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THE WORLD AFTER THE GREAT POWERS: GEOPOLITICAL FRAGMENTATION AND STRATEGIC UNCERTAINTY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Summary: *This paper examines the transformation of the global security environment in the 21st century. It puts forward the concept of a world without traditional "Great Powers," where the strategic rivalry, partnership, and confrontation among the United States, China, and Russia are reshaping the future of global security. These dynamics not only set the conditions for geopolitical change but also trigger significant strategic uncertainty. The analysis identifies key structural shifts within the global security landscape and highlights major emerging strategic trends. It defines specific parameters of the contemporary objective reality in an effort to answer the question: "Are there 'Great Powers' in the modern era, and if so, who are they?" The paper explores the evolving dynamics between leading global actors, focusing on the clash of divergent ideological principles, value systems, and strategic interests. Drawing on open and accessible sources, the study underscores the urgent need to update terminology in the fields of security, geopolitics, and international relations. The conclusions offer targeted findings and actionable recommendations for the Bulgarian national security system, aimed at enhancing its adaptability and fostering proactive measures to ensure sustainability in an increasingly unstable world.*

Keywords: *Great Powers, geopolitical transformation, strategic uncertainty, United States, China, Russia, conflicts*

INTRODUCTION

The **relevance** of the topic is determined by the cascading transformations in geopolitics, biotechnology, industry and economy, but also in all spheres of social interactions. This finding necessitates a re-evaluation of key trends in the security environment shaped by the strategic rivalry between state and non-state actors. The concept of international relations is also evolving necessitating a rethinking of terminology in security and defence studies. A plausible description of objective reality requires a rethinking of the terminology and content of fundamental concepts with which we construct a meaningful narrative of international relations. Rethinking security concepts is necessitated by the changing role and place of states and non-state actors, which are not static but constantly evolving but are part of a dynamic process of permanent change. It is the evolution of

the world that necessitates a new understanding of geopolitical transformation and strategic indeterminacy, which goes through a rethinking of the concepts we use to describe our global security processes. Such a concept is “Great Powers”, which has influenced both academic thought and the framework of global security dynamics since 1648, going through its clearer definition after the Napoleonic Wars and the Congress of Vienna in 1815, when a new international order was established in Europe.

The **aim** of the paper is to distinguish certain aspects and manifestations of strategic indeterminacy by analyzing the process of geopolitical fragmentation in the era of risk

Research **objectives**:

1) to delineate leading aspects of geopolitical fragmentation in the modern era;

2) to outline the manifestations of strategic uncertainty;

The research **hypothesis** is that geopolitical fragmentation is a long-term process of change in the security environment that generates strategic uncertainty

The analysis supports the argument that permanent change requires upgrading the terminological apparatus because it is difficult, if not impossible, to explain the modern era with “outdated” terminology. The sub-thesis is imposed: the global security environment is entering a stage where there are no “Great Powers”.

Additional task: The change of objective reality and the need to know it, and hence to manage it, requires clarification and potentially even revision of fundamental concepts in security, defence and international relations such as Great Powers.

The **object** of study is the process of geopolitical fragmentation and strategic indeterminacy. The object of study is the interconnected and complex relationships between state and non-state actors that format the contemporary security environment in different spheres of life. The research is based on the following methodology: multidisciplinary and systems analysis, holistic approach, analysis of the security environment with a geopolitical approach, generalizations from general to particular, and inductive analysis. The paper includes comparative analysis, conclusions, implications and recommendations with a practical focus. Historical analysis and statistics are included

The research includes a wide range of literature: books and monographs in security, defence and international relations, articles from think tanks, strategic analyses of Bulgarian and foreign institutions. The analysis is supplemented with information from the global network of the Internet. Regarding the need to specify the concept of Great Powers, the analyses of prof. Leopold von Ranke (1833/2010), who reminds that the emergence of the idea and the concept of “Great Powers” can be attributed to the beginning

of the 19th century, when in Russia, Prussia, Austria, Great Britain, to which France is conditionally added. These were the leading states at the time, which played a leading role in shaping the security environment. The main arguments for this are the military and economic power of the states, but also their responsibility for maintaining international peace and stability. Great powers not only have military and economic power, but they are the most powerful legitimate systems that determine the course of history by deciding existential global issues. Ranke also focuses on moral responsibility, not just selfish national interest, but our contemporary times show otherwise, which will be the focus of the analysis in this paper.

