

The Crisis of Democracy and the Role of Foreign Policy in the United States

La crisis de la democracia en EE. UU. y el rol de la política exterior

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Key words

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- Jacksonianism
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Abstract

Donald Trump's second term has prompted a new international debate among political leaders, opinion leaders and academics about the state of US democracy. Phenomena such as the polarisation and division of American society have featured prominently in this debate. The role of foreign policy, however, has received far less attention, despite its recent salience in the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine. This article concludes that, despite having a secondary nature in domestic politics, foreign policy has accompanied and fuelled these key phenomena for the future of US democracy.

Resumen

El segundo mandato de Donald Trump ha generado un nuevo debate sobre el estado de la democracia estadounidense entre líderes políticos, de opinión y académicos de todo el mundo. Fenómenos como la polarización y la división de la sociedad estadounidense han estado muy presentes dentro de este debate. Sin embargo, el rol que juega la política exterior ha sido mucho menos analizado a pesar del protagonismo reciente que ha tenido en casos como los conflictos de Gaza o Ucrania. El análisis concluye que, a pesar de su naturaleza secundaria para la política doméstica, la política exterior ha acompañado y alimentado estos fenómenos clave para el futuro de la democracia estadounidense.

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INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

On January 20, 2025, President-elect Donald Trump took office as President of the United States for the second time. While his inaugural address did not cover a wide range of foreign policy issues, it contained some key points such as his willingness to end the wars started by previous administrations. He also took some controversial positions, which included his criticism of Panama over China's influence in the management of the Canal and the renaming of the Gulf of Mexico, the subject of one of his first executive orders (Trump, 2025).

Despite its limited role in Trump's inaugural address, foreign policy has been characterised by a number of scholars as the product of a deeply flawed institutional system. In their view, Trump himself is the result of a series of mistakes made by the American elites that have managed foreign policy over the last forty years (Walt, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2018).

The aim of this article is to examine the influence of foreign policy on the crisis of the American system and its consequences. While recognising that this influence is limited, it is assumed that it is not necessarily non-existent, in light of the large number of instances where foreign policy decisions have been rejected by public opinion. This research stems from two important issues: the paucity of rigorous scholarship on this relationship (Johnstone and Priest, 2017: 1-2); and the acknowledgement that foreign policy has only a limited influence on domestic electoral processes (Nincic, 1988: 153), not to mention its influence on the evolution of a political system. The United States is no exception. However, this also showcases the new contributions and current relevance of this type of research, which links foreign policy to domestic po-

licy and examines the effects of the former on the latter.

The article sits within foreign policy and international relations rather than sociology or empirical political science. It applies the theoretical and methodological framework of neoclassical realism (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, 2016). The role of theoretical frameworks in shaping methodological choices is decisive across the discipline, and is particularly central to neoclassical realist theory. In this regard, US foreign policy is understood as the product of primary systemic factors, such as the rise of China, alongside other domestic factors. These include ideological factors, strategic traditions, the role of the elites and institutional constraints.

These aspects, which serve to explain foreign policy, will be used here to show how it has entered into crisis in the main power of the international system. This crisis in turn feeds back into domestic divisions within the United States and an increasingly dysfunctional political system. This has become particularly evident since the Trump administration's adoption of Jacksonian populist positions (Dieste, 2025) and their relative persistence within the Biden administration. This methodology naturally requires placing greater conceptual and theoretical focus on US international policy debates than on domestic policy debates, but helps to shed light on an aspect that has received little attention in the political literature.

This article is divided into two parts. The first sets out the more traditional conceptions of US foreign policy and their development during the early post-Cold War decades. It also addresses the principal points that have since attracted criticism: China's accession to the WTO, the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s, the Iraq War, and the US response to the Arab Spring and the Ukraine crisis.

The second part focuses on the Biden and Trump administrations and analyses President Trump's adoption of Jacksonian ideology. It also examines Biden's attempt to return to a more orthodox foreign policy, set against crisis points such as the 2022 war in Ukraine and the events in Gaza following October 7, 2023. The article ends with some relevant conclusions.

