

Shaping the World Order

The Strategic Logic Behind the Foreign Policies of Great Powers

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Abstract

This study investigates the strategic reasoning behind the foreign policies of great modern powers, addressing important shortcomings in international relations literature that often portray great power behavior as unchanging or overly simplified. Moving beyond conventional realist views that focus solely on power and security as fixed goals, this research emphasizes how great powers employ a wide array of tools and adaptive tactics to operate within an increasingly intricate, competitive, and unstable global landscape. Utilizing a descriptive-analytical approach based on qualitative examination of secondary sources, the paper explores how great powers set strategic aims, utilize varied instruments of statecraft, pursue regional influence, balance cooperative multilateralism with independent unilateral actions, and adjust flexibly to global crises and rivalries. The results demonstrate that the conduct of great powers is complex and evolving, combining military, economic, and diplomatic means tailored to dynamic geopolitical circumstances. Additionally, the ability to respond effectively to emergent challenges such as pandemics and technological changes emerges as a crucial factor in maintaining global influence. The study calls for a refined understanding of great power politics that unites enduring goals with adaptive policy shifts. For policymakers, it highlights the necessity of appreciating the fluid and adaptive nature of great power strategies to better predict international trends and manage competition. Ultimately, this work contributes to theoretical literature by offering a comprehensive model for understanding how great powers continuously shape and transform the international order in the contemporary era.

Keywords: Great Powers; Foreign Policy; Strategic Adaptation; International Relations; Global Governance

Introduction

The foreign policy conduct of great powers remains a decisive factor shaping the global order and the overall architecture of international relations. These influential states, endowed with substantial political, economic, and military resources, play a central role in determining global security, stability, and governance mechanisms (Abebe, 2009). Hence, analyzing the motivations and strategic calculations behind their foreign policies is essential for a deeper understanding of current international developments. This study addresses the key question: In what ways do contemporary great powers formulate, implement, and modify their foreign policies to preserve and strengthen their influence amid an increasingly intricate, competitive, and unstable international environment?

The main aim of this research is to examine the strategic reasoning that informs the foreign policy decisions of great powers by exploring multiple critical aspects. These include their fundamental strategic goals, the various tools of statecraft they apply, encompassing military, economic, and diplomatic means, their regional strategies and efforts to maintain spheres of influence, their inclination toward multilateral or unilateral global governance models, and lastly, their ability to adjust to unforeseen global crises and mounting rivalries. By integrating analysis across these domains, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive and nuanced perspective on how great powers navigate complex geopolitical landscapes to advance their national interests.

The academic literature on great power politics offers a wide array of insights into different components of their behavior. Traditional and neorealist theories emphasize the primacy of power accumulation and security concerns as fundamental drivers, rooted in the anarchic nature of the international system where states act in self-interest (Tüfekçi, 2025). In

contrast, more recent scholarships have expanded this understanding by focusing on economic diplomacy as a vital dimension of influence, the innovative roles of diplomacy, and the importance of regional power balances. Moreover, ongoing debates about multilateralism versus unilateralism reflect the shifting institutional preferences great powers adopt in pursuit of their agendas on the global stage (Milstein, 2024).

Despite these rich contributions, a significant gap exists in combining these diverse elements into an integrated framework that captures how great powers flexibly respond to sudden and rapid changes in the global environment. Phenomena such as pandemics, technological innovations, economic crises, and heightened geopolitical competition increasingly push great powers to reevaluate conventional strategies and develop adaptive approaches to safeguard their influence and security interests.

This article seeks to address this theoretical and empirical shortfall by employing a descriptive-analytical methodology grounded in qualitative research. It draws upon an extensive survey of secondary materials, including peer-reviewed scholarly articles, foundational monographs, and key theoretical works within International Relations and Strategic Studies. The focus lies on examining the dynamic interaction between long-standing strategic objectives and the versatile use of instruments of statecraft across both regional and global arenas. Additionally, the study emphasizes how great powers adjust their foreign policy strategies to effectively confront emergent global shocks and rivalry dynamics, thereby enriching understanding of their evolving roles in today's international system.

