

# US-Visegrad Realities in Biden's World of Democracies

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**Abstract:** *The 'liberal world order' can be considered as an historic exception in the history of 'realist anarchy' of international relations. This exception is the result of many factors and it has been significantly influenced by the power of the United States. Thus, the agenda of the world order can be analysed in the context of American foreign policy. The place of Central Europe – and in the Visegrad countries – can be analysed in this frame. This approach elaborates the basis for further inquiries also of the Central European-American relations but here the goal is to understand the place of the Visegrad countries in the context of the American led liberal world order. The goal of this study is to theorise the world order, and to identify the role of the United States and the place of the Visegrad countries in it. Furthermore, the study tries to draw theoretic conclusions in the light of the 'Biden doctrine' – which is theoretically coherent with the liberal characteristic of the order – to the Visegrad-US relations.*

**Keywords:** *world order, theories of international relations, US foreign policy, Visegrad Cooperation*

## Introduction

The 'liberal world order'<sup>1</sup> is an historic exception according to Robert Kagan (Kagan 2022: 9) – a 'bug' in the classical realist logic of the international

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1 The clarification and precise conceptual theoretic definition of the difference between the terms world order and international order deserves a separate study. If using the term liberal international order, Ikenberry's (e.g. 2020) or even Kagan's (e.g. 2022) theoretical definition of international relations can be taken as a point of reference. In this case, the tangible characteristics of a liberal international order are the principles of cooperation, free trade, universality of human rights or peaceful coexistence.

system(s). Despite not becoming universal, the liberal world order has been able to prevent the outbreak of great power wars since 1945. This does not mean, of course, that the order created eventual peace, or that the great powers did not fight, or would not fight, proxy wars. There is a consensus in the theoretical literature that the 'liberal world order' was helped to be borne by the United States as a midwife exploiting a very particular power configuration and the assistance of, for instance, European allies.<sup>2</sup>

The study makes historical references to Central European-American relations, but it does not aim to provide a chronological overview.<sup>3</sup> Rather, the aim is to highlight what, in the context of the 'liberal world order', can form a logical and conceptual system that is relevant to our region in terms of US foreign policy.

The theoretic starting point is the world which is visible from Central Europe. In this study Central Europe is mentioned narrowly as a synonym of the Visegrad Cooperation.<sup>4</sup> Accepting the assertion that there are indeed regional characteristics in foreign policy which are more specific to the Visegrad countries, we also need to note that the V4 is also part of a larger framework of interpretation based on the present logic, i.e. the V4 is part of several larger, overlapping 'security complexes' such as the EU or NATO. In other words, the aim here is to interpret our own region (Central Europe and the V4). In order to do so we need to reverse the order of logic and look first at the largest circle, the world order, and then at the transatlantic (security) complex led by the United States, which influences the interpretive frames and the set of instruments of the regional and domestic (foreign) policy geometry in Central Europe. Stem-

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However, these principles are not equally present globally in all dimensions (e.g. economic global governance vs. hard security issues). World order, on the other hand, is understood as a truly existing global ruling principle based on these values, which compels the actors of the international system to act regardless of whether or not they actually share liberal values. The coercive framework is influenced by the agenda-setters of the liberal world order – such as the US or the EU – and the actors of the order cannot ignore the framework. This is the surrealism of international relations – i.e. that realist foreign policy logic can also be interpreted within this framework, i.e. ultimately both liberal and realist schools are correct and there is currently one paradigmatic framework which is created and operated by the West. Consequently, realism and liberalism are also concepts within this Western constructed system of thoughts.

- 2 Robert Kagan sees the source of error in the fact that order regulates many areas of life but does not change human nature, and it is because of the latter that we can perceive that the 'liberal world order' is under siege by historical forces today. The emphasis on the negative quality of human nature is clearly a realist starting point for Kagan, but the belief in the limiting power of order is more liberal (Kagan 2022a; Kagan 2022b).
- 3 There are many examples of works on the history of relations between Central Europe and the United States in the Hungarian (Hungarian and English) literature. See for instance: Rada 2018, Péczeli 2019.
- 4 Exactly defining Central Europe is not a simple task, because in the process of defining its geographical, political and economic boundaries we also run into the problem of how to narrow down the definition. It is clear that the use of a broader definition poses more rather than fewer methodological problems. A much broader and more detailed description of the restrictive use of the term is presented in Marton et al. 2015.

ming from this, the following propositions can be drawn with respect to our region and the world order.