POST-COLD WAR US FOREIGN POLICY AND ITS DOMESTIC CONSEQUENCES

With the end of the Cold War, the United States was left as the only power capable of permeating the international system (Krauthammer, 1990). Foreign policy objectives were clearly non-existential, bearing no relation to survival or power competition against a rival of the magnitude of the Soviet Union. Neither China nor Russia were yet in a position to challenge US pre-eminence. Priorities at the time were related to the promotion of values and ideals such as human rights and liberal democracy, and to preventing human rights violations. In this context, the significance of a number of weak autocracies (Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya and North Korea) was overstated, none of which were capable of threatening US primacy. This role would also extend to non-state jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda after 9/11 (Lake, 1993; Bush, 2001).

In this context of unipolarity, US foreign policy elites were largely divided over the goals and course of action within the domestic decision-making process in this historical period. These elites could be divided into three factions (Tovar, 2018). The first were the realists, who had played a central role in containment strategy during the Cold War and advocated a foreign policy grounded in the national interest, understood in terms of security.

The other two factions had strong similarities and could well have been grouped under a single banner. Particularly notable here were the liberals, whose interventionist dimension was especially prominent. They focused on the need to prevent mass human rights violations of the kind that occurred in the Balkans and Rwanda. There was a further faction —institutionalist in nature— which was centred primarily on the importance of international organisations, international law and multilateralism. However, it lost prominence after the events in Somalia and the downed Black Hawk incident.

Republican neo-conservatives, who had shifted from a realist stance during the Cold War (albeit a more assertive one than usual) to an idealist approach, shared much of the agenda with liberals. Especially the idea of the expansion of liberal democracy as an instrument for creating a peace community. The main theoretical difference was their defence of unilateralism and their distrust of the role of international organisations. They both agreed, however, that the United States was an indispensable and exceptional nation, different from the rest, as the current of American exceptionalism had traditionally held (Smith, 2009: 66-74; Vaisse, 2010: 232-236; Walt, 2011).

Whereas in the Cold War realists were presented as the prevailing current, their position was criticised during that period. Similarly, the unipolar distribution of power meant that US elites' preferences in terms of ideals and values could be fulfilled. This is not to say that realists disappeared; they were in fact particularly influential from 2004 onwards and throughout the years of Obama's presidency. For much of this period, however, they were chiefly regarded as critics of US foreign policy. This was not rare in their history, as the positions held by Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan on the Vietnam War had demonstrated.

Nonetheless, these three positions largely dominated the debates and decisions that would be taken from 1989 onwards.

Starting from the premise that international organisations are central to the consolidation of peace, liberal institutionalists supported the strengthening of bodies such as the United Nations, an organisation that was increasingly aligned both with the tenets of this school of thought and with the values and ideals that the United States identified as its own. Examples included liberal democracy and the promotion of human rights. Even in the case of not necessarily liberal administrations such as that of George H. W. Bush, the United Nations became the pillar of international legitimacy, embodied in military interventions such as those in the Gulf and Somalia (The White House, 1991: 13).

The progressive development of ideas such as the responsibility to protect started the debate on the concept of sovereignty and gave coverage to humanitarian interventions, as illustrated by Haiti and the Balkans, among others. It is worth recalling that the UN Secretary-General himself, Kofi Annan, openly endorsed this agenda (Annan, 1999). This would soon be accompanied by debate on the state-building processes that characterised post-conflict reconstruction in these cases (Fukuyama, 2004). Interventionist liberals often advocated for these kinds of actions, although this agenda was not without tensions, as in the case of Kosovo, which did not have the backing of the UN Security Council.

The second issue that also created strong divisions among US elites was that of China. From Bill Clinton's presidency onwards, voices emerged that would toy with the possibility of transforming authoritarian powers (such as China) into liberal democracies or, at the very least, of turning them into *responsible stakeholders* with which to share global leadership (Zoellick, 2005).

The problem with this controversial debate was that it had lasting consequences for US society, especially a decision shared by Bill Clinton and George W. Bush: China's entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

This decision, driven primarily by the Clinton administration and concluded under George W. Bush, has had some of the most far-reaching implications for US domestic policy and is currently among the most heavily criticised. Although it was a decision with a strong economic impact, the motivations of some of the leaders involved in this event were not economic but political in nature.

