



THE ARCHITECTURE OF CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION

**Centre for International Studies
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Centre for Strategic Analysis «TESPA»

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PREFACE

This text emerged as an attempt to explain complex international processes in a language that is simple, but not simplistic. Contemporary international competition increasingly rarely looks like a direct confrontation between two states or two blocs. It unfolds through rules, institutions, sanctions, technologies, logistics, security guarantees, information signals, negotiation formats and attempts by individual actors to shift the boundaries of what is considered permissible.

We live in a period in which the international system has not disappeared, but its rules are being challenged more and more often. Some states seek to preserve the basic principles of the existing order. Others seek to reshape it in line with their own interests. Still others use crises, wars, energy dependencies, trade routes or sanctions restrictions as instruments of bargaining and influence.

For this reason, following the news alone is not enough to understand contemporary politics. It is necessary to see which signals are repeated, what functions they perform, what patterns they form and what scenarios they may lead to. A single statement, a single summit or a single sanctions package matters only when we understand its place within the broader architecture of international interaction.

This work is designed as an explanatory text. It does not aim to provide final answers to every question of international politics. Its purpose is different: to show the logic of the processes already taking place and to give the reader a tool for navigating them.

The focus is not only on events, but also on mechanisms. Why do states make particular statements? Why do sanctions become not only a form of punishment, but also a way of structuring behaviour? Why do security

guarantees for Ukraine matter not only for Ukraine? Why can China simultaneously criticise Western dominance and yet not be interested in the complete destruction of the global system? Why does Russia use destabilisation as an instrument for regaining influence? Why can the United States avoid directly controlling every process while still remaining a system-forming actor through rules, frameworks and constraints?

This material is also a step towards the broader analytical framework of TESPA. In brief, TESPA is a way of viewing international processes not as a set of random events, but as a system of signals, patterns, scenarios and architectural changes. In this version of the text, the methodology is not presented as a complex academic apparatus. It is used as a logic of explanation: from event to signal, from signal to pattern, from pattern to scenario, and from scenario to an understanding of architecture.

The diagrams occupy a special place in this work. They are not intended to oversimplify reality, but to show the connections between processes. A diagram makes it possible to see what often becomes fragmented in ordinary text: the roles of actors, directions of influence, the logic of bargaining, the configuration of security, the structure of dependencies or the transformation of rules.

This text is intended for readers who want to understand more clearly how contemporary international competition is organised: experts, students, journalists, representatives of civil society, public officials, researchers and anyone for whom it is important to see not only events, but also the processes behind them.

The main idea of this work is simple: contemporary international competition is not only about territory, resources or influence. It is also about the right to define the rules according to which other actors are expected to operate. That is why analysis today must be not only event-based, but also architectural.



INTRODUCTION

All diagrams in this publication are analytical explanatory models developed within the TESPА approach. They do not constitute an official description of state policies, but reflect the author's interpretation of structural logics, mechanisms and roles in contemporary international competition.

The Architecture of Contemporary International Competition

The contemporary international system is in a state of deep tension. This tension does not always appear as direct war or open confrontation. More often, it exists in the form of sanctions, diplomatic signals, technological restrictions, competition over standards, struggles for markets, control over logistical routes, information pressure, security guarantees and negotiating conditions.

To understand this system, it is important to move away from overly simple explanations. The world cannot be described only as a confrontation between “democracies and autocracies”, “the West and the non-West”, or “two poles”. Such formulas may be convenient, but they often conceal a more complex reality.

A more precise approach is to view contemporary competition as a contestation of hierarchy within a unipolar system. This means that the United States remains the central system-forming actor, but its leading role is increasingly challenged by other states. China seeks to reshape the rules and weaken the Western normative monopoly. Russia's strategy has undergone a visible evolution: from an attempt to impose “multipolarity” on the world on its own terms — through coercion against Ukraine and the forceful contestation of the unipolar system — towards

a more defensive, destructive and crisis-based model. In this model, Russia is no longer so much constructing an attractive alternative to the world order as trying to restore or preserve its status through destabilisation, obstruction, threats of escalation and bargaining through crises. Iran uses regional assets, sanctions adaptation and the threat of escalation as instruments of bargaining. The European Union is gradually attempting to move from the role of a normative and economic actor towards a more explicit regional security function. Ukraine has become one of the central nodes through which the international system's ability to prevent the legitimisation of forceful border change is being tested.

In this logic, international competition is not chaotic. It has an architecture.