1. Hungary's (and consequently the other V4 countries') foreign policy has a sovereign space of maneuver and a national character, which can be decisive first regionally, because it is there where the closer network of values and interests (which are eventually constructed at the national level) directly interacts;
2. Central Europe is indisputably and institutionally part of the 'liberal world order', which we can also understand in the light of the relations with the United States, the most influential agenda-setter of this order;
3. The domestic and/or regional character and space for maneuver is exogenously and institutionally shaped by the 'liberal world order' and by the development of that order in which the US foreign policy (not only in relation to our region) is fundamental.

## The 'liberal world order' in theory

Theorising the 'liberal world order' is not a small endeavour, because it can be liberal and also can give credit to realist predictions at the same time. Some of the issues on the US foreign policy agenda are clearly liberal, while other issues generate realist responses. Transatlantic cooperation itself is a specific 'liberal bubble' within the 'liberal world'. Realist power is not negligible, however, because the United States created this bubble and was able to establish itself as the sole hegemonic superpower in the world order after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The United States, thanks to its realistic-material military, economic and political power, has been able to fix the agenda from its own point of view, leaving less room for other participants, in some cases even forcing compliance. The Visegrad countries – similarly to others – perceive the down-sides of the 'liberal world order' but are only able to act as critics because they are inside the bubble. They do not have a direct agenda-setting power either, but they are able to participate indirectly in influencing proposals related to an issue already on the agenda. If there is no unified and distinctive voice, it will be lost in the noise of the turbulent outside world, and it is no wonder that only the role to adapt remains.<sup>5</sup>

In theory certainly, but also in terms of practical political action, we can agree that there is a distinctive regional characteristic that influences foreign policy.<sup>6</sup> The regional characteristics are also shaped by the agenda set and pursued by the leaders of our international system and alliance: the United States and, not insignificantly for our region, the European Union. We also accept the assump-

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5 The term resilience expresses very similar phenomenon.

6 See for instance the summary about Regional Security Complex Theory in Marton et al. 2015.

tion that the current world order is liberal and influenced by the issues on the agenda of the liberal West (neoliberal approach, but with tangible neorealist elements if NATO is included in the equation), and that the issues reflect the order itself. The West is not uniform in every practical decision, but we can accept the simplification that the US is the dominant agenda-setter, so the bilateral relations – the Central European-American relations – are explicitly important.

On the other hand, it has to be acknowledged that the constituent actors, i.e. states, also have an impact on what issues are placed on the agenda at the systemic level and consequently how the world order develops. To take one example: our country's foreign policy is influenced by the international order and international events, but interests and values are determined by a longer, deeper, more complex and more internally driven process (the individualistic approach, which is more classical realist or classical liberal in nature); i.e. what we think about the challenges we face is first reflected in our region and if it gains credit by our partners in the regional issue-specific (security) complex,<sup>7</sup> it can also have an influence at the level of the liberal order.<sup>8</sup>

$$\begin{aligned}
 S &= L (R1, R2\dots) +/- IL (O1, O2\dots) \\
 L &= R1 +/- R2\dots \\
 R1 &= +/- H, P, CZ, SK
 \end{aligned}$$

The international/world order is a useful starting point, and it is worth interpreting it not only within the narrow framework of formal international law and international institutions. If interpreted narrowly, the failure for instance of the UN to contain Russian aggression would suggest the failure of the order itself. Russia broke the rules of the institutional order in every respect in 2022 (and has continuously since then) and the international institutional order is not capable of responding. The UNSC might well authorise use of force as retaliation in theory, but understandably this will not happen in the case of the Russia-Ukraine war. Nonetheless, the failure of the UN does not mean the failure of the 'liberal world order', because there are many mechanisms that have demonstrated that unilaterally breaking order has serious (even if not immediate) consequences. It is a fact that even China, which has benefited from the 'liberal order' over the past decades, cannot rationally neglect and simply sit on the waves of (artificially strengthened) national sentiment when seeking

7 See for more details: Marton et al. 2015.

8 In the formula S is the international system; L the members of the liberal order (the bubble or core); IL the regions outside the liberal core and O the players in these regions. R stands for the regions within the liberal core among which the United States or Central Europe are independent but mutually influential (asymmetric sometimes) units. The formula does not include the relative weight (power) of the players/regions. Assume that R1 is Central Europe, thus R1 is influenced by the individual countries' interests in the region.

some kind of world leadership. This logic reduces expectations on the chances of a 20<sup>th</sup> century-style Cold War, because China is incomparably more connected to and dependent on the 'liberal order' than the Soviet Union was.