President Bill Clinton, the driving force behind initiatives such as NAFTA, had become an advocate of these agreements and their beneficial consequences. The case for and against them was always political and value-based as well as economic. China's adversaries in Washington consistently invoked its human rights policies. Its trade practices were also a significant point of contention. However, as Madeleine Albright acknowledged, values always outweighed economic interests in US public opinion at the time (Albright, 2003: 550); or at least that was the prevailing interpretation.

Despite the administration's support, Congress resisted normalising trade relations with China, which was essential for equal access to the WTO. This goal was eventually achieved, but even so, the administration's held divergent views, as one faction was sceptical because of the significant political obstacles involved in the process (Clinton, 2005: 388, 513-514 and 606).

The Clinton administration gave a major boost to China's accession to the WTO, but it was George W. Bush's administration that saw its accession to the organisation through to completion. The trade policy pursued was closely bound up with political

and values-driven motivations, in particular the promotion of liberal democracy, a feature of prominent administration programmes such as the Freedom Agenda. President Bush himself explained in his memoirs that his trade policy was a tool at the service of this Agenda (Bush, 2010: 427).

It is particularly paradoxical that these leaders attached little importance in their respective memoirs to a decision of such consequence, one that would become a principal line of attack and a focal point of criticism directed at the US foreign policy elites throughout the Trump and Biden presidencies.

Subsequently, another major point of criticism was the Iraq war. While it was closely related to previous liberal interventionist actions, it was framed in the context of the global war on terror. The change of decision-makers and the new counter-insurgency strategy slowly improved the situation after 2006, but the damage had already been done (Rothkopf, 2014: 45-83). Whereas the Iraq war had a very limited impact on the 2004 presidential elections, the situation was completely different in 2008. Aware of the fiasco, which was characterised by a trillion dollar expenditure, 4000 US soldiers killed and more than 100 000 Iraqi deaths, public opinion began to shift (Hulse and Connelly, 2006).

The mistakes of this foreign policy were not confined solely to the Iraq war. The consequences of the war on terror for US values, the improvable outcomes of the humanitarian interventionism of the 1990s and the strategic disregard of top-tier rivals such as China weighed heavily. The same was true of the consequences of the Freedom Agenda in the Middle East and of the *colour revolutions* in the post-Soviet regions, which antagonised US partners such as Egypt and Russia (Traub, 2008: 123-152).

By 2007, the management of foreign policy had become an increasing source

of public concern, particularly in light of the results of the Iraq War (Public Agenda, 2007: 3). The shift in US public opinion was marked by the relatively unorthodox positions of the new Democratic candidate: Barack Obama.

Hillary Clinton, his main rival and future Secretary of State, held positions more in line with the Democratic Party's liberal orthodoxy on issues such as the role of the United States as the indispensable nation and the use of force (Landler, 2016: 11-23). She also supported the declaration of war on Iraq in the US Congress. The same would happen with John McCain, Republican candidate in the presidential elections, who held a position close to the neo-conservative movement with proposals such as the creation of a "League of Democracies" (McCain, 2007).

Following his election victory, Obama's early decisions reflected realist postulates that had played a secondary role since Bill Clinton had come to power. He pursued a nuanced questioning of interventions aimed at imposing democracy and advocated withdrawal from Iraq, which finally took place in December 2011 (Obama, 2009a; Obama, 2011). However, he continued to engage in an increasingly unpopular war in Afghanistan, in which he failed to achieve significantly improved outcomes (Obama, 2009b).

The Obama administration also reproduced the liberal approach associated with Samantha Power, Susan Rice, Michael McFaul and Victoria Nuland, reflected in decisions such as support for the intervention in Libya and the handling of the 2014 Ukraine crisis. Neither of them had a satisfactory outcome. The Libya fiasco called into question the responsibility-to-protect doctrine, while the Ukraine crisis heightened tensions with Russia and undermined the Reset policy pursued during Obama's first term. The reaction to the Arab

Spring would similarly range from an original point of being “on the right side of history” to scepticism and the defence of a foreign policy based on vital interests. Likewise, the withdrawal from Iraq had to be partially reversed in the face of the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (Mann, 2010; Obama, 2013; Mearsheimer, 2014; Kuperman, 2015; Goldberg, 2016).