Here, architecture does not mean a formal institutional structure or a single international treaty. Architecture means a structure of roles, rules, constraints, mechanisms and channels of interaction through which actors organise their behaviour. It may be formal or informal, stable or still in formation. It may exist through alliances, sanctions regimes, trade rules, security guarantees, negotiating formats, logistical routes or recurring practices.

For example, the Ukrainian case is not merely a regional war. Several systemic questions pass through it at once: whether a state can change borders by force; whether a great power has the right to a sphere of influence; whether security guarantees can be formed without the participation of the aggressor state; whether the European Union is capable of becoming a regional security manager; and whether the United States is prepared to transfer part of the operational burden to its allies while retaining the systemic level of management.

Similarly, the Strait of Hormuz is not merely a geographical point on the map. It can be a strategic asset through which Iran influences regional security, energy flows, negotiations with the United States, the roles of China and India, and the



future regime of access to critical maritime infrastructure.

Sanctions are also not merely punishment. In the contemporary system, they are increasingly becoming a mechanism for managing behaviour. Primary sanctions target a specific actor. Secondary sanctions discipline the environment around that actor. Technological restrictions alter long-term development opportunities. Financial restrictions force states to search for alternative channels. In this way, a sanctions architecture emerges, affecting not only the target state, but also third countries, businesses, banks, logistics and political decision-making.

In this work, international competition is examined through several key dimensions.

The first dimension is the struggle over rules. States compete not only for resources, but also over which actions will be considered legitimate, which formats will be recognised, which guarantees will have force and who will have the right to define the terms of interaction.

The second dimension is the struggle for status. Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, Iran, Turkey, India and other actors seek not only material gains, but also recognition of their role. Status may be no less important than resources, because it determines who is admitted to negotiations, whose interests are taken into account and who is able to block decisions.

The third dimension is the struggle over security architecture. Ukraine, Taiwan, the Strait of Hormuz, the Black Sea region, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific are not isolated points of tension. They are nodes through which the resilience of rules, alliances, guarantees and access regimes is tested.

The fourth dimension is the struggle over economic and technological dependency. Trade routes, energy, critical materials, semiconductors, financial systems, sanctions regimes and alternative payment mechanisms are becoming instruments of strategic competition.

The fifth dimension is the struggle over interpretation. Actors seek not only to act, but also to explain their actions in ways that make them acceptable. This is why it is important to analyse not only facts, but also narrative frames: how an event is described, who is called legitimate and who is not, which formulas are repeated and which concepts are promoted.

This work is structured to combine explanations of processes with diagrams. Each diagram is intended to help reveal the structure: who acts, through which instruments, for what purpose, against whom or together with whom, and how this affects the overall configuration.

The aim of this publication is not to predict the future in categorical terms. Its aim is to provide the reader with a map of processes. Such a map does not eliminate uncertainty, but it makes it easier to navigate.

The central question running through the entire text is not only what is happening in the world, but what architecture is being formed through these events.





Why international competition has an architecture.

When we speak about the architecture of international competition, we are not referring to a single plan according to which all states act. We are referring to a system of roles, rules, constraints and mechanisms within which actors seek to strengthen their own positions, limit their competitors or change the conditions of the game.

International competition is expressed not only through military confrontation. It also operates through diplomacy, sanctions, trade, technology, energy, logistics, international organisations, regional crises, information campaigns and negotiation formats. This is why individual events cannot be viewed in isolation. They are parts of broader processes.

For example, Russia's war against Ukraine is not only a regional war. It has become a node in which several systemic questions are being tested at the same time: whether a great power can change borders by force; whether the international system is capable of restraining revisionism; whether the United States and the EU can preserve unity; whether Russia will receive a veto over the security choices of neighbouring states; and whether the Ukrainian case will become a precedent for other conflicts.

Likewise, the rivalry between the United States and China cannot be reduced only to trade or technology. It concerns who will define standards, rules of access to markets, security boundaries, conditions of interaction with the Global South and permissible forms of influence in the international system.

Therefore, the main task of this work is not simply to describe individual conflicts, but to show how they form part of the broader architecture of contemporary international competition.

The architecture of international competition.

By the architecture of international competition, we mean not a formal organisation and not a single centre of control, but a system of roles, rules, constraints, levers and nodes through which states interact with one another. In this system, each major actor seeks either to preserve existing rules, to change them, or to block rules that restrict its opportunities.

The architecture of competition consists of several basic elements.

First, there are actors — states, alliances, international organisations and regional centres of power that have their own interests, resources and strategies.