The 'liberal world order' from a neoliberal (or idealist) point of view is a framework, the limits of which can be pushed, but not crossed without serious consequences. That is – and here according to both liberal and realist theory, which endow states with anthropological traits – in a world based on self-help, self-interest and power-maximising, states are condemned to life in a 'liberal correctional facility' managed by the agenda-setter of the order if they want to survive in the complex system of interdependencies. It is a prison because sovereignty in the international system cannot be unlimited even for great powers; and either because of neo-liberal mutual dependencies or because of the neorealist survival instinct states cannot do just anything. However, this is relative, because the 'liberal order' is also based on nation-states and on the myth of Westphalian-style sovereignty,<sup>9</sup> according to which the sacred cow of the international system is the sovereign equality of the states and full authority in their domestic affairs.<sup>10</sup> From the Central European point of view the 'liberal world order' can be described along the following premises:

- 1) the international system is state-centred and states follow self-interest, which is derived from their internal endowments – i.e. interests and values are constructed within the state because of domestic reasons; the pursuit of an existing and valid interest is rational in the international sphere, but the process of interests-formation is not (i.e. dependent on personal, or party-political convictions);
- 2) there is international order, institutionalised as a compromise between the self-interested behaviour of states, which can be called norms or traditions;
- 3) the international order is anarchic and 'reconstructs' the network of interests and leads towards controlled anarchy through institutional compromises;
- 4) within the international order, there are sub-systems in which the 'socializing' effect of the order, i.e. hierarchy appears more characteristically; it can be manifested regionally or thematised along issues: as in Central Europe, Europe or the West, interdependencies are stronger and may be even formally institutionalised (EU) or ideologically motivated ('world of democracies');

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9 It is important to note here and to complete the argument that we are aware that the peace of 1648 itself is only a milestone in a long process, but nevertheless the reference to this event as a paradigm-shifting date is widely accepted in the theoretical literature. For more on the critique see Osiander 2001.

10 See the Charter of the UN: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter>.

- 5) some states may be able to have influence with their own interests on the international level: the United States is an example of a modern national interest formation and the EU for a postmodern process (Cooper 2000);
- 6) the validity of the international order is not called into question only by the fact that some actors are not equally affected by socialisation, or that they are questioning it.

Differences may remain even within the narrowly defined sub-system or the liberal democratic core of the order ('liberal bubble'), which is the result of differences in the internally determined process of interest and value formation. However, neither this, nor a challenger to the 'liberal order', such as Russia today, can easily destroy it. The order is constantly changing. Neither China nor Russia can offer yet a viable alternative with a similar 'socializing' capacity which is characteristic to the 'liberal world order', or compared even to some extent to the Soviet Union in the Soviet bloc. The corollary of the above is that the international order cannot be in constant anarchy because it changes, which is not only a modification or consequence of the material (re)distribution of power between actors, but also a change in the internal and external interests and conditions of and for the actors, i.e. socialisation.

The foreign policy agenda of the US and the management of the items of this agenda influence the directions of the 'liberal world order', thus it has an influence on the subsystemic level, such as on the V4. The regionally strong socialisation effect of Central European cooperation and interaction has a direct and unavoidably solid influence on the individual foreign policy of the countries of the subregions (here the V4). However, as we discussed, national interests are constructed internally, i.e. Hungary and the other three Visegrad countries also shape the outcome of the Central European complex compromise of interests and values. This is a valid but overlooked explanation for why many immediately talk about the crisis or even the obsolescence of the V4 when this compromise is not born easily.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the interests and foreign policy directions are born first independently (of course the governments who are the engines of interest construction through securitisation)<sup>12</sup> even from the neighbours; later through the regional 'socialisation process' they may get closer and adapt to the compromise. But it is a process and may be longer than in a crisis we would need. Shaping the compromise and the 'joint' interest in 2015 (illegal migration) was quicker than in 2022. In line with this logic the differences in the interests are normal despite many comments that Visegrad is dead.<sup>13</sup>

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11 Such as today.

12 See Marton et al. 2015.

13 Luckily, those experts who have dealt scientifically with our region have a different opinion. See: Cabada 2020; Usiak 2018.