Paradoxically, criticism from the US foreign policy elites was directed at President Obama’s unorthodox positions, including his scepticism towards American exceptionalism. Prominent members of his administration, including Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, made their dissatisfaction with the foreign policy elites clear, dismissively referring to them as “the Blob”, a term that would gain currency among critics of its post-Cold War record (Walt, 2018: 91; Rhodes, 2019: 450–452).

While Obama’s presidency entailed a strategic break with previous positions, it also triggered an increasingly clear division in US society that would affect the institutional functioning of American democracy. With a system of checks & balances limiting the powers of the executive branch, bipartisan collaboration is an essential element for the functioning of the institutions. However, a series of phenomena introduced significant rigidity: the growing influence of lobbying groups, the judicialisation of politics, the growing domestic divisions and the delegation of congressional powers to executive agencies. Increasing polarisation, in turn, made bipartisan collaboration much more difficult (Fukuyama, 2014a; Fukuyama 2014b: 252–281). Foreign policy was no exception, despite its comparatively limited dependence on the legislature given the considerable powers vested in the President.

The 2016 presidential election pitted an orthodox and well-prepared candidate against a breakaway and unorthodox challen-

ger, and again the unorthodox candidate won the Electoral College and the US presidency. From this point on, the dysfunction and polarisation that had already begun in previous administrations would become even more evident.

THE IMPACT OF FOREIGN POLICY ON THE UNITED STATES DURING THE TRUMP AND BIDEN ADMINISTRATIONS

Donald Trump has been one of the most important political phenomena of recent times; a figure who was originally patronised by US elites and would eventually become one of the most influential political decision-makers in the United States (Haass, 2021: 85). This article focuses specifically on the aspects derived from his international policy, but his influence goes far beyond in terms of its significance in the domestic and even cultural spheres of a part of US society.

Donald Trump prevailed in a primary election where the presence of candidates with much more orthodox positions, such as Jeb Bush, had previously been considered favourites. However, it was not only in the Democratic camp that there was a drive for change, nor was he the only breakaway candidate in the Republican primaries. Other figures, such as Senators Ted Cruz for the Jacksonian wing or Rand Paul for the libertarian wing, cannot be excluded either (Presidency Project, 2015).

From the outset, Trump’s unorthodox positions broke with the neo-conservative and partly realist tradition of the most recent Republican Party. The most prominent of these included criticisms of democracy expansion policies, the identification of China as a currency manipulator, attacks on and demands for increased financial contributions from the US’s European and Asian

allies in exchange for their defence, and even the declaration of NATO as an “obsolete institution”. Trump’s preference for protectionism represented a notable departure from the recent Republican tradition on free trade, aligning his position more closely with pre-1990s Democratic stances and those of prominent figures on the party’s progressive wing, such as Bernie Sanders (Sanders, 2015; Trump, 2016).

Following his major primary victory, Trump stood facing Hillary Clinton, who represented the Obama legacy, despite the significant differences that there had been between them (Landler, 2016). Hillary Clinton identified more with liberal interventionist positions and was highly critical of some of President Obama’s decisions, such as his refusal to intervene in Syria after failing to abide by the red line he himself had set. Nevertheless, the Democratic candidate received the outgoing President’s support in anticipation that a Trump victory would be even more disastrous for his legacy, as was in fact the case (Trump, 2017a).

Surprisingly, and contrary to most polls, candidate Donald Trump managed to win the Electoral College despite Hillary Clinton’s victory exceeding three million in the popular vote. This victory, narrower than the one he would achieve in 2024, was partly attributable to the phenomena already noted: the growing institutional dysfunction and social polarisation that had taken place over the preceding years and decades (Sides, Tesler and Vavreck, 2017). Foreign policy was undoubtedly a minor factor, but this does not mean that it was irrelevant or non-existent.