By doing so, this research not only advances theoretical perspectives but also provides practical insights valuable for policymakers and analysts who aim to anticipate and interpret the actions of great powers within a rapidly transforming and uncertain world. Through a systematic

exploration of motivations, tools, and adaptive capacities, the article contributes to the scholarship on how these key actors influence the trajectory of global politics and the emerging international order.

Theoretical Framework

This article is anchored in Realism, a foundational and widely respected theoretical approach within the field of international relations. Originating from the insights of classical thinkers such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, Realism centers on the idea that states are the principal actors in a global system characterized by an absence of overarching authority (Aria, 2025). Under this anarchic structure, states, especially those recognized as great powers, are primarily motivated by the pursuit of survival, power enhancement, and strategic positioning (Tripp, 2013). This perspective offers a clear and persuasive explanation for the reasoning behind the foreign policies adopted by great powers, particularly regarding their efforts to influence or maintain the international order in line with their national interests (Rosato & Schuessler, 2011).

A fundamental tenet of Realism is the recognition that the international arena operates without a central governing authority to regulate state behavior or resolve disputes (Ganchev, 2022). This state of anarchy compels states to depend on their own resources and capabilities to safeguard their security. As a result, power is regarded as an essential element in international relations. Great powers, by definition, possess the requisite military strength, economic resources, and geopolitical leverage to extend their influence on a global scale (Wolska et al., 2025). Accordingly, their foreign policy choices are strategic in nature, aimed not only at securing their own survival and sovereignty but also at establishing power configurations that favor their interests (Behr, 2020).

This study primarily employs the lens of Structural Realism (Neorealism), as developed by Kenneth Waltz, which stresses that the distribution of power across the international system shapes state behavior (Taliaferro, 2000). From this vantage point, great powers are viewed as rational actors operating within structural constraints, striving either to maximize their relative capabilities or to prevent rival states from achieving dominance (Dehnavi et al., 2021). Additionally, insights from Offensive Realism, as theorized by John Mearsheimer, are incorporated, highlighting that certain great powers may seek hegemony as a strategy to guarantee long-term security through predominance rather than equilibrium (Aria, 2025).

Realism thus serves as a powerful theoretical framework to analyze the manner in which great powers develop foreign policies amid a competitive and uncertain international environment (Woldearegay, 2024). Their engagement, whether through forming military alliances, employing economic pressure, or engaging in diplomatic negotiations, can be interpreted as calculated responses to threats and opportunities presented by the anarchic system. While alternative theoretical approaches provide valuable perspectives on the role of international norms, institutions, and identities, Realism remains the most straightforward and effective paradigm for understanding the strategic rationale behind great powers' efforts to mold the global order to their advantage (Alexandrovich & Bae, 2016).

Research Methodology

This research adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology rooted in qualitative analysis, aiming to explore and elucidate the strategic logic underlying the foreign policies of great powers through the prism of Realist theory. The study is entirely based on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed academic articles, authoritative books, and seminal texts within the

fields of International Relations and Strategic Studies, with a particular focus on Realism and great power politics.

To ensure academic rigor and relevance, the literature review concentrated on works that explicitly address the strategic behavior of great powers within a power-competitive international landscape. The inclusion criteria prioritized publications offering comprehensive theoretical insights and empirical analyses related to power dynamics, security competition, and state behavior under conditions of systemic anarchy. Foundational and contemporary writings by leading Realist scholars, such as Kenneth Waltz (1979), John Mearsheimer (2001), and Hans Morgenthau (1948), constitute core references.

Sources were systematically gathered through comprehensive searches in reputable academic databases, including JSTOR, Scopus, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar. Search terms combined keywords such as “Realism and Foreign Policy,” “Great Powers and World Order,” “Power Politics,” and “Strategic Behavior in International Relations.” The search was limited to English-language publications, with an emphasis on literature published over the past four decades to encompass both classical and neorealist perspectives. Studies lacking a theoretical foundation in Realism or focused solely on descriptive accounts without analytical depth were excluded to preserve the conceptual integrity of the study.