All references used are noted in the footnote text. At the end of the article, a “References” section is provided. The dynamic geopolitical fragmentation and strategic uncertainty in the security environment define several principles of the work: academic courage and modesty, authenticity and directness. From these, the following academic limitations emerge: the paper outlines leading aspects of geopolitical fragmentation and strategic indeterminacy, and delineates key geostrategic trends and processes that form the basis of this analysis.

The analysis in the article is not a claim for an exhaustive view of modernity; it can be interpreted as the beginning of a debate in which the transformation of the world requires an upgrading of ideas about it. It outlines the main aspects of the fragmentation of the security environment by focusing on the different aspects of power: military, political, economic, socio-cultural and civilizational. The article seeks a wide readership by provoking critical thinking among different categories of security and defence learners: students, listeners, and undergraduates interested in international security, geopolitics, and strategic analysis of the security environment. The analysis has the ambition that users of its results will reach experts and specialists at different levels of the national security system of Bulgaria, and why not international experts in international academia as an unassuming sub-goal.

1. MANIFESTATIONS OF GEOPOLITICAL FRAGMENTATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The global security environment is entering a stage where there are no “Great Powers”. Fragmentation of the global security environment is manifested in the decline of power and loss of legitimacy in leading global processes. States with claims to global leadership are quite limited in simultaneously fulfilling all dimensions of the characteristics of a “Great Power”. The US is losing the common moral and value basis of its strategic leadership, its economic dominance is being challenged. China, governed by an authoritarian system that emphasizes obedience lacks an established system of allies and alliances. Russia is limited and constrained

economically, the European Union (EU) is not a unified, monolithic, military power. The focus of this article is on the US, China, Russia, and fragmentarily on the EU.

First of all, here are a few characteristics of a “Great Power”. A “Great Power” is a sovereign state acknowledged for its capacity to influence the global economic system and security landscape. The key word here is recognized, but it also has a wide range of capabilities to influence the global security level. This influence is usually demonstrated, even flaunted, through a combination of military, economic, diplomatic, and to a significant extent soft power. Great powers are distinguished from other states by their ability to form and implement grand strategy, to shape constructive global trends, to steer the world and human civilization toward future horizons, to manage international events, to project power beyond their own borders. Typically, other states consider their strategic interests, which are reflected in international strategies and policies (Oxford Reference, n.d.; Costa, n.d.). In today's age of risk, “Great Powers” are primarily states, an alliance of states, that are capable of dealing with global, existential, challenges, risks, dangers and threats to the world. Such an ideal is advocated by NATO in its Strategic Concept of 2022. The Alliance's main objective is to ensure collective defence based on a 360-degree approach, with three main tasks: deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security (NATO, 2022). After World War II, the idea of a Great Power was often associated with the permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States). The very idea of the UN integrates the idea of respect for sovereignty. A question arises, “What happens when great powers refuse to respect this principle or are similarly intent on disrespecting the founding international principles they themselves have established?” We arrive at a strategic indeterminacy that defines the contemporary security environment, as if confirming Henry Kissinger's dictum that there is no world order, no authority greater than the state. The global security system is therefore anarchistic in nature. Let us direct our efforts into an attempt to define strategic indeterminacy by the fundamental aspects that define a state as a “Great Power”.