President Trump also developed and implemented a worldview that was fundamentally different from that of his immediate predecessors: Jacksonianism (Mead, 2002: 218–263). This is a current, or, as its principal theorist Walter Russell Mead preferred to describe it, an expression of the cultural,

social and religious values of a large section of the American public. Its traits included self-reliance, individualism, equality among members of their community and courage, which would make up their “code of honour”; a code of honour that they would uphold domestically and would have implications for its application to international politics. This tradition would have certain similarities with European populist movements, such as the criticism of the US elites and the defence of the interests of the middle class or a certain nativism in its beginnings, which was later diluted. Originally, it was identified with US rural and frontier communities.

This Jacksonianism would also have a foreign policy dimension. According to Mead, this was the current that was the closest to continental Europe’s political realism. Its main features notably included pessimism about human nature; and distrust of foreign commitments, the role of international organisations and the role of its elites in defending the interests of the American people. It also advocated an assertive foreign policy vis-à-vis US adversaries. Jacksonians projected their code of honour onto international politics. Only states that respected this code of values were treated with dignity. Those who were not respectful were treated accordingly. Moreover, Jacksonians were reluctant to become involved in armed conflicts, but once they entered into war, their goal was the total defeat of the adversary. Its main international positions notably included the defence of the State of Israel. In economic and trade matters, Jacksonians favoured the defence of middle-class interests as the primary consideration and were critical of deficit and debt, although these concerns remained subordinate to the main overriding principle.

It has been debated whether the adoption of Jacksonianism as Trump’s main ideological guide was actually the work of his advisor Steve Bannon, who had become

acquainted with Mead's work. Trump's identification with President Andrew Jackson has been clear, direct and unreservedly embraced. It was no coincidence that that President Trump placed a portrait of Andrew Jackson in a prominent position in the Oval Office. Jacksonians' reaction to Democratic "identity politics" (from which they feel excluded) was identified by Mead as one of the factors that brought Trump to power in 2016 (Trump, 2017b; Mead, 2017; Glasser, 2018).

The main features of Trump's foreign policy were consistent with this worldview. This was reflected in his trade policy. It is worth mentioning that one of President Trump's first decisions was to abandon the Trans-Pacific Free Trade Agreement. An agreement that the Obama administration had struggled to sign, which had become one of the main pillars of US foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific. Also notable was the lack of distinction between allies and adversaries in its trade policy, a sign that the decision of winning back US jobs and industry would come before political considerations. The US administration opted for bilateral agreements, whereby it would promote situations favourable to US interests (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2017).

Within national security, a more ambivalent position in the first mandate was in evidence. In this respect, the leaders known as *the adults* (Mann, 2017) initially succeeded in delaying decisions such as the abandonment of the Iran Nuclear Deal. Similarly, NATO went from being "obsolete" to becoming an object of satisfaction for the US president for taking credit for increasing defence spending, which was strongly demanded of his allies (Stoltenberg and Trump 2017). Ultimately, President Trump maintained security guarantees in Asia and Europe. He also incorporated great power rivalry into US national security priorities under the 2017 National Security Strategy (The White

House, 2017: 2-3). In the Middle East, the end of the Iran nuclear deal and strong support for allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia dovetailed perfectly with Jacksonian approaches (Trump 2017b).

Not all aspects of security were so reassuring for his allies. Trump's attitude towards endless wars and his support for US withdrawal from theatres such as Syria and Afghanistan led to some foreign controversy, despite notable bipartisan and public support (Newman and Vinjamory, 2019; Wolfgang, 2020). The administration also included some multiple views, but the absence of a coordinated decision-making process gave rise to accusations of dysfunction (Tovar, 2018b: 272-273).

Both his foreign and domestic policy entered into severe crisis in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, which badly damaged US international standing and strained relations with China. It also overshadowed significant diplomatic achievements of the administration, including the economic normalisation agreement between Kosovo and Serbia and the Abraham Accords, under which the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain —later to be joined by Sudan and Morocco— recognised the State of Israel (Wike, Fetterolf and Mordecai, 2020; Trump, 2020; State Department, 2020).

Joe Biden's presidency can be seen as a last-ditch attempt by US foreign policy elites to bring US foreign policy back into line with the dominant post-Cold War standards and visions. From the outset, President Biden sought to distance himself from his predecessor in a number of areas, even if this meant imitating some of his means or instruments. Thus, the United States rejoined the Paris Agreement on climate change as soon as Biden took office (Blinken, 2021).

