House 2015, 2, 5, 10, 25).

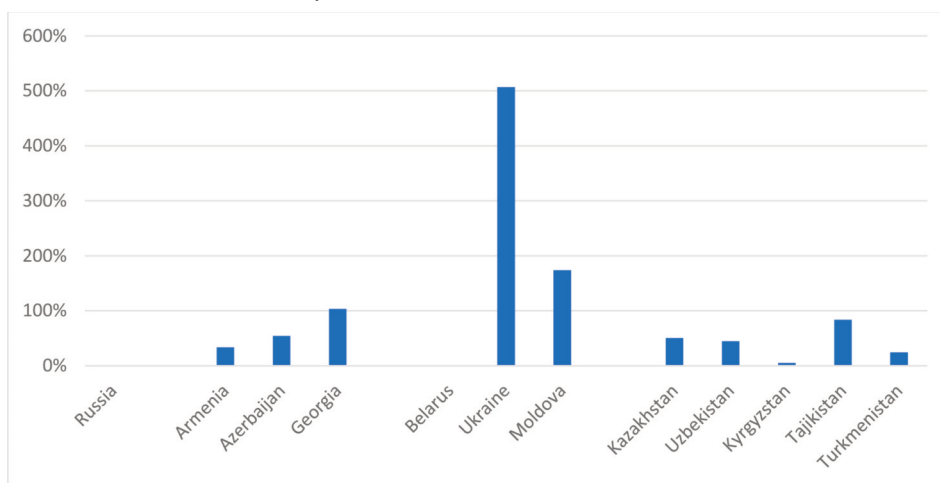
Since the start of the Ukrainian crisis, US-Russia bilateral economic relations steadily continued the stagnation trend. After ending the US trade preferences in May 2014 (Radio Free Europe 2014), trade in goods from 2014 to 2021 increased only by 4.7% from \$34.4bn to \$36bn, which significantly decreased in comparison to the previous periods of growth—2000-2007 by 173% and 2007-2014 by 29.4% (US Census Bureau n.d.). From 2014 to 2021, the investments rose by 23.4%. However, after a serious decrease of 35% from 2007 to 2014, they have never again reached the 2009 maximum of \$20.7bn (BEA n.d.). This trend was, first of all, set by Obama's policies to impose sanctions on Russia over Crimea. However, all consequent administrations accepted this approach as the main form of countering Moscow (Timofeev 2018). Moreover, the United States under the Trump administration continued this hostile trend by fixating on the adversarial status of Russia as a revisionist power (White House 2017) and by withdrawing from arms control treaties (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, Open Skies Treaty) (Bowen and Cory 2021, 48), which only intensified the Kremlin's concerns.

The fundamental shift of Washington's attitude towards Russia clearly brought a qualitative change in US foreign practices in all sub-regions of the post-Soviet space. Policies towards Ukraine became more consistent and significantly shifted its vector. On the diplomatic track, the United States started unilaterally supporting Kiev's position on the fulfilment of the Minsk agreements, not pressuring it so much to fulfil its part of the obligations (Markedonov, Silaev, and Neklyudov 2020). In the expert community, the events in Ukraine started to be interpreted as an anticorruption Revolution of Dignity against a Russia-orientated president (Rice 2017, 116-201). In addition, the training programmes for a new generation of Ukrainian political leaders began (Stanford). Ukraine became the primary trading partner of the United States in

the post-Soviet space (not taking Russia), doubling its trade in goods from \$2.2bn in 2014 to \$4.4bn in 2021. At the same time, Washington significantly militarised these relations. Ukraine became the main recipient of US arms, receiving 39% of all arms sold to countries in the region (SIPRI n.d.). The US military assistance to Kiev increased almost 5 times: from 2009 to 2014, the total amount was \$0.37bn, and from 2015 to 2020, the overall sum of military aid reached \$1.89bn (Pic 7.), while economic help almost did not rise (ForeignAssistance.gov).