The collected literature underwent thematic analysis and conceptual synthesis aimed at identifying recurrent patterns and frameworks explaining how great powers pursue their strategic interests, manage power rivalries, and shape the global order. This approach emphasizes theoretical interpretation rather than empirical testing, focusing on how Realist principles elucidate state behavior under conditions of systemic rivalry.

Strategic Objectives of Contemporary Great Powers

Expanding upon the Realist perspective and methodological approach previously discussed, this section explores the concrete strategic objectives pursued by contemporary great powers as they operate within a global system marked by anarchy and persistent competition (Buyukliev, 2025). While the theoretical grounding has established the primacy of power and survival, here the focus shifts toward unpacking the tangible aims that shape great power behavior and foreign policy in today's geopolitical environment. As power dynamics evolve and new regional and global challenges emerge, great powers continuously reassess and realign their strategic priorities (Paikowsky et al., 2025). A central objective for all great powers is the protection of national security. In the absence of a supranational authority capable of enforcing rules or deterring aggression, states must rely on their own capabilities to prevent external threats. This necessitates maintaining a credible defense posture and ensuring strategic deterrence (Research, Society and Development, 2025). For instance, the United States' extensive global military footprint is designed to respond to crises and deter adversaries, while Russia's assertive posture in its near-abroad reflects its emphasis on securing geopolitical buffer zones. Security considerations, therefore, serve as a foundational driver of great power strategy (Lamine, 2025).

Beyond security, great powers strive to extend their global influence and elevate their international standing. This goal often involves shaping international institutions, promoting normative agendas, and engaging in global governance mechanisms that reflect their strategic interests (Gooch et al., 2022). China's global economic outreach, particularly through initiatives like the Belt and Road, demonstrates a calculated attempt to strengthen influence across multiple regions. The European Union, meanwhile, exercises soft power by promoting regulatory

standards, development aid, and diplomatic engagement to reinforce its international role (Bolton & Minor, 2016). Another vital objective concerns economic resilience and control over strategic assets. Great powers prioritize access to vital resources, energy supplies, markets, and trade infrastructure as part of their broader national interests (Tüfekçi, 2025). Securing these economic lifelines not only ensures domestic prosperity but also reinforces geopolitical leverage. Policy initiatives in this domain range from trade pacts and regional economic zones to military patrols in maritime chokepoints (Sethi, 2025).

Lastly, great powers are committed to managing strategic rivalries and preserving systemic equilibrium. In line with Realist thinking, states often engage in balancing behavior to prevent the emergence of a threatening hegemon (Pedersen, 2023). This is evident in the growing competition between the United States and China, where both powers deploy military, economic, and diplomatic tools to constrain each other's rise and maintain regional advantage (Hsiung, 2015). Altogether, the strategic priorities of today's great powers revolve around safeguarding national security, expanding geopolitical influence, ensuring economic access, and maintaining balance in the international system (Abbondanza & Wilkins, 2023). These interconnected objectives underscore the calculated and competitive nature of foreign policy formulation in a world where power remains the ultimate determinant of state behavior (Reshetnikova, 2024).

Instruments of Statecraft: Military, Economic, and Diplomatic Tools

Following the discussion of the strategic priorities pursued by great powers, attention must now turn to the practical means through which these objectives are implemented. The effectiveness of a great power is determined not only by its overarching ambitions but by its ability to apply a diverse range of statecraft instruments with precision and adaptability (Chen &

Evers, 2023). Among these, the military, economic, and diplomatic tools form the foundational triad through which states exert influence, protect interests, and respond to global developments. The choice and application of these instruments are shaped by both strategic necessity and the specific geopolitical conditions confronting the state at any given moment (Han, 2025). Armed force continues to be the most prominent and immediate tool in the arsenal of great powers. Though commonly associated with warfare and deterrence, the role of military capabilities extends into peacetime operations, strategic posturing, and alliance commitments (Blagden, 2021). Through forward deployments, military exercises, and defense partnerships, great powers establish their presence, deter adversaries, and reassure allies (Heimann et al., 2024). Illustrative examples include the global military footprint of the United States, Russia's assertive defense of its regional interests, and China's military expansionism in the South China Sea. Each demonstrates how force is employed not solely for conflict but as a calculated tool of strategic influence (Ouyang, 2024; Sella, 2024).