Second, there are rules — formal or informal principles that determine what is considered permissible in the international system and what is not. For example, whether borders may be changed by force, whether a great power has the right to control the choices of its neighbours, whether sanctions may extend to third actors, or whether the forcible blocking of maritime routes is permissible.

Third, there are nodes of competition — territories, regions, routes, technologies or political issues through which the resilience of the entire system is tested. Ukraine, Taiwan, the Strait of Hormuz, sanctions regimes, energy routes, strategic technologies and financial infrastructure are such nodes.

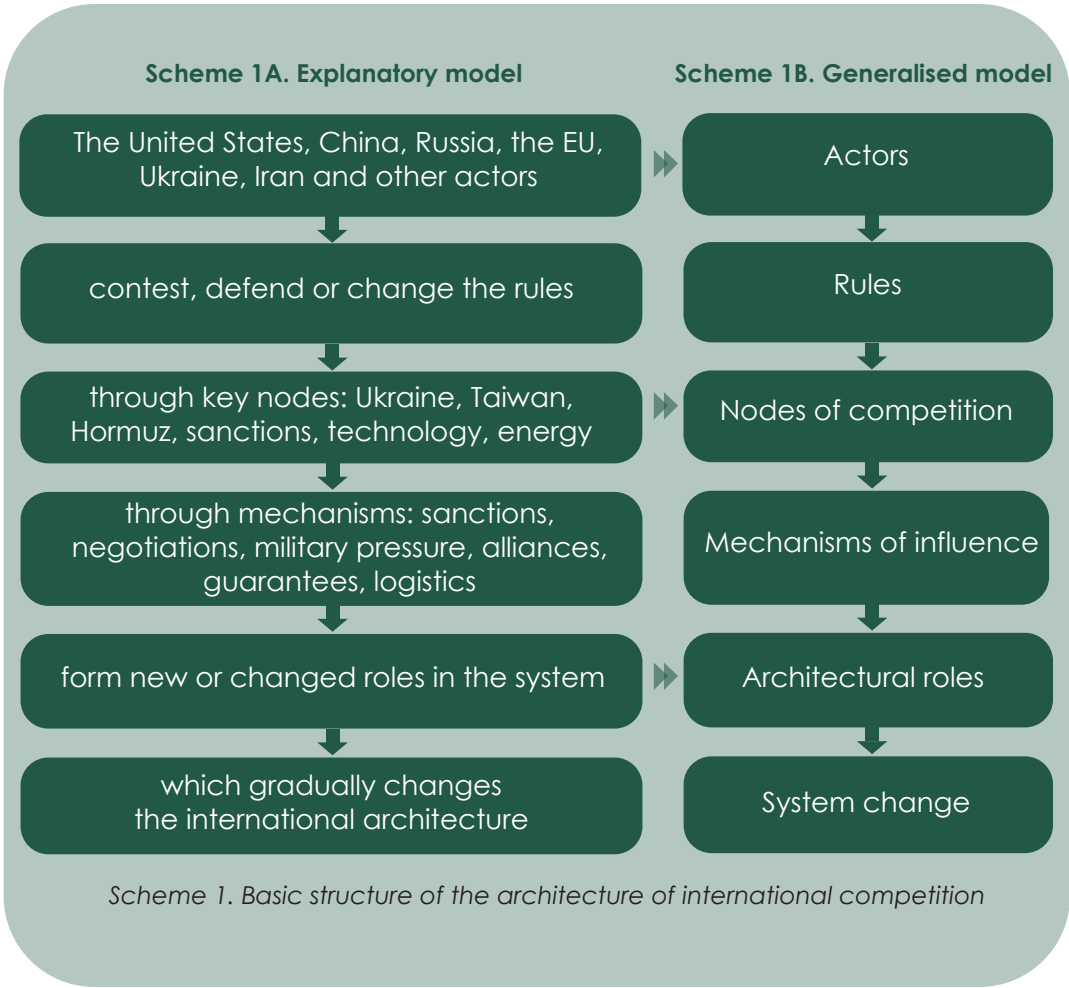
Fourth, there are mechanisms of influence — sanctions, military presence, negotiation formats, alliances, security guarantees, economic dependencies, information campaigns, diplomatic initiatives, logistical corridors and institutional decisions.

Fifth, there are architectural roles. One actor may perform the role of a systemic guarantor, another that of a regional manager, a third that of an actor of destabilisation, a fourth that of a mediator, and a fifth that of a node of containment



or an object of pressure. It is the distribution of these roles that shows how the system functions at a given moment.