The Visegrad regional compromise of interests can be different from the rest of the EU or the Transatlantic region. Through the socialisation process the Visegrad interests shape also the EU, US agendas (and V4 specific issues may appear on the agenda) and leave a print on the 'liberal world order'. The realisation of the process implies to a few conclusions: there is a dialogue in the order but changes are slow; the direct agenda-setters' interests will always be more dominant; the smaller states (such as the Visegrad countries individually) are not always patient.<sup>14</sup>

In relation to the changes in the 'liberal world order', claims have been made that the world order has failed and that nationalism and populism are undermining the internationalism (Ikenberry 2022) that has characterised the US-led order since 1991. It is important to note here that while nationalism may be the antonym of internationalism, internationalism is not inherently liberal, so nationalism cannot automatically be the inverse of liberalism. Perhaps it is precisely that internationalism weakens the order, since the forced dissemination of liberal values ('offensive liberalism'<sup>15</sup>) on the international stage is not tolerant, i.e. not liberal to regional alternatives. There are strong arguments about the decline of the United States. But the fact that the US shaped socialisation process, driven by American values and interests, does not create automatic conformity for all members, it does not mean that the order is failing. In the case of empires, it can be historically attested that the end of expansion indeed meant the decline of the empire. However, the 'liberal world order' is independent of its creators, for example through multilateral international organisations, international security agreements and organisations, global trade and global product chains, the total globalisation of finance. This gives the ability to the order to deal with challenges jointly and impose a negative impact on those who challenge the order itself or violate its rules.<sup>16</sup>

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14 Even if nowadays the US presidential elections are theatrical and entertaining (for some terrifying) but the US foreign policy in practice and the agenda does not change that quickly if at all, consequently the world order even more slowly. Eventually, for the 'liberal world order' and the transatlantic alliance and the US-Central European relations it is less decisive whether Republicans or Democrats will occupy the White House. The tones may be different and in the longer term the consequences of certain foreign policy steps definitely, but the trends and the directions will remain the same in the core: maintain and strengthen the order, which is threatened by China and Russia and their followers.

15 The term is not widely used in the literature, unlike the offensive realist label. However, Ikenberry mentions it in a similar context (Ikenberry 2020). For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that the author of this article – independently of Benjamin Miller – has come to a similar conclusion to Miller and also introduced the term into the Hungarian literature (Rada et al. 2023). In a 2010 article, Miller added theoretical sophistication to the general critique of the Bush administration's neoconservative foreign policy – critique fashionable at that time – when he characterised offensive liberalism (Miller 2010).

16 For liberals, one of the most important features of the order is that progress is linked to modernity, to capitalist economic development. A very convincing proof of the continuous and accelerating human progress is that in the last thirty years the proportion of people living in extreme poverty (while the world population has grown at an astonishing rate) has decreased by 1% every year. It is easy to



The dichotomous logic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was believed to have been left in the past after 1991, a view which gained popularity with incredible speed in global professional circles.<sup>17</sup> A recurring motif in the history of human thought is the attempt to describe reality in terms of counter-pairs (Levine 2006) and the historical events of the last century have seemed to confirm the validity of the existence of these counter-pairs: the First World War and the fight between the liberal world and the 19<sup>th</sup> century balance of power politics; the Second World War and the struggle between democracies and fascist totalitarian dictatorships, or the Cold War and the struggle between democracies<sup>18</sup> and communism. If we think about it, this simplification, and an approach more akin to the ‘normal’ course of international relations, is brought back by the Biden ‘world of democracies’, which divides the world into liberal democracies and illiberal authoritarian regimes, according to certain criteria decided in Washington.

The liberal world order is an exception (Kagan 2022a) – if we look at the examples above, it has only existed for 32 years – which has been able to come into being and survive for so long because it has rested on the unquestioned and unchallenged material power of the United States. This base may have diminished in relative terms, but the more important pillar of the liberal order is intangible. What keeps the United States at the heart of the liberal order is that its members, and indeed even its critics, benefit more from its functioning than they spend on maintaining it (this is also true for the EU and the US). And if we look at the opportunity costs, the costs would be incomparably higher if each country had to maintain the necessary security on its own, without international institutions to mitigate conflicts in each and every area of international relations (i.e. not only in the military dimension). What Joe Biden has also perceived well is that there is a group of countries within the order – the liberal democracies – which voluntarily wish to maintain order along values they themselves share, and there are others who do not share the same values but whose interests (at least in the short term) do not come into conflict with the logic of the order. The latter group is also numerous, and given the law of inertia, it is difficult to imagine a successful attempt of overthrowing the existing system. The principles, norms and institutions created in or by the US-led ‘North Atlantic design centre’ will remain attractive until the US (and the West) can credibly represent them. If that credibility is diminished, for example, by movements like BLM or

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calculate that this is a drop of more than 30 percentage points all together. It is interesting to note that in the United States, the ‘progressives’ who outpace liberals on the left also sharply attack the ‘liberal world order’ precisely because of capitalism or criticise it for its failure to ‘equalize’ according to imperial logic.