The main characteristics of the Great Powers are military power, economic power, diplomatic influence, and soft power, which allow a global reach of their strategic interests. Relative to the countries we consider “Great Powers”, mainly the United States, China and Russia, global trends are emerging that do not fully fit the definitions of a Great Power and are part of a general transformation of the global system. Underlying the changes are the devolution and dispersion of power in the modern era, coupled with the demonopolisation of violence, in which processes non-state actors are increasingly influential. It appears that no country can fit into conventional definitions of “Great Power”. Military capability does not mean world

domination, economic power provokes retaliatory and resistive balancing policies and strategies, diplomatic mechanisms fail in the pursuit of strategic goals, soft power is replaced by the sharp power of propaganda, disinformation and altered reality. All of these compromise trust and social solidarity between different systems: individual, community, states, alliances, global security order. Considered in isolation, the different aspects of great power suggest an acceptance of the idea of entering a new era in which concepts such as “Great Power” seem irrelevant, emptied of content and meaning. This generates, in addition to strategic indeterminacy, an unexpected academic difficulty, the impossibility of describing the modern era in the “old” terms. There is a need for a new terminological vocabulary in security, defence and international relations, because their upgrading is not an act of mechanical substitution, but an ideological, meaningful and substantive categorization of terminology that reliably, authentically and qualitatively describes the objective reality.

Let's go back to the basic characteristics of the “Great Powers”.

First, the **military strength** of countries is a necessary condition for great power status in the world, but it is far from the only criterion of influence. The conventional understanding of great power military strength is the possession of modern and substantial armed forces, which includes nuclear capabilities and the ability to project power at the global security level. Great power military power means the strategic capacity to deploy forces far from one's own territory, including nuclear capabilities. In the modern era, the military capabilities of countries include the use of space, cyberspace combined artificial intelligence (AI). This section presents a comparative analysis of the military capabilities of the US, China, and Russia.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) analysis, global defense spending in 2024 was \$2.718 trillion; the U.S. spent \$997 billion on defense, accounting for 66% of total NATO military spending and 37% of global military spending (Liang, X. et al., 2025). The report by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS, 2025, 14-30) confirms the US status as a global, even undisputed, leader in the military sphere. A major argument in U.S. military strength is its military bases around the world, which number more than 750 in over 80 countries, as well as 11 aircraft carriers. A key aspect of U.S. military power is integrated command and control (C2) and the development of multi-domain operations. This involves all components of military power by seeking synergy in the interaction between land, air, naval, space, and cyber components. The United States is a leading military power in the field of artificial intelligence for military purposes and autonomous systems. The report to the US Congress states that it uses at least 128 bases in at least 51 countries around the world (Nicastro and Tilghman, 2024) It is confirmed

that the network of US overseas military bases is a strategic instrument of military power in the context of geopolitical fragmentation (Nicastro and Tilghman, 2024; Global Firepower, n.d.; Bandow, 2021). The US has more than three times as many bases as all other countries combined. The costs of these bases are the basis of political debate and domestic tensions that have formulated the idea of closing some of these bases. The cost of these bases amounts to more than USD 80 billion. The construction of the military infrastructure alone between 2000 and 2021 cost between 70 and 182 billion dollars (Vine, Deppen, & Bolger, 2021).

According to the Global Firepower Index (n.d.), Russia ranks second due to the nuclear triad, but this does not fully take into account qualitative aspects of military power such as operational readiness, technological innovation, logistical efficiency, command and control systems, and actual force projection capabilities. China outperforms Russia in industrial capacity, defence spending, and the “intelligentization” of its armed forces. According to IISS analysis, China's defense spending by purchasing power parity is \$476.7 billion. China has reached over 600 nuclear warheads and has an ambition of reaching over 1,000 by 2030, with the ultimate goal of fully modernizing the military by 2035. Chinese leader Xi Jinping's strategic goal is to achieve a “world class” Chinese armed forces by 2049 (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024, p. IX). In addition, China is building a 600-hectare military command center, 10 times the size of the Pentagon, making it the largest command center in the world. Construction includes underground bunkers for protection, including from nuclear strike (Yilmaz, 2025). The strategic rivalry between the US and China is also expressed in terms of aircraft carriers. In the spring of 2024, China commissioned its third aircraft carrier, the CV-18 Fujian, which is another, but not the last. China achieved the world's largest naval force with over 370 ships and submarines (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024, p. 48).

