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The Strategic Position of the United States in the mid-2020s and Ramifications for European Security

Interview with Stephen Burgess

Professor Burgess, what are the current shifts of the United States in global affairs?

The strategic position of the United States is undergoing the most dramatic shift in 85 years. The days of the U.S. acting as a "benign hegemon" upholding a "rules based international order" and fostering a global network of alliances and partnerships in "great power competition" seem to be ending. Instead, the Trump administration has adopted a transactional foreign policy which rejects globalism and shifts the burden of security onto increasingly distrustful allies and partners. The result is that the U.S. is acting like any other great power, with interests eclipsing values. Even if a Democrat returns to the White House in 2029, there is little hope that America will return to its former role, because it will be less trusted to uphold security guarantees and global rules. U.S. burden shifting and increasing doubts about its security commitments mean that Europe will have to increasingly provide for its own security and prepare to face an increasingly aggressive Russia largely on its own.

You present a rather sober perspective on the U.S.'s approach to the post-WWII order based on the UN Charter, especially following the 80th session of the UN General Assembly in New York. Why is that?

The period of benign hegemony can be understood in terms of American leaders' willingness to use the country's considerable military and economic power to construct the international order after the catastrophic Second World War and to contain and overcome the Soviet Union in the Cold War. The U.S. provided the lion's share of financial and economic resources for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and its bilateral allies elsewhere as part of containment. It led in constructing the global trade and financial architecture and struck multilateral and bilateral trade deals which were not always in the interests of maintaining its manufacturing industry. America promoted democratic values as a way of preventing another holocaust and in competing with Soviet-promoted socialism. With the end of the Cold War, successive administrations continued this grand strategy with the belief that a global liberal order would prevail. The greatest gamble was that open trade with China would result in liberalization and democratization.



Quote: Burgess, U.S. Positioning and European Security, NSM#Blog October 2025, <https://nsm.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsmblog>

Would you suggest that the second Trump administration deliberately ignores historical lessons, does so knowingly, or completely dismisses this way of interpreting history?

The second Trump administration is driven by the lesson that U.S. hegemony has been too costly both in terms of blood and treasure. It also believes that Western liberal democracy has cost jobs through free trade deals and excessive immigration to the detriment of national identity. Administration officials openly support right wing European parties and the breakup of the European Union. President Trump has looked to make deals that he believes that will benefit the United States and his personal interests.

How could this happen? What does the America First Policy entail strategically?

President Trump won the 2024 elections including the popular vote based on voter concerns about the economy and excessive immigration. The Heritage Foundation's "Project 2025" included an America First foreign policy platform which has been implemented by the new administration. The president used executive orders based upon the declaration of "national emergencies" that led to implementation of tariffs and anti-diversity, equity and inclusion foreign policy measures.

Strategically, America First means withdrawal from previous foreign policy commitments and aggressive use of tariffs and sanctions regardless of alliances and partnerships, which can be characterized as "neo-mercantilism."

Can you share your perceptions on how this perspective influences strategic decision-making of the Pentagon? What about the main "theatres of war" anticipated by the U.S. military? What are your thoughts on Canada and Greenland, if any?

The elevation of America first and decline of great power competition can be seen in the administration's China policy. The overriding aim seems to be making deals on trade and TikTok with Beijing as opposed to competing and assuring U.S. allies and partners. The evidence is starkest in comparing U.S. policies towards China and India. The latter has been an increasingly important strategic partner until the administration imposed fifty percent tariffs because of Indian trade policies and importation of Russian oil. In contrast, China has not been punished for its greater importation of Russian oil and covert support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Also, the U.S. administration has permitted the export of advanced microchips to China in a reversal of great power competition policy. The levying of steep tariffs against Taiwan and ambiguous messaging about security support for Taipei have also created doubts concerning U.S. policy.

The contradictions in U.S. Asia policy also affect Europe. Even more important have been President Trump's personal diplomacy towards President Putin in attempting to negotiate an end to the Ukraine war and ambiguous support for NATO Article V security guarantees. Trump's overtures to Putin and aggressive pressure on President Zelensky demonstrated a willingness to tilt towards Russia to the expense of Europe and Ukraine. The recent failure of diplomacy has not



Quote: Burgess, U.S. Positioning and European Security, NSM#Blog October 2025, <https://nsm.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsmblog>

led the president to impose ready-made sanctions but instead to urge Europe to stop importation of Russian oil. Trump has not responded assertively in reaction to the increasing Russian-suspected drone traffic over Europe.

President Trump's populist musings about taking over Greenland and Canada in order to position the United States to compete in the Northern Passage has faded as the year has unfolded. The Pentagon, now the "Department of War", has asserted that the bulk of U.S. strategic effort should be to contain China and its ambitions against Taiwan and in the South China Sea. However, the U.S. military has been used primarily against Iran and Venezuela and in domestic policing. While U.S. forces are prepared for conflict with China, the mixed messages from the White House create strategic uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific region.

For Europe, of course, the Russian aggression in Ukraine continues to be the dominant focus. Considering Europe purchases a substantial amount of military equipment from the U.S., can the software and systems be fully trusted?

The seismic shift in U.S. strategic position has been recognized in Europe, and governments have mobilized their defense forces and industries and intensified regional cooperation. At issue is how much countries can continue to rely on NATO with questionable U.S. backing, how much of a leadership role Europe should assume in NATO, and the role of the European Union. Also, how much can Europe accelerate defense force and industrial integration to save resources? The Russian challenge is intensifying, which is increasing pressure on Europe to develop drone and counter-drone development among other things. Fortunately, the growth of Ukraine's defense force and industries with sophisticated drones and cyber networks provides Europe with opportunities for cooperation that are already being grasped.

Professor Burgess, your final lens and perspective on what lies ahead after this big realist shift?

Changes in the international order take time, but there can be sudden shifts. Such a change is happening in 2025 with the transformation of the U.S. strategic position to purely serve its own interests and those of its leader. Realist theorists, such as John Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz, predicted that the U.S. would draw back from benign hegemony and global leadership with the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s. It took more than three decades for their prediction to come to fruition.



Quote: Burgess, U.S. Positioning and European Security, NSM#Blog October 2025, <https://nsm.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsmblog>

Further reading:

- Jennifer Lind and Darryl G. Press, "Strategies of Prioritization: American Foreign Policy after Primacy," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2025.
- "The Future of US Foreign Policy: Navigating Great Power Competition and Diplomacy," New York Center for Foreign Policy Affairs, September 24, 2025.
- "Testing Assumptions About US Foreign Policy in 2025," Stimson Center, February 14, 2025.

Stephen Burgess is a retired Professor associated with the University of Florida. From 1999-2024, he was on the faculty at the US Air War College, Department of International Security Studies. Previously, he was a faculty member at Hofstra University, Vanderbilt University, and the University of Zambia. Dr. Burgess was a research associate at the University of Zimbabwe. He received his doctorate at Michigan State University, 1992 and Master's from the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, 1977. Most notable among his many publications are "Russia, South Asia, and the United States: A New Great Game?" *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, (2019), "Multilateral Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: Tentative Steps towards a Regional NATO? Contemporary Security Policy, (2017), and "Confronting China's Maritime Expansion in the South China Sea: A Collective Action Problem," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, (2020).



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