Simultaneously, economic instruments enable great powers to shape international behavior using both inducements and constraints. These tools encompass a range of actions such as sanctions, foreign investments, development assistance, and preferential trade arrangements (Chen & Evers, 2023). In contrast to the immediacy of military intervention, economic measures often operate incrementally but can yield significant geopolitical advantages over time. Examples include Washington's deployment of sanctions as a form of pressure, Beijing's use of infrastructure financing to expand its influence, and Brussels' deployment of trade leverage to advance regulatory standards and diplomatic goals (Zhao, 2024). In addition, diplomacy serves both as a standalone strategy and as a mechanism that supports military and economic engagement. Through diplomatic channels, states construct alliances, broker agreements, and

influence global norms and institutions. Forums like the United Nations Security Council, G20, and regional summits provide venues for formal negotiation, while public diplomacy and media outreach allow states to shape perceptions and assert soft power globally (Heimann et al., 2024).

Regional Engagement and Sphere of Influence Strategies

Following the identification of strategic goals and the tools used to pursue them, it is crucial to examine how great powers focus their efforts across specific geographic zones. Regional engagement and the establishment of spheres of influence form a central pillar of great power behavior, enabling states to exert structured control and strategic leverage within proximate or high-priority areas (Fuad, 2024). While global ambitions remain vital, it is often at the regional level where great powers implement targeted strategies, using proximity, historical relationships, and geopolitical imperatives to justify their presence and influence (Gooch et al., 2022). Rather than dispersing resources evenly across the globe, great powers strategically concentrate their attention on regions that hold significant geopolitical or economic relevance. These areas may possess critical infrastructure, energy resources, or serve as vital transit hubs for global commerce. By embedding themselves within these spaces, great powers aim to safeguard access, secure regional leadership, and deny competing powers the opportunity to establish dominance.

The United States, for example, maintains robust strategic involvement in the Indo-Pacific through a web of bilateral alliances and strategic partnerships, including those with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia. These ties are reinforced by consistent military deployments and freedom of navigation operations, aimed at counterbalancing China's rise and preserving a favorable regional order (Khalid & Mat, 2024; Rai, 2022). In contrast,

Russia has concentrated its regional influence-building in its immediate periphery, particularly Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, where it leverages historical linkages, military cooperation, and energy dependency to solidify control. Through entities such as the Eurasian Economic Union and CSTO, Moscow seeks to re-establish its dominance over its traditional sphere of influence and deter Western encroachment (Putra et al., 2024).

China's regional strategy, meanwhile, has focused on deepening interdependence through infrastructure and investment. The Belt and Road Initiative represents a multifaceted effort to link China to strategic regions including Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East (Petry, 2022). By financing and constructing critical infrastructure projects, Beijing is gradually expanding its economic footprint, while also enhancing its political leverage and strategic access in key transit corridors (Liu & Wang, 2022).

Multilateralism vs. Unilateralism in Shaping Global Governance

Following the exploration of great powers' strategic objectives, their utilization of statecraft instruments, and their regional influence approaches, it becomes crucial to analyze the broader systemic methods they adopt in influencing global norms and institutions (Lips, 2018). A central distinction in this context lies between multilateralism and unilateralism, two contrasting yet frequently overlapping strategies employed by powerful states to assert control and shape global governance. The preference for one over the other often reveals deeper ideological leanings and strategic considerations that inform how a great power perceives and interacts with the international system (Bisley, 2008).