An essential element of China's strategy is the Digital Silk Road (DSR) initiative, which enables the country to achieve technological autonomy and geo-economic influence. China is building digital infrastructure overseas, which includes 5G networks, fibre optic cables and data centres. This trend is defining the emergence of a new phenomenon of 'digital authoritarianism', and in terms of political influence, particularly in Africa, a so-called “infrastructure” is being built. As a result, modern digital technologies and networks, used until recently for more democracy, freedom and subjectivity in relations, are becoming an instrument of digital social credit and a prerequisite for the construction of an AI-Superpower such as China (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024, pp. 12-13). The same trend is enabling Russia to create its own model of digital authoritarianism, which we can call a “Digital Gulag”.

As a result, global interconnectedness, through the Internet, is fragmenting into digital nationalism, intranet patriotism, with characteristics of digital ghettos. Nation-states, until recently known as “Great Powers”, are attempting to revise concepts such as 'spheres of influence'; new books on geopolitical issues are being published in Bulgaria that rationalise such irrational tendencies, which we can place in the context of legitimising the use of force in the destruction of the principle of sovereignty. The consequence is a return to the “jungle of war” where the right of force replaces the force of right. A trite phrase, but it accurately reflects the contemporary processes of the destruction of the peace established after the end of the Second World War. The main destroyer of this system is Russia.

One of the reasons for this is the change of the status quo from the post-Cold War period. A key measure of this is the growing military power of the Russian Federation, headed in the twenty-first century by Vladimir Putin. His main thought is nostalgia for the greatness of the USSR, with the trauma of losing Great Power status. Russia's attempt to revise its great power status is without the necessary results. One aspect of this strategy has been Russia's efforts to assist Syria, but the end result has been Bashar al-Assad's flight to Moscow. Another indicator of Russia's failure to “revise” the world order is its failure to support Armenia in the war with Azerbaijan. A third key argument is the failure of Russian strategy in Ukraine. Failure to subdue the Ukrainian state in three days, instead, the war has been going on since 2022 and at the time of writing 29.04.2025. All this proves that the second military power, according to Global Firepower, cannot achieve great power status with hard violence. The reasons are several, but the main ones are: lack of legitimacy, non-recognition of the so-called spheres of influence, insufficient technological, economic and military capacity to achieve strategic advantage. Russia is the leading nuclear power, possessing the largest nuclear arsenal in the world with 5 580 nuclear warheads, out of a total of over 12 400. The United States possesses 5,225 (Arms Control Association, 2025).

Second, **economics** determines the power of states and distinguishes great powers from other states. In today's world, the global economy is characterised by trends that undermine the power, influence and role of countries that we consider great powers.

A key indicator of this is the slowdown in global economic growth as a permanent trend, as forecast by the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2025). Forecasts point to average growth rates of 3.1% over the next 5 years, the lowest levels in decades. The main factors for this are regionalisation and disruption of supply chains, as well as a process of deglobalisation. The economic system built up after the Second World War, 1944 (Bretton Woods), is in the process of fragmentation. Further boosting negative trends is the stagnation and decline in cross-border flows since 2020. The main