The Biden administration also made an atypical decision, namely issuing an *Interim National Security Guidance* instead of waiting to formulate a national security strategy

(which was only due in 2022), as is customary in such cases. Both documents would offer a much more orthodox worldview, in line with the positions of President Biden and his senior cabinet officials (The White House, 2021; The White House, 2022).

Biden's worldview would return to certain prominent liberal tenets, including the defence of a Liberal International Order. This concept was developed by John Ikenberry (2011) and spread rapidly among global foreign policy elites, particularly following Trump's 2016 victory. It refers to the body of international institutions and norms that the United States had sponsored since the end of the Second World War. The idea of a confrontation between liberal democracies and autocracies was also revived, despite having lost credibility in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War. This idea drew on theoretical approaches to international relations such as democratic peace theory, which holds that liberal democracies do not go to war with one another (Doyle, 1983; The White House, 2021: 7).

This point soon had to be reformulated due to the need to cooperate with authoritarian states such as Saudi Arabia in the 2022 document. The basis for the position held by the US was the revisionist behaviour of autocracies. Those considered hostile included China and Russia. The administration nonetheless retained the realist framework of great power competition, which continued to be identified as the primary threat. This represented a significant line of continuity with the Trump administration's approach, although now pursued from a multilateral perspective where alliances played a central role (The White House, 2022a: 7-9).

Biden and his team shared these positions to such an extent that the administration was criticised on grounds of *groupthink*. Unlike the Trump administration, all of Biden's foreign policy team members had previously worked with the

President, especially during the Obama administration. And they all held relatively orthodox foreign policy ideas (Walt, 2022).

In addition to great power rivalry, there was another continuing element in the Biden administration's policy, with important domestic effects: protectionism. While the rupture with the Jacksonianism of the Trump era was quite clear on other issues, it was not on this last point. Beyond retaining Trump-era tariffs on Chinese goods and their selective extension to the technology sector, the European Union considered itself affected by programmes involving subsidies for American products, such as the "Buy American" initiative and the Inflation Reduction Act, which gave rise to countermeasures being considered (Scheinert, 2023).

The most controversial decisions of the Biden administration, however, and those with the clearest domestic implications, were those relating to the armed conflicts in which the United States became involved, which had a particularly strong impact during the second half of his term.

The first of these was the war in Afghanistan, launched after the 9/11 attacks because of the presence of jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda in the country. Nevertheless, by the time President Biden came to power and even years before, no one was quite sure what the purpose of the US mission was, especially after a special forces operation killed Osama Bin Laden in 2011. For Richard Haass, among other authors, as early as 2009 (and despite the declarations made by Obama, among other Presidents), Afghanistan was not a war of necessity but of choice (Haass, 2009: 21-22).

Afghanistan came to epitomise what would be termed "endless wars", considered to be those without a clear endpoint in which the US military had to act, often alongside state-building attempts. Despite the conceptual debate, this case seems

to be consistent with the above definition (Cook, 2021).

Withdrawal from Afghanistan commanded a degree of consensus across both the more progressive wing of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, representing a point of convergence between Trump's positions and those of Senator Bernie Sanders (Sanders, 2017). President Trump himself had tried to bring the war to a negotiated end during his term in office, and Vice President Biden opposed the troop surge under Obama. A US exit from the Afghanistan war clearly seemed a logical choice in the face of higher strategic priorities such as the rise of China. President Biden declared that the US mission "was never supposed to be (about) creating a [...] democracy" and announced that he would not pass the war on to a fifth president (Biden, 2021). The implementation of the military withdrawal, however, was heavily criticised and produced scenes of chaos at the airport (even with a degree of Taliban acquiescence) of a kind not witnessed since the Vietnam era (Green and Doherty, 2021).

The case of the Ukrainian war was even more significant. Although the Biden administration initially sought to build a predictable relationship with Russia (Biden, 2021b), the invasion of Ukraine brought that effort to an abrupt end. Both the Biden administration's traditional worldview and its liberal convictions regarding a "rules-based international order" would lead to rejecting Russian demands and making the Russian invasion a reality (Biden, 2022a).