This trend had multiplied extensively by the start of the direct and open military confrontation between Russia and Ukraine in 2022. The United States seriously increased military and economic aid to Ukraine. According to the USAID statistics, the total amount of official development assistance multiplied 24 times: from \$0.5bn in 2021 to \$12.4bn in 2022 and then \$15.9bn in 2023 (ForeignAssistance.gov). Moreover, Washington has drastically increased the supply of military weapons with a total value of \$55 billion (US Department of State 2024), which, in comparison to 2021, increased 135 times in both 2022 and 2023 (SIPRI n.d.).

Picture 7: The change in the amount of US military aid given to Ukraine and other former Soviet republics from 2009 to 2014 and 2015 to 2021, in %



Source: ForeignAssistance.gov. 2024.

In 2015, the United States initiated a multilateral forum, C5+1, in Central Asia to intensify the development of all sorts of bilateral ties and discuss regional issues. Although it was not formally framed on an anti-Russian basis, the strategic planning documents directly formulated the necessity to support



regional countries' sovereignty in front of Chinese and Russian security risks (US Department of State 2019, 10). Under this imperative, the US adopted a strategy to promote public administration reform in Central Asia, market liberalisation, and strengthening economic ties with South Asia (US Department of State 2020), which in 2021 led to the creation of the US-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan-Pakistan group (US Department of State, 2021). While not being the biggest trading partner with the region, the United States became a leading investor in Central Asia, reaching almost \$44.8 bn, primarily concentrated in Kazakhstan (US Department of State n.d.).

Through direct and indirect means, the United States played on divisions between Russia and its smaller allies: Belarus and Armenia. Traditionally, Washington paid little attention to the events in Belarus, having its bilateral ties on a low level and routinely criticising the regime for human rights violations and election fraud. However, the Trump administration attempted to find common ground with Belarus. For the first time since the 1990s, amid Moscow-Minsk tensions over the oil supplies and the Kremlin's attempts to build closer interstate relations in the so-called Union State (Financial Times 2020a), the US Secretary of State, M. Pompeo, made a trip to Minsk in February 2020 to offer an oil supply substitute to import from Russia (Financial Times 2020b). Nevertheless, after the political crisis in August 2020, due to the massive protests after the presidential elections and subsequent internal political turmoil in Belarus, and especially after the start of the direct Russian-Ukrainian confrontation, the United States returned to their previous policies towards Belarus and intensified the sanctions against its authorities (Welt 2021) and the idea of creating a new form of the so-called Union State with Russia (Congress 2020).

Finally, the United States indirectly stimulated the divisions between Russia and Armenia by presenting itself to Erevan as an alternative provider of security and economic development. During the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020, the United States decided to limit its participation by simply expressing its concern on the level of the State Department and its representatives in the OSCE (Guardian 2020). Despite having a large Armenian diaspora inside the United States, Washington decided not to intervene directly. It preferred to outsource the active role in this conflict to Turkey, which actively supported Azerbaijan. Intentionally or not, this combination allowed the United States to save the potential to develop its bilateral ties with Armenia for the future and, at the same time, create a stress-test situation for Russia, which is obliged to come to help its ally under Article 7 of the Collective Security Treaty (also referred to as the 1992 Tashkent Treaty).

This US approach eventually proved its effectiveness after the start of the third and final Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2023. The termination of the existence of the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and the Armenian

unpreparedness to defend it seriously increased the distrust of the Armenian leadership towards the Kremlin (Davydov 2023). That eventually led to a serious increase in Erevan's political, diplomatic, and even military contacts with the United States in order to develop and strengthen bilateral relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2024).

## Conclusion

The evolution of the United States policies and strategy towards the post-Soviet space over the last 30 years has seen significant transformation. The complex analysis of the United States strategy and its realisation through its foreign practices led to several conclusions. The first one answers the main research question of this paper. In order to achieve its long-term goals, the United States has used all its economic, military, and diplomatic arsenal, carefully calculating the disbursement of resources. In the case of the post-Soviet space, the US strategy towards this region was a direct continuation of the Cold War goals of defeating the Soviet Union in the bilateral systemic confrontation that implied competition in all social spheres. The absence of the Marshall Plan in the 1990s, NATO's partnership with Ukraine and Georgia in the 2000s, C5+1 cooperation in the 2010s, a change of type of relations with Russia after the 2007 Munich speech (decrease and stagnation of trade and investments, decrease of development assistance, and rise of democracy promotion programmes and criticism), and then with Ukraine after 2014 (increase of trade, military assistance, arms supply, and people-to-people relations)—all these actions served the same strategic approach: to impede the resurrection of the Soviet threat via creating a new European security order under NATO and stimulating decentralisation processes in the post-Soviet space.