factors for this are the financial crisis and, above all, the Covid 19 pandemic, which has provoked a rise in protectionism. The leading risks to economic development, as defined by the IMF director, are slowing economic development because trade is not a growth engine, but also a negative is the increase in global indebtedness. World government debt is about 93% of global GDP and is expected to reach 100% of GDP by 2030 (International Monetary Fund, 2025; Petrova, 2024). The article by Maurice Obstfeld (2025) supports the idea that even “Great Powers” like the US do not possess absolute, undeniable power and influence. One reason is the policies of Donald Trump's administration that undermine the dominant position of the US currency. This argument is coupled with the use of sanctions and political pressure from the US, which undermines confidence in the dollar. The consequence is a search for alternatives. The finding is that even the most powerful countries are not immune to the changes and transformation of power in the modern era. The overemphasis on the importance of the dollar, the geopolitical rivalries, the military race are leading to de-dollarisation, which is further reinforcing the internal instability of the US, along with the political fragmentation of American society (Obstfeld, 2025). In his book *King Dollar*, Paul Blustein argues for the continued dominance of the dollar, but that comes with a strategic responsibility. The dollar remains the dominant currency because of liquidity, the rule of law and the stability of institutions. In contrast to this comes the reign of the current administration, led by Donald Trump, who has ruled by edict, withdrawn support and funding for global institutions and initiatives, cut US aid to other countries, cut the US administration and the institutions on which the stability of the dollar is based. Even the United States depends on international markets and partners, and no country can act completely independently without poles. In addition, sanctions have a limited effect because the countries they target find ways to overcome them. This is an indicator of the limited capabilities of the only superpower with strategic interests in the world.

History confirms the thesis of the decline of the Great Powers. Dominant powers are not eternal. The British currency is a typical example, falling from its dominant position as an indicator of the cyclical nature of the global dominance of one system or another. With great power comes great responsibility, excessive use of economic pressure leads to negative consequences, loss of influence and credibility. If the main symbol, along with military power, of the American geo-economic role is the dollar, and its importance is faltering, then the claim that there are no “Great Powers” in the modern era seems relevant, global power is not absolute and eternal, and the existence of a particular “Great Power” is a temporary balance between two eras of indeterminacy and chaos (Blustein, 2025).

The fragmentation of the global economy is exacerbated by the change in trade relations. The dominance of a great power is not a static state, but a

dynamic process driven by continuous change. Between 2000 and 2024, China displaced the United States as the major trading partner for most countries around the world, underscoring that global leadership is the result of sustained economic and political effort, not a permanent given. China is overtaking the US in trade relations in Asia, Africa and Latin America. China's strategic initiatives are a major factor in this. Some of these are "Made in China 2025", "Belt and Road", with a major drive towards dominance and displacement of the US role in particular regions. In its essence, such transformation leads to geopolitical changes, value imbalance, economic transformations, which lead to a dissenergetic effect of conflict and strategic clashes (Soltani, 2025).

The leading factors for this change are demographic changes associated with the ageing populations of Western countries (institutionally democratic) compared to developing countries (often authoritarian and dictatorial). Next is the productivity differentials, which are coupled with technological advances and competition, as well as the disruption of supply chains. One dramatic phenomenon is the decline of Japan's share of the world economy from over 18% in 1994 to less than 6% in 2024. India is growing significantly, China reaches over 18% in 2024, and is already several years ahead of the US in purchasing power. A negative trend is also reported in the development of the EU, in 2024 in purchasing power the EU reaches 14-15%, projections are that by 2030 it will fall to levels of 13.04% (YCharts, 2024; Rao, 2024).

The data proves that the global economy is changing, the geostrategic center of the world is returning to Asia. Since the end of the Cold War, China has maintained an average economic growth rate of around 9%, sometimes reaching 14%, which far exceeds the growth of other countries and the global economy as a whole (ChinaPower, 2024). However, in recent years, China's economic growth has been slowing. Again, the reasons are the Covid 19 and the world economic crisis as reaching about 3%. In the first quarter of 2025, China's economy reached 5.4% due to increased exports, but the trade war with the US and increasing tariffs are disrupting global trade flows and interactions (ChinaPower, 2024). On this plane, a major domestic policy issue for Xi Jinping and China is meeting the needs of the middle class, and an economy growing at less than 6% is unlikely to meet the needs of the population (Yang, Sicular, & Gustafsson, 2024). Since 1978, China has managed to lift 800 million people out of poverty, yet about 17% of the population lives on less than \$6.85 a day in purchasing power parity. The World Bank's recommendations to China include focusing on structural reforms, improving social protection and integration, and improving the business environment, as well as reducing social inequalities (World Bank, (2024).