The administration's performance was initially widely praised. Especially when the available intelligence was made public to its allies and US forecasts became reality as of February 22, 2022. Similarly, the allies uniting behind US leadership and the adoption of a sanctions policy aimed at isolating Russia were praised in the West. The same was

true of the policy of unconditional support for Ukraine as well as the implications of enlarging NATO to include Finland and Sweden. The initial \$650 million package expanded to \$45 billion by the end of 2022 (Biden, 2022b; Matheus, 2024: 45).

Yet a war that initially appeared to be a unifying instrument of US foreign policy and a success for the Biden administration became essentially divisive as it dragged on over time. One of the areas on which this conflict would have an indirect impact was inflation (Marcetic, 2024), a crucially important point with electoral implications and one that forced the Biden administration to make changes in other areas of its foreign policy.

Consequently, President Biden paid a controversial visit to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Ben Salman, despite having previously advocated treating him as a pariah in the wake of the Khashoggi case. The reason for the visit was a request for an increase in Saudi oil production that would lessen the effects of inflation in the United States. Nevertheless, the Saudi crown prince was no more willing to increase production than he was to impose sanctions on Russia, and the response was an additional oil cut by OPEC and Russia itself (Ryan, 2022; Mazzetti, Wong and Entous, 2022).

Moreover, the position on Ukraine began to take on clear partisan overtones, as could be seen in different polls. While support for Ukraine gradually eroded across the board, opposition to the conflict would become much more prominent among Republican-identifying sectors of the population and, to a lesser extent, among independents. Democrats would still overwhelmingly support this policy (Wike et al., 2024).

At the same time, former president and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump used the war in Ukraine to attack the Biden administration, and accused it of

dragging the country towards World War III. This amplified such views within the Republican Party, although many Republican legislators continued to support Ukraine, most notably Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, who had by then distanced himself from the former President (Sentner and Bazair-Eimil, 2024).

This opposition would also explain the significant delay in approving the new \$69 billion package requested by President Biden in 2023. President Zelenski's visit to an arms factory in Pennsylvania, the most important US key state during the 2024 presidential election, triggered a major controversy and significant criticism of the Ukrainian president among candidate Donald Trump's inner circle. Ultimately, the goal of achieving peace in Ukraine became one of Trump's main campaign proposals. These events proved decisive for later developments (Bolton and Weaver, 2024; Dress, 2024; Kellogg and Fleitz, 2024).

No less divisive was the policy adopted by the Biden administration in relation to the Hamas terrorist attacks of October 7, 2023 and the subsequent Israeli reaction. The terrorist attacks, which claimed more than 1200 lives, injured thousands and resulted in more than 250 people being kidnapped, generated significant solidarity in US society. Despite his previous poor personal relationship with the Israeli prime minister, President Biden offered military support to the Israeli government (Biden, 2024).

The problem was that the forceful Israeli reaction led in turn to tens of thousands of civilian casualties and a conflict that spilled over into neighbouring Lebanon. Despite US government support, the Democratic Party split in two: an orthodox faction that supported Biden's position and a progressive wing that did not hide its dissatisfaction with the President's decisions. This discontent would extend to the State Department itself, and was reflected in the resignations

of some of its members in protest (Ipsos/Reuters, 2024; Kamarck, Heetdercks and Rusting, 2024).

Progressive sectors led protests in different areas, especially in some of the country's main universities. This led to Republican accusations of anti-Semitism against some of its leaders, as happened in the House of Representatives with the chancellors of Columbia, MIT and Harvard. Similarly, Rashida Tlaib, the only representative of Palestinian origin in the House, was censured for uttering the famous slogan "from the river to the sea" (CBS News, 2023; House of Representatives, 2023).

The discontent spread to some of the key states that would decide the 2024 presidential election, such as Michigan, putting the Democratic victory at risk. Yet the Biden administration did not even consider proposals from long-standing members such as progressive Senator Bernie Sanders, who raised the possibility of attaching conditions to military aid for Israel (Sanders, 2023).