17 It is also not surprising that Fukuyama’s theory (1993), or more precisely allegory, has been the most widely and sharply criticised hypothesis since, even in liberal circles.

18 Yes, we are aware that not all the allies were or have been democratic. This is the core of hypocrisy in Biden’s World of Democracy logic.



MAGA, which disproportionately exaggerate the flaws (even if otherwise raising relevant questions) of the system for their particular (with universal claim) self-interests, then they are falsely labelled liberal (or conservative), then not only the US, but the liberal world order loses.

Liberal logic defined the ‘new world order’ after 1991 and this is what forms the core of today’s international system. Therefore, if (only) this line of thought is accepted as a starting point, then any vision of an indeed multipolar world in which China and/or Russia are global powers is exaggerated. This may be possible if China or Russia could develop and operate an alternative order that is better than the present one and that is voluntarily followed by the international community. It is not enough to point out the flaws of the present order. The flaws are not a challenge to the order, even if they are to the dominance of the United States, because the liberal order is also a self-controlling ecosystem, in which sustainability is secured precisely by the fact that it balances the conflicts of interests that arise from the diversity of values. The United States has been able to define the order for so long because it has placed its maintenance at the top of its foreign policy agenda, even if it has come at a cost and with relatively less benefit to Washington compared to its partners.

This is the original basis, which is often forgotten even in Washington. Like, for example, when the balance of the ecosystem is not the goal but Washington rather intends to forcefully make the members of the order equal and similar (democracy promotion with Bush, or the assertion of democratic superiority with Biden), or when the US seeks to withdraw from the order and demands more contributions from the other beneficiaries (neo-isolationist and transactionalist thinking with Trump). Compared to the hierarchical system of imperial and ‘vassal or satellite’ relations, in which weaker states feel vulnerable and only submit to the stronger because of their survival instincts, the ‘liberal world order’ has brought something new. The weaker states believe in defence within a regulated framework of cooperation, thus they can turn to areas more beneficial to them than power maximalisation (e.g. the economy, culture).

## Is there a Biden doctrine?

At the start of his presidency, Biden made clear the need to develop relations with European allies in the frames of the ‘world of democracies’.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the Russian aggression and invasion of Ukraine (2014 interestingly still left some doubts) made it even clearer that a strong and united EU is in Washington’s well-perceived interest. Even before his official inauguration, Biden had

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<sup>19</sup> We need to add that the practical implementation of this idea divided Europe. Consider, for example, that not all EU or NATO allies were automatically invited to the 2021 and 2022 Democracy Summits. It drives thus counter-productively a wedge between allies reinforcing political divisions and ideological debates.

already set out ambitious plans for Transatlantic cooperation, with essentially positive expectations. Biden declared that ‘America is back in Europe’, a statement he reiterated at the Munich Security Conference (NPR 2021) and a year later, in Warsaw, now in a new context and with new reasons, following the Russian invasion (White House 2022). However, the original statements, which appeared to be a victory speech, did not take into account that the Europeans and the V4 countries had not been passive in the years preceding Biden’s presidency and had started to redefine their position and role in the ‘special relationship’<sup>20</sup> in a changing world order, especially in the light of China’s growing power. In Biden’s foreign policy, the turning (back) towards Europe also served to strengthen the front against Russia from the very beginning. Biden has positioned the United States as a leader of the world of democracies (White House 2021), in which he believed that the EU and US interests were aligned. At the same time, this envisages a kind of global conflict of democracies and dictatorships, which does not necessarily coincide with EU interests and the necessity to maintain relations with China (and, of course, Russia).

The ‘liberal world order’ is eventually similar to the Biden logic, a set of liberal principles, the application of which is intended to make the whole world sustainable and peaceful, resting on the stability of like-minded democracies (Ikenberry 2020). From this perspective, it makes sense to speak of a ‘liberal world order’ even if not all international actors are the same, but the term loses meaning if the core liberal democracies do not exist, and consequently, it is dangerous to tolerate dissent and illiberal turnings within the ‘liberal bubble’ (core). This is the explanation for the activist agenda to criticise the allies (seemingly) more often during the Obama and now Biden administrations than adversaries. The liberal approach to the world order is necessarily normative and inherently forward-looking: it judges the world through its own lens, and if the Western values remain dominant it utopianly envisages a better and more livable world.<sup>21</sup>

## US-Visegrad relations in the world of democracies

The idea of the ‘spirit of Visegrad’ cannot be interpreted in the traditional realist-liberal coordinate system. The countries of the Visegrad Group are members of the European Union and NATO, and although their foreign and security policy is guided by national interest, traditional, classical realist power-political categories are hardly able to interpret their political actions. Although several elements of liberal institutionalism and other liberal theories (interdependence, demo-

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20 Of course, the term originally refers to UK-US cooperation, but it is not entirely inappropriate to use it in a wider EU context either.