Where does Russia's economy stand? The country that has a claim to be a “Great Power”, with memories of a “Great Civilization” and a “Great Empire”, currently has economic growth for the beginning of 2025 of 2.5% and this is an optimistic scenario for the year. Inflation reaches 7.1%, the growth of the economy is in the defense sector. It is known that Russia's defense industry does not have the potential to produce dual-use goods, and coupled with downward trends in investment, they call into question the development of the Russian economy (Kolyandr, 2025). Russia's efforts to revive its great power status are tied to its involvement in Syria. Recent events in the Middle East and the flight of Bashar al-Assad to Moscow are an indicator that this attempt at global leadership is failing. Russia remains primarily a regional power, contending with Turkey's expanding strategic ambitions not only in the Middle East, but also in Africa and Europe (Dalay, 2024).

Along with this, Russia drops out of the top 10 economies in the world and ranks 11th in nominal GDP. This decline depends on the war in Ukraine, sanctions, dependence on natural resource exports and limited access to foreign investment (Silver, 2025). Moreover, the failure of Russia's invasion of Ukraine proves that Russia is no longer a superpower and there is no indication that this finding will be reversed, because the processes in the country point to its dysfunctional system (Kuzio, 2022). Hard power, coercion, and fear appear to be Russia's primary tools for pursuing its strategic objectives. But as we mentioned at the beginning of the article, one of the characteristics of the “Great Powers” is the acceptance of their influence by other actors in international relations.

This brings us to the **soft power** strategic competition between countries that we traditionally perceive as great powers

In GMF's analysis of the 2025 soft power and trends in transatlantic relations, it shows that the traditional concept of “Great Powers” is being eroded. The world order is transforming into a more complex and multifactorial configuration.

US leadership is maintained in terms of soft power, however, the country's reputation is declining due to Donald Trump's governance, which is a cascading process of internal imbalances and inequality in society, as well as the growing strategic clash in the Indo-Pacific, the Arctic, but also in Europe. China is seeing its soft power rise, mainly through Confucius Institutes and classrooms, with its strategic initiatives. China has overtaken the UK, now ranking second. Indicators include growing business opportunities and influence for growth and for doing business. Russia remains of limited influence, ranking 16th on the soft power index with only 5% of respondents (GMF) considering Russia the most influential world power. The EU is defined as a system with enormous potential but without unity and strategic autonomy. GMF outputs 17% of respondents place the

EU in a leading position, the younger generation in the EU considers the world fragmented and multipolar (Brand Finance, 2025; Scheffer, Quencez, Weber, 2023).

The **results** of the analysis highlight the impressive achievements of the military systems of the United States, China and Russia. On the other hand, do these findings imply balance and constructiveness in the global security environment?

The result of the sophistication of the means of violence is negative and generates strategic destabilisation, erosion of trust, geopolitical rivalry and tensions. One of the main aspirations of humanity after the Second World War is to achieve and build peace, but let us compare the budget of the UN (the global organization that builds peace). The UN budget for 2023 is 68.5 billion dollars, military spending for the same year is 2.43 trillion dollars, for 2024 it increases by 9.4%, for the period 2015-2024 the increase is 37% (Liang, et al., 2025).