Second, we noticed a specific seven- or eight-year “flux and reflux” cycle in this US approach. Each time Moscow and Washington had serious disagreements (1999, 2007, 2014, 2022), the United States increased the significance of another former Soviet republic in their foreign policy strategic documents. However, when it was necessary to achieve significant results in bilateral relations (primarily in the sphere of strategic arms reduction), the White House, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, tried to calm its critical rhetoric towards the Kremlin.

The third conclusion is about the way the US distributes its resources. In each case, Washington used different foreign policy mechanisms and resources to stimulate or impede some international trends in the post-Soviet space. First, a whole range of multilateral forums have been used to frame the relations and steer them in a specific direction: the Russia-NATO Council, NATO partnership with Ukraine and Georgia, and C5+1 with Central Asia. The case of the 2020

Nagorno-Karabakh war demonstrated how the US did not fulfil its full potential involvement within the Minsk Group of the OSCE to undermine a competing multilateral framework of the CSTO. Second, the US actively used its economic and financial dominance as a “sticks and carrots” instrument to manipulate the behaviour of its counterparts in the region. The offer to Belarus made by Mike Pompeo to substitute Russian oil, the tremendous rise of investments in Kazakhstan, economic and military aid to Ukraine, the potential of strengthening relations with Armenia, and the gradual increase of sanctions on Russia were creating a mechanism to stimulate economically decentralisation trends between the former Soviet republics. Third, the same approach can be seen in ideological accents made by the US officials and expert community actively praising the 2014 Ukrainian revolution after the 2007 Munich speech and after Kiev codified its Western orientation towards inclusion into NATO and the EU in its constitution. Thus, the complexity of these US multilateral, economic, military, and ideological practices does not fit a unified framework or standard. Instead, in each case, Washington used a different set of tools that would most effectively serve its long-term interest of undermining any centralisation processes in the region.

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## PROJEKCIJA MOĆI SAD U POSTSOVJETSKOM PROSTORU: POLITIKE I PRAKSE

*Apstrakt:* Članak analizira politiku SAD-a u postsovjetskom prostoru kao primer kako velika sila može stimulisati specifičan politički poredak u nekom regionu. Autor navodi da strateški okvir SAD-a u ovom prostoru nije u suprotnosti sa imperativima odvratanja prema SSSR-u. U zavisnosti od svojih kratkoročnih ciljeva u odnosima sa Rusijom, spoljna politika SAD-a prati sedmogodišnji ili osmogodišnji ciklus stimulacije decentralizacionih procesa u regionu. Nakon raspada SSSR-a, prvo jasno ispoljavanje razlika između Moskve i Vašingtona, koje se dogodilo 1999. godine, bilo je praćeno sa tri talasa tenzija – 2007, 2014. i 2022. godine. U sva četiri slučaja, SAD su povećale svoju stratešku pažnju prema drugim bivšim sovjetskim republikama. U svakom potregionu ovog prostora, SAD primenjuju različite setove praksi koje su najefikasnije i najprikladnije za svaku zemlju u ispunjavanju aktuelnih američkih političkih imperativa. Tokom poslednje tri decenije, Sjedinjene Države su demonstrirale efikasnu upotrebu različitih „štapova i šargarepa“ u političkom pristupu, uglavnom putem ideoloških, ekonomskih, vojnih, diplomatskih i multilateralnih sredstava spoljne politike, kako prema ovim postsovjetskim državama, tako i prema Rusiji. U svakoj državi postsovjetskog prostora Vašington je primenjivao jedinstven set političkih praksi i taktika, često sa istim ciljem – podrivanje moći Moskve i stimulanja decentralizacionih procesa među bivšim sovjetskim republikama.

*Ključne reči:* Rusija; Evroazija; Centralna Azija; Kavkaz; Sjedinjene Države; Ukrajina; liberalni svetski poredak; promocija demokratije.