Multilateralism is characterized by cooperation among multiple nations and engagement through established international organizations. It signifies a commitment to shared rule-making,

collective problem-solving, and adherence to legal norms and institutional mechanisms (Chytoupoulou, 2024). Great powers embracing multilateralism often seek international legitimacy, burden-sharing, and long-term stability in the global order. The European Union exemplifies a consistent multilateral actor, with member states such as France and Germany pushing for cooperative governance through key global platforms like the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and global climate frameworks (Ying, 2024; Mohamud & Ga'al, 2025).

Conversely, unilateralism reflects an orientation toward independent, often uncoordinated, action outside collective agreements or global institutional frameworks. This approach places emphasis on national sovereignty, self-determination, and freedom of maneuver in foreign policy decisions (Holloway, 2000). The United States, particularly in the post-Cold War context, has at times leaned heavily into unilateral conduct, especially when international consensus is perceived as limiting or contrary to national interests. Notable examples include the 2003 military intervention in Iraq and the decision to withdraw from several multilateral agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord and the Iran Nuclear Deal under certain administrations (Baig, 2023).

China's strategy demonstrates a hybrid approach, combining multilateral engagement with alternative institutional creation. Beijing has actively increased its participation in organizations like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, projecting itself as a cooperative global player (Dunford & Liu, 2024). At the same time, it has developed new frameworks, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative, that allow it to wield influence outside traditional Western-led institutions and build a parallel structure of global economic and political connectivity (Ly, 2021).

Adaptive Strategies in Response to Global Shocks and Rivalries

Building upon the analysis of the strategic goals of great powers, their statecraft tools, regional strategies, and global engagement models, it becomes essential to examine how these actors adjust their behavior in response to sudden global disruptions and intensifying power competitions. The dynamic and often unpredictable nature of the international system necessitates the adoption of flexible and innovative strategies. Global shocks such as pandemics, financial crises, technological disruptions, and large-scale conflicts, alongside escalating rivalries, demand that great powers rethink their traditional approaches and develop agile responses to protect their interests and maintain influence (Simarmata & Simarmata, 2025).

One of the key adaptive strategies observed among great powers is the acceleration of self-reliance in critical sectors. For example, in response to disruptions in global supply chains triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, several powerful states have shifted toward enhancing domestic production capacity in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, semiconductors, and energy (Katada, 2025). This move reflects a recalibration of economic policy aimed at reducing strategic dependencies and insulating national economies from future vulnerabilities (Lawton et al., 2023).

Another adaptive measure is the recalibration of military doctrines and alliance frameworks. In the face of renewed geopolitical competition, especially between the United States and China or between NATO and Russia, great powers have updated their strategic doctrines to include hybrid warfare, cyber defense, and space militarization (Lomachinska et al., 2025). At the same time, security partnerships and military coalitions have been restructured to better respond to emerging threats. This is evident in NATO's renewed strategic concept and the Indo-Pacific defense alignments involving the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia under initiatives like the Quad (Sorokin, 2025).

Moreover, great powers are increasingly adopting diplomatic agility by diversifying their engagement beyond traditional alliances. This includes forging new economic and political partnerships in the Global South and participating in flexible coalitions that can act swiftly without the constraints of formal institutions (K.C., 2023). For instance, China's outreach to Latin America and Africa and the U.S. emphasis on minilateralism in Asia represent a pivot toward a more responsive diplomatic posture in a fragmented global order (Sun et al., 2024). In a climate of uncertainty and intensified rivalries, the ability to adapt has become a cornerstone of strategic resilience. These evolving strategies underscore that great powers are not merely reactive but are actively redesigning their global roles to navigate complexity, mitigate risks, and sustain their positions within an increasingly competitive and unstable international environment (Rodríguez & Rüland, 2022).

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight that the foreign policies of contemporary great powers are shaped by a sophisticated blend of enduring goals and flexible adaptations to global developments. While traditional Realist perspectives underscore the pursuit of security and power in a decentralized global system (Aria, 2025; Wolska et al., 2025), this research demonstrates that these objectives are realized through a carefully calibrated mix of military, economic, and diplomatic instruments (Chen & Evers, 2023; Han, 2025). Great powers no longer rely solely on coercive force but strategically integrate soft power, economic incentives, and institutional engagement to achieve their ambitions (Paikowsky et al., 2025; Abebe, 2009).