21 The recurrent keywords of the foreign policy strategies of the 2000s built on this idea. A good example of this is the security strategy of the European Security Strategy – ‘A secure Europe in a better world’ (EU 2003).

cratic peace) are relevant to understand the Visegrad Group's security policy practice, they cannot holistically capture the reality of the Visegrad Group either. The security policy of the countries in the region can only be reconstructed as a choice between possible futures imagined in the past, partly interest-based and conscious, partly shaped in a context of debate, partly informed by fundamental value choices and the constructive power of imagination. In the case of the V4, the regional security complex is a particularly interesting object of research especially as Visegrad Group defence ministers agreed in 2014 to develop a common defence policy strategy which is active management of the earlier mentioned regional socialisation process of interests.<sup>22</sup> Translated into the 'language' of securitisation, one could say that state actors in the V4 security community are attempting to jointly address certain threats and they jointly identify them. This is true independently from the actual governments and their domestic ideology.<sup>23</sup>

Why is this relevant for our region and our countries in Visegrad, and how does it justify the benefits of belonging to the 'liberal world order'. NATO cannot, therefore, be conceived of as a mere community of realist interests – otherwise it is doubtful that it could have survived in the post-Cold War world, after the Soviet military threat was gone. Yet it is essential that the Alliance provides its members with a strong collective defence and deterrence capability. Without it, Hungary and the other countries of the V4 would not be able to provide for their own security adequately. Without NATO its members would require prohibitively expensive defence development, or else be subordinated to the interests of some external power. If that external power were the United States or NATO (which would be likely even without membership), the Central European countries would share in the dependence and orientation constraints of the alliance, but would not participate in its decision-making in the absence of membership. That is, there is no sane alternative of memberships.

Both analysts and political actors agree that Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine and the war have brought about a fundamental change in the international order. However, it should be remembered that in the three decades since the Cold War we have witnessed a number of turning points that have reinforced the need within the academic community to interpret the 'new world order' and none of them actually created a new one (Rada 2007; Rada 2019). We only need to look back at the last decade, which began in a very pessimistic way, with a vision of an overstretched US led world torn apart by the global war on terror and in decline ravaged by the global economic crisis (Zakaria 2011). This did not create multipolarity though, despite the fact that

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22 See the publication presented by the Czech presidency (Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2019–2020).

23 See for instance Nyilas 2023.

a regionally stronger China and Russia wanted to be seen as a challenger again. It is beyond dispute that the United States has remained the world's leading superpower and the (neo)liberal world order it (also) created in 1945 and has governed and influenced since 1991 still stands and no systemic alternative has emerged. Some of the historical turning points of the last three decades can be interpreted as systemic challenges, but the socio-economic difficulties of consequence have also shaped domestic politics and raised fundamental questions of order, values and interests.

The 'world of democracies' acknowledges that the goal is to maintain a 'liberal world order', but recognises that while the order is global, not everyone necessarily shares all its goals and can exist outside of it, thus it is a global but not a universal value system. That is, the United States can be tolerant of actors outside this democratic world as long as they do not threaten the order itself – through Washington's perspective, as long as they serve the US goals (of which maintaining order is a serious element). However, within the order, this logic cannot be tolerant, because the members of the 'world of democracies' must be strong to prevent 'Kagan's jungle' (Kagan 2022a) growing back. Of course, the latter creates tensions within the order, because unification along American progressive-liberal principles – we have deliberately not used the term interest or value – requires much less attention and energy from Washington than managing the process of compromise. The 'liberal order' is the global set of rules and logics – from which, incidentally, even China benefits – that can be sustained if the 'constructed'<sup>24</sup> arguments of US domestic politics are uniformly shared within the 'world of democracies'. It is not so surprising, therefore, that allies that are otherwise in fact regarded as stable democracies are criticised and their domestic policies are pressured. Inside the bubble, all the elements that form the ideological basis of the liberal order – free trade, progressive (i.e. ever-expanding) protection of universal human rights, peace, security and a friendly foreign policy – can be held to account simultaneously, while outside the bubble the approach is more pragmatic and realist and it is not necessary to comply with all the elements at the same time.