Let us devote a few lines to the Global Peace Index. The trends here are also negative. The deterioration of global security is deepening, conflict in the world is increasing. The world is at a crossroads where there is a risk of escalation of conflicts to a clash between nuclear powers. The analysis reports 56 active conflicts, with over 90 countries engaged in hostilities beyond their territorial borders. Violence costs exceed \$19 trillion – 13.5% of global GDP – or nearly \$2,400 per person worldwide. The number of conflict victims in 2023 is 162,000. And despite the growing military capabilities of the United States and China, with those of the United States exceeding those of the Chinese state by about three times, the inability of the only superpower to guarantee peace in the world is evident. It is proving that hard power alone is not enough. The examples of the conflicts in Ukraine, Ethiopia, Yemen, Gaza, the clashes between India and Pakistan show a clear trend of militarization of the world, with the risk of escalation to large-scale wars (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024).

The data show that the world is being transformed into a multi-factorial system in which no one country completely dominates. The US, China and Russia have their own strengths, but also face challenges of internal security and societal consolidation. Foreign policy is increasingly shaped by domestic dynamics that often diverge from global security imperatives. This suggests that the concept of “Great Powers” is giving way to a more dynamic strategic indeterminacy in the twenty-first century.

2. STRATEGIC UNCERTAINTY IN A WORLD WITHOUT “GREAT POWERS”

The world is in search of new “Great Powers”, which means that the global security system is falling into strategic uncertainty. Writing in Foreign Affairs, Wes Mitchell highlights the need for the US to reclaim strategic

diplomacy as a key instrument of its national power. Mitchell focuses on the Trump administration's diplomatic efforts to dialogue with Vladimir Putin and to send a letter to Iranian leader Ali Khamenei. The U.S. rapprochement with authoritarian leaders is seen by Mitchell as an adjustment in U.S. foreign policy, aimed at a balance between diplomacy and force to achieve national interests rather than in pursuit of idealistic goals (Mitchell, 2025).

I beg to differ with Mitchell because one of the ideas implied in his article is the rejection of idealistic goals that are based on institutions, which means a return to the idea of “spheres of influence”, which implies a reliance on hard power rather than the norms and force of law. The dilemma of security, the “jungle of war”, war as an inevitable clash of interests have until recently been overcome on the basis of the system of institutions and norms built up after the end of the Second World War. Its destruction and the lack of an alternative implies a geopolitical transformation and fragmentation based on the idea that war is inevitable and whoever is stronger militarily will prevail.

The analysis of the IISS Armed Conflict Survey (IISS, 2025) highlights that the traditional concept of “Great Powers” has its basis, but the analysis traces the already mentioned fragmentation, which is an indicator that traditional powers are losing their relevance in the contemporary realities. The current conflicts reflect the dispersion of power in the twenty-first century and its transformation and redistribution. The status quo has changed, countries in Asia and Africa are reluctant to accept the Westphalian-centric model of configuring the world. The possibilities of asymmetric action allow entities with limited capabilities to compete with global and regional powers. Increasingly, non-state actors determine the development of societies and states. All of this is coupled with non-traditional challenges, risks, dangers and threats to global security. These factors are contributing to the outbreak of frozen conflicts and new wars, with the inability to resolve and stop them. Traditional conflict management and resolution mechanisms and institutions are ineffective. An additional factor in the growing strategic uncertainty is the use of proxy armies and groups by Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, but not only, leading to an erosion of regional and global security. The traditional great powers lack the means and mechanisms to influence and manage the global economy and especially the security sphere because of the swarming of actors as well as a growing trend of identity politics, tribalism and fragmentation of the social fabric of societies and individual systems. In addition, there is an inability of the “great powers” to guarantee the security of their strategic partners. The US talks of protectionism and isolationism, Russia is failing in Syria, China is facing an internal crisis. The dreamed-of multipolarity is again facing a nuclear threat in South Asia, Europe is also threatened by Russia with a tactical nuclear strike. The Indo-Pacific is the arena of a clash of nuclear

states, Israel as a nuclear state sees relations with its neighbours as an existential issue. The growing influence of regional players such as Turkey, Brazil, and Germany is changing traditional dynamics and blurring the boundaries of the idea of “Great Powers” (International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2024, pp. 5-11).