Although opinion polls showed that Democratic supporters were openly dissatisfied with the situation, the administration did not alter its position. The best that advocates of the Palestinian cause received were verbal statements calling for an end to civilian suffering and the establishment of a ceasefire. Particular criticism was directed at the Democratic committee responsible for managing the Chicago Convention, where advocates of the Palestinian cause were not permitted to address the Convention (Harris, 2024; McGinley, 2024).

Even this modest proposal for a ceasefire failed, despite Biden's apparent frustration at Israel's treatment of Palestinian civilians. The long-awaited cessation of hostilities was only achieved after the election, through the involvement of President-elect Donald Trump's team (Dettmer, 2025).

By then, Kamala Harris and the Democrats had already lost the election. And

while it cannot be argued that foreign policy was the sole determining factor in this defeat, it is indisputable that these two divisive wars and the indirect factors stemming from them played a role in this change of administration. President Trump would again be at the helm of the US government for the following four years.

CONCLUSIONS: THE FOREIGN POLICY OF TRUMP'S SECOND PRESIDENCY AND THE CRISIS OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Trump's second presidency has revived the debate about the crisis of US democracy. Although the claim that US democracy is at risk carries clear ideological undertones and may seem simplistic from a political science perspective, the worrying trends of polarisation and systemic dysfunction identified by Fukuyama and others have persisted. Foreign policy has been one of the areas where it has not only had direct implications, but has also fuelled them.

Foreign policy has not traditionally been seen as an influential source of political change in contemporary US politics. There is no shortage of arguments to make a strong case for this, including George W. Bush's victory in 2004 despite the effects of the Iraq war. However, their role should not be underestimated either.

It is undeniable that foreign policy was mismanaged by the elites, as is the fact that the major schools of thought that dominated post-Cold War debates on US foreign policy have now been superseded. These have been displaced by the rising influence of realism and Jacksonian populism, a shift visible even within the Biden administration, as its trade policy demonstrated. A change in outlook adapted to a new era is not necessarily negative and may even have some

positive elements, but it is clear that it has not yet become fully established and continues to generate controversy. Its influence was also undeniable in the 2024 elections, where the conflict in Gaza and war in Ukraine had created huge internal divisions in both US parties and US society, which facilitated the victory of the Republican candidate.

This trend continued with Trump after his victory on November 5, 2024, this time combining the presidency and control of both chambers with the popular vote. The country was even more polarised and divided than before. Trump's priorities had not changed much from his first term, but he had a team even more unorthodox and adaptive to the President's preferences and his more energetic directions. Its members included a Fox journalist, a prominent former Democratic critic of US foreign policy (Tulsi Gabbard) and a more orthodox figure, Marco Rubio. The latter was associated with neo-conservative positions in the past and has not, however, challenged Trump's preferences. And unlike other vice presidents, J. D. Vance has played a relatively active role in this area.

The most significant decisions in this term in office have included the bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities, the imposition of a ceasefire in Gaza, intervention in Venezuela and attempts to reach a peace agreement in Ukraine. Even more forceful tariff policy has also been implemented which, again, does not distinguish between allies and adversaries. Cuts under the Trump administration have abolished USAID, which had administered US foreign aid since 1961. Recent polling on these decisions, including the proposed annexation of Greenland, reveals deep division, if not outright rejection, even within Trump's MAGA base. This evidence suggests that the trend described in this article is set to continue.

It can now be seen that Trump's foreign policy has changed little since his first term, and where it has shifted, in aspects such as military interventionism, the move has been towards more traditional positions. This has not allayed concerns about the survival of US alliances with European and Asian partners, particularly following the publication of the 2025 National Security Strategy. The Jacksonian line has held, despite apparent exceptions such as Venezuela. Both the promotion of democracy and the liberal vision of foreign policy have been sidelined for the past four years. Should Vice-President J. D. Vance inherit this legacy, both can be expected to face sustained challenge within a transformed Republican Party.

Foreign policy is not in itself a driver of democratic decay; nonetheless, it goes hand in hand with and promotes the polarisation and division that have contributed to the current perception that the first power in the international system is undergoing an erosion in its global standing. Unless the United States can articulate a new vision of its role with some degree of consensus and coherence, its position as the leading power in the international system will be significantly affected.

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