The study emphasizes the complementary nature of statecraft tools. While military capabilities remain central to deterrence and security provision (Blagden, 2021; Heimann et al., 2024), economic measures and diplomacy are increasingly crucial in shaping the international

environment. For instance, China's Belt and Road Initiative and the European Union's regulatory influence illustrate how non-military strategies can effectively extend a state's reach and authority (Gooch et al., 2022; Zhao, 2024). This demonstrates that contemporary great powers employ a hybrid strategy that combines coercive and persuasive mechanisms to respond to complex and competitive international conditions.

Regional strategies further reveal the calculated deployment of influence. States prioritize geographic areas of strategic importance, leveraging alliances, economic investments, and military presence to reinforce dominance and restrict competitors (Fuad, 2024; Khalid & Mat, 2024). The United States' focus on the Indo-Pacific, Russia's concentration on its near-abroad, and China's cross-regional infrastructure investments exemplify the tailored approaches adopted by great powers to achieve both regional and global objectives (Rai, 2022; Petry, 2022). These patterns affirm that Realist principles of power maximization are applied with attention to spatial, historical, and economic contexts (Pedersen, 2023; Abbondanza & Wilkins, 2023).

The interplay between multilateralism and unilateralism also emerges as a defining feature of modern foreign policy. Great powers shift between collective cooperation and independent action based on strategic advantage, legitimacy, and flexibility (Lips, 2018; Bisley, 2008). While the European Union's consistent multilateral engagement supports normative frameworks and shared governance (Ying, 2024; Mohamud & Ga'al, 2025), unilateral measures by the United States or mixed approaches by China highlight the importance of adapting governance strategies to context and opportunity (Baig, 2023; Ly, 2021). This demonstrates that effective global influence requires a nuanced balance between institutional participation and sovereign discretion.

Finally, the study highlights the significance of adaptive strategies in response to crises and intensified rivalries. Events such as pandemics, technological disruptions, and heightened geopolitical competition have prompted states to strengthen domestic resilience, modernize military capabilities, and diversify diplomatic engagements (Katada, 2025; Lawton et al., 2023; Lomachinska et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2024). These adaptive measures illustrate that great powers are proactive actors, constantly redesigning policies to safeguard national interests and maintain influence in an increasingly volatile international landscape (Rodríguez & Rüland, 2022).

Overall, the discussion underscores that contemporary great powers operate at the intersection of traditional Realist objectives and innovative, context-sensitive strategies. By integrating military, economic, and diplomatic tools with region-specific engagement and flexible governance approaches, these states navigate the complexities of global politics effectively. The findings challenge rigid or deterministic interpretations of power politics, highlighting the value of analytical frameworks that account for both strategic continuity and adaptive responsiveness for scholars and policymakers alike.

Conclusion

This study has examined how contemporary great powers formulate and implement their foreign policies, emphasizing the combination of long-term strategic goals with flexible, adaptive measures. It shows that these states operate within a complex, competitive international system where securing national interests, maintaining influence, and safeguarding survival remain central priorities. The findings highlight that great powers rely on a diverse set of tools, military, economic, and diplomatic, to pursue their objectives effectively. Concentrating on regions of strategic importance and establishing spheres of influence allows them to exert control

and advance their interests in a targeted manner. Additionally, the choice between multilateral and unilateral strategies demonstrates the adaptability and context-driven nature of modern statecraft. The study also underscores the importance of responsive strategies in the face of global disruptions, technological advancements, and intensifying rivalries. By enhancing domestic capacities, modernizing military and economic approaches, and diversifying diplomatic engagements, great powers are able to maintain their position and influence despite a rapidly changing global environment. In summary, the behavior of contemporary great powers reflects a balance between traditional power-driven objectives and the need for strategic flexibility. Understanding these dynamics provides valuable insights for scholars and policymakers, offering a clearer perspective on how influential states navigate the complexities of global politics and maintain their roles within an evolving international order.

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