The only superpower, the United States, a major player in NATO and Euro-Atlantic security, has defined its strategic priorities as “America First”. In this context, the EU is increasingly talking about strategic autonomy, but this marks a retreat from the Euro-Atlantic vision of shared peace and global social solidarity. The unifying idea for this in the post bipolar system is the “American dream”, which claims universality internalised with democratic institutions. Its manifestation is reflected in the growing trend of the world's middle class, but a significant part of the population remains outside it, giving rise to the rise of dissenters. A space for a “Chinese dream” is opening up. It is inherently introverted (for Chinese only), all others must either submit at the state level or be melted into the Han ethnic community in China, as happens with Tibetans and Uighur Muslims, for example. The fragmentation of the world is also reflected in the fact that the US's retreat from European security opens up space for Russia's “Russian dream”, which it integrates by military force and rules by fear, and whoever disagrees with it is expelled, killed or destroyed if we are talking about countries such as Ukraine and Georgia, for example.

CONCLUSION

1) The concept of “Great Power” has been found to be losing its substantive and practical value in the modern era. One of the reasons for this is the changing parameters of state power in the military, economic, diplomatic and in the sphere of patterns of social relations, also known as soft power.

2) The trend of geopolitical fragmentation has emerged as a leading characteristic of the international system, manifested through regionalisation, deglobalisation and weakening of global institutions.

3) The idea that the world is entering strategic uncertainty due to the manifestation of structural weaknesses of traditional “Great Powers” such as the US, China and Russia was confirmed. Each is multiplying its internal vulnerabilities at the global security level.

A post-“Great Powers” world is defined by geopolitical fragmentation. The absence of new great powers defines a strategic indeterminacy that is reinforced by competing visions of the future of civilization. US economic and security dominance is eroding, leading to a breakdown of the institutional and normative order of the world. The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) analysis of Trump's foreign policy proves that US capabilities are diminishing, and the actions of the presidential

administration are determined not by Grand Strategy but by conjunctural processes and domestic political dynamics (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). New forms of dependency, power, and economic change are emerging. Traditional conflict management mechanisms are failing; security is determined by situational adaptation to the strategic environment. Global systemicity is defined by multiple circles of influence in which state and non-state actors provoke their vulnerabilities. The present analysis confirms the need to optimize the contemporary notion of international relations, which goes through a revision of concepts such as “Great Powers”. There is a need for security and defence scholarship to integrate new concepts that describe objective reality in a qualitatively accurate way. The world in the twenty-first century is formed on the basis of competing visions, we can call them “national dreams”, which are not accepted by other subjects in international relations. Polycentrism and strategic indeterminacy are forming because systems do not maintain a vacuum, the world is in search of new “Great Powers”. Bulgaria is also required to show intellectual flexibility, institutional adaptability, rational integrity and ethical sustainability. In the geopolitical fragmentation that has emerged, combined with the internal instability of the “Great Powers”, a lasting strategic indeterminacy is emerging. This requires a critical rethinking of the narrative with which we describe the world. The words with which we structure it are changing. It requires vision, conceptual evolution and academic courage. Change in the modern age is not mechanical fragmentation and indeterminacy, but a strategic test of humanity's existential choices. To constructively tackle this task, regional cooperation needs to be strengthened to achieve collective strategizing, and new approaches to world governance need to be integrated and understood and made sense of in new ways, only in this way will the future become possible for all of us to achieve. Strategic uncertainty marks the end of the relative predictability that characterised the post-World War II period. It turns out that the deconstruction of the unipolar system means not only the vertical replacement of one power by another, but a horizontal redistribution of power, from global institutions to local and transnational networks of influence. The solution in this context is not a return to the old paradigms of power, but strategic imagination, diplomatic and systemic flexibility, but above all political will.

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