## **Conclusion: Visegrad-American relations**

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, calling into question many of our assumptions about the international order. Russian aggression is a test of the system and also raises questions about whether the V4 is a regional security complex in the traditional sense. Leaving aside the open questions, we can agree that the invasion of Ukraine will be registered in the history books as

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<sup>24</sup> This is the classical liberal microeconomic logic; more on classical liberalism see for instance Baylis 2020: 103–114.

a turning point and that many of the often carefully guarded tenets of the way international relations functions will need to be rethought. There is no doubt that the V4 will remain valid and that in today's world there is a need for political cooperation at the regional level, which can provide flexible and regionally effective responses to (even) global challenges that arise in different regions.<sup>25</sup> But even before the war in Ukraine, theoretical debates had already pointed out that the theoretical framework of regional security complexes is narrow and not fully applicable to the V4 and that the Visegrad Cooperation is rather a kind of issue(question)-specific regional complex, and definitely not a united international organisation. That is, the regional character does emerge due to commonly understood challenges and responses to them. The issue-specific approach to security has tended to strengthen cooperation on strategic issues over the last 30 years, despite many debates and diverging approaches. The 'Visegrad spirit'<sup>26</sup> is the link, the logical and indeed practical institutional 'glue' that has enabled the Visegrad countries since 1991 to continue to cooperate flexibly and to enter together to the European or global stage, representing regional interests that would have been less visible without cooperation. Some issues are interdependent and closely interlinked and become issue-specific security supercomplexes (Marton et al. 2015), which are also constantly changing.

In the context of US foreign policy, rather philosophical dialogues are currently taking place about our region, and debates are opening up over certain words and phrases rather than on issues of practical relevance. At the end of the first decade of the new century, there was already an ongoing question whether the United States would be able to continue to play the role it had since the end of the Cold War. The slogan 'America first' did not emerge with Trump, because under Barack Obama there was already an internal demand to step back from world politics and concentrate on domestic economic and social problems. This has been seen by many as the end of the era of unilateralism and a return to a multilateral world, in which there are challengers to the United States. China, however, is not strong enough to create a new system (order) and Russia may be able to influence global politics for the last time with its military aggression in Ukraine.<sup>27</sup> This may change, especially in the case of China, but it will not mean that the influence of the United States will diminish significantly in the near future.

The United States has occupied a special place in the international system since the end of the Cold War, a fact that all the theoretical schools agree on (Mearsheimer 2018). The neoliberal (neoconservative) Robert Kagan (2022b)

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25 See more about V4 specific security studies at Marton et al. 2015.

26 See more about the expression 'Visegrad Spirit' at Rada 2021.

27 Interestingly, this scenario was also predicted by the liberal Kagan, the realist Mearsheimer and, by a different logic not knowing the above two (due to the simultaneous publication), was also the finding of the 2019 Hungarian publication 'Biztonságpolitikai Corvinák' (Rada 2019; Mearsheimer 2018; Kagan 2022a).

adds to this by arguing that considering the historical development of the order and the anarchic nature of international system, on which the liberal and realist mainstream also agrees (Baylis 2020: 103–114; 130–144; 192–206), the logic of US dominance is an exception, because even from a realist perspective, the US interests coincided with the need to reinforce and maintain the (neo)liberal order. The key to the emergence of the ‘liberal hegemony’ was that the United States was able to become a power in the international system without a challenger so that it could pursue a purely liberal foreign policy. The aim of which was to spread the liberal order and expand the range of liberal democracies, and to strengthen the institutions that support international governance, in accordance with its interests based on its own domestic values. Unchallenged by international events, the assumption of US foreign policy was that a world reconstructed in its own image would be safer for all and would offer the possibility of real progress also for all without exception (Mearsheimer 2018: 6).

For Central Europe, 2019 was a symbolically important year because Hungary, together with other Central European countries, celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the change of systems, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NATO membership and the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of EU membership, thus joining symbolically and institutionally to the ‘liberal world order’. These events have been the cornerstone of the foreign policy of the countries of our region over the last three decades. Additionally, 2019 marked the anniversary of rejoining the ‘West’. In Yalta, our country’s fate was decided and we had no influence on the real directions of development of our country for four decades. However, this changed in 1989; and while the past decades have not been easy, and the democratic transition and institutional, economic and social reforms have not been smooth, today Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic are full and equal members of the Western security architecture and alliance and value community. This membership has given back the opportunity that the V4 countries lost after the Second World War and the membership has given our countries the chance to develop along the values and, more importantly, the interests that were not possible earlier. Consequently, for any sane observer there was and is no alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration. Of course, there are and will be disputes and disagreements, but all of these move the alliance forward rather than calling into question its validity.

Central Europe became part of the alliance, but the ‘newcomers’ did not always feel that they were really welcomed. Feelings of abandonment or neglect have been recurrent and are not always unjustified. In the recent decades, the desire to align with the European Union or NATO has meant that the countries of Central Europe have often adopted institutions and rules without criticism, and that we have become less responsive to and less engaged with the often different processes taking place in our region. Until the mid-2000s, the issue of energy security was less prominent within the EU, and in 2015 the community was surprised that a ‘new’ member(s) could take such a strong stance on illegal migration.



It is in Hungary's and the region's interest to be part of this Euro-Atlantic alliance, but the past twenty and fifteen years also showed that this community will only work and will be able to address future challenges if its members are able to represent their interests on an equal basis. Honest dialogue is also in the interest of the United States. The feeling that Central Europeans have been forgotten or are not understood is not conducive to the development of the community. A feeling that the United States has turned its back on our region, partly as a result of the global economic crisis, have developed. Since the early 2010s, there has been a growing tendency for Washington to criticise more sharply and to intervene openly in the domestic politics of its allies,<sup>28</sup> something that had never happened before. While the change of attitude on the US side is justifiable – see the argument about the democratic core of the 'liberal world order' – the new tone has caused tensions within the alliance.

All these experiences and serious dilemmas that had to be addressed in the last decades can serve as a guide for how to strengthen regional resilience and prepare for the increasingly frequent global political turning points that are likely to continue in the future. Regional cooperation does have relevance but there is no lasting alternative of the Euro-Atlantic alliance. A good example of this is that, learning from the lessons of the 2008–2009 crisis, when the whole EU was looking for a solution, the more effective response for our region was a regional approach, and building on this experience in the fight against Covid-19, the member states – despite EU criticism – sought a solution within the V4 frames to the dilemma of how to deal effectively with the pandemic without creating unforeseeable economic problems. Thus, strengthening regional cohesion in the V4, developing physical and human infrastructure and exploiting regional synergies remain high on the agenda.

The goal of integration into the Euro-Atlantic federal system was unquestioned and its success is beyond doubt. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the rules of the game in the EU and NATO were shaped without the Visegrad countries, and even after full membership was achieved, there remained a justifiable sense of inadequacy: the alliance expected unconditional alignment as a starting point and was not always accommodating of the reservations expressed by our region. There is, of course, no alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration and the public of the Visegrad countries, contrary to any belief, have a clear pro-NATO and pro-EU public opinion.<sup>29</sup>

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28 Victoria Nuland, Assistant Secretary at the State Department (in 2014) is a good example in Hungary's case. Available at: <http://ircblog.usembassy.hu/2014/10/03/victoria-nuland-az-europai-es-eurazsiai-terseg-ugyeiert-felelos-kulugyi-allamtitkar-beszede-az-egyeseult-allamok-kozep-europa-strategiai-forumon/>

29 Also, let us consider that criticism does not necessarily equal skepticism and that opinion polls clearly demonstrate the popularity of NATO and the EU. The governments cannot ignore this fact either. See in more detail the Nézőpont Institute's earlier surveys on various topics: Nézőpont Intézet 2019.



The Visegrad countries have long sought to prove themselves as reliable allies, for example by lining up behind the United States unconditionally in 2003, which led to a number of sharp criticisms in Western Europe. The V4 countries also sought to be fully compliant in the often double-standard EU accession process without expressing concerns, which was of course comfortable to the EU. Full membership, as the term implies, brought with it real expectations of 'equality', i.e. the 'new' members did not just want to take their share of the responsibilities without being able to shape the future. The importance of cooperation and finding a common voice is particularly important. The Visegrad countries want to be effective and reliable partners at the same time, while keeping the typically regionally important issue-specific complexes on the European, transatlantic policy agenda. Effectiveness does not only depend on the Visegrad countries, as the club(s) also need to implement their internal reforms, in which it is important to listen to the views of all members. The use of double or multiple standards in many cases, including against the Visegrad countries, is by no means a way forward. That is true even if the result of recent regional elections in 2023 are not celebrated similarly in all the capitals within the alliance.

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