In this logic, it is important to analyse not only individual events, but also how they change the positioning of actors within the system. A single statement may be mere rhetoric. But if it is backed by a new mechanism, a new role for an actor, or a change in the rules of access to a particular space, it acquires architectural significance.



Explanation of the scheme

This scheme shows that international competition cannot be reduced to direct confrontation between states. It takes place through the struggle over rules and over control of the key nodes of the system.

For example, Russia's war against Ukraine is not merely a bilateral conflict. It has become a test of whether a forcible change of borders can be legitimised as a new norm. That is why the Ukrainian case matters not only for Europe, but for the entire international system.

Likewise, the Strait of Hormuz is not merely a regional security issue. It is a node through which Iran can turn the threat of instability into a bargaining asset. Sanctions, too, are not merely a punishment, but a mechanism for shaping rules of behaviour for states and companies that interact with sanctioned actors.

Thus, the architectural approach makes it possible to see not only events, but also how roles, rules and mechanisms of the international system change through those events. This is precisely the basis of the TESPА approach to the analysis of contemporary international competition.





I. FROM STABLE UNIPOLARITY TO THE CONTESTATION OF HIERARCHY

After the end of the Cold War, the international system entered, for a time, a period of relatively stable unipolarity. The United States remained the main system-forming actor, while most key international rules, institutions and security mechanisms functioned within a Western-centric architecture.

During this period, the leading role of the United States did not mean full control over all processes. However, it was the United States that had the greatest capacity to define the boundaries of permissible behaviour, build coalitions, apply sanctions, support allies, influence international institutions and set the basic framework of the global order.

Over time, however, this hierarchy began to be contested. Some actors did not necessarily seek to destroy the international system completely, but sought to change their place within it, weaken the Western normative monopoly, or secure recognition of their own rules and spheres of influence.

This is why contemporary international competition is more accurately described not as a full transition to multipolarity, but as the contestation of hierarchy within a unipolar system. This means that the old system has not yet disappeared, but its rules, statuses and mechanisms are increasingly becoming the object of struggle.

In this logic, each of the key actors acts differently.

China seeks to reformat the rules so that they take greater account of its interests, economic weight and normative vision. It does not always act through the direct destruction

of the system. More often, China seeks gradually to weaken the Western monopoly over the definition of rules and to secure for itself the role of a responsible but autonomous systemic actor.

Russia initially sought to impose its own vision of “multipolarity” on the world through the forcible contestation of the unipolar system and the coercion of Ukraine. However, after this plan failed to produce the expected result, its strategy shifted increasingly towards a defensive-destructive model: Russia seeks to preserve or restore its status through destabilisation, the blocking of other actors’ formats, the threat of escalation and crisis bargaining.

Iran uses regional assets, sanctions adaptation, negotiation fragmentation and the threat of escalation as instruments of bargaining. Its strategy lies not only in direct confrontation with the United States or Israel, but also in an attempt to turn its own vulnerabilities and regional levers into negotiation resources.

The EU is gradually seeking to move from the role of a normative and economic actor towards a more distinct regional-security function. The Ukrainian case has become a test for the EU’s capacity not only to declare values, but also to form long-term mechanisms of financing, sanctions, security guarantees and defence coordination.

In this system, Ukraine is not a passive object of competition, but a central node through which the capacity of the international order to prevent the legitimisation of the forcible change of borders is being tested. This is why the Ukrainian case matters not only for Europe, but for the entire international system.

Thus, contemporary international competition has emerged not because the system has completely collapsed. It has emerged because the old hierarchy remains in place, but is increasingly being contested. Actors are not simply fighting one another; they are fighting over rules, status, access to mechanisms of influence, and the right to define the future architecture of the international order.



II. CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE UNIPOLAR SYSTEM

The contemporary international system should be viewed not as a completed transition to multipolarity, but as a stage of contestation of hierarchy within a preserved unipolar structure. In the period after the end of the Cold War, the United States remained the central system-forming actor, and the international system functioned as a relatively stable unipolar hierarchy. However, in the contemporary period this hierarchy is increasingly being contested by other states that seek to revise their place in the system, change the rules of access to resources, status, security and international influence.

Russia initially sought to impose on the world a model of “multipolarity” on its own terms. In this logic, the war against Ukraine was not only a regional conflict, but an instrument of coercion aimed at a broader change in international rules: recognition of spheres of influence, restrictions on the sovereign choice of neighbours, Russia’s return to the status of a great power, and revision of the post-Cold War hierarchy. Ukraine became a key node of this strategy, because it was precisely through forcible pressure on Ukraine that Russia sought to secure recognition of new rules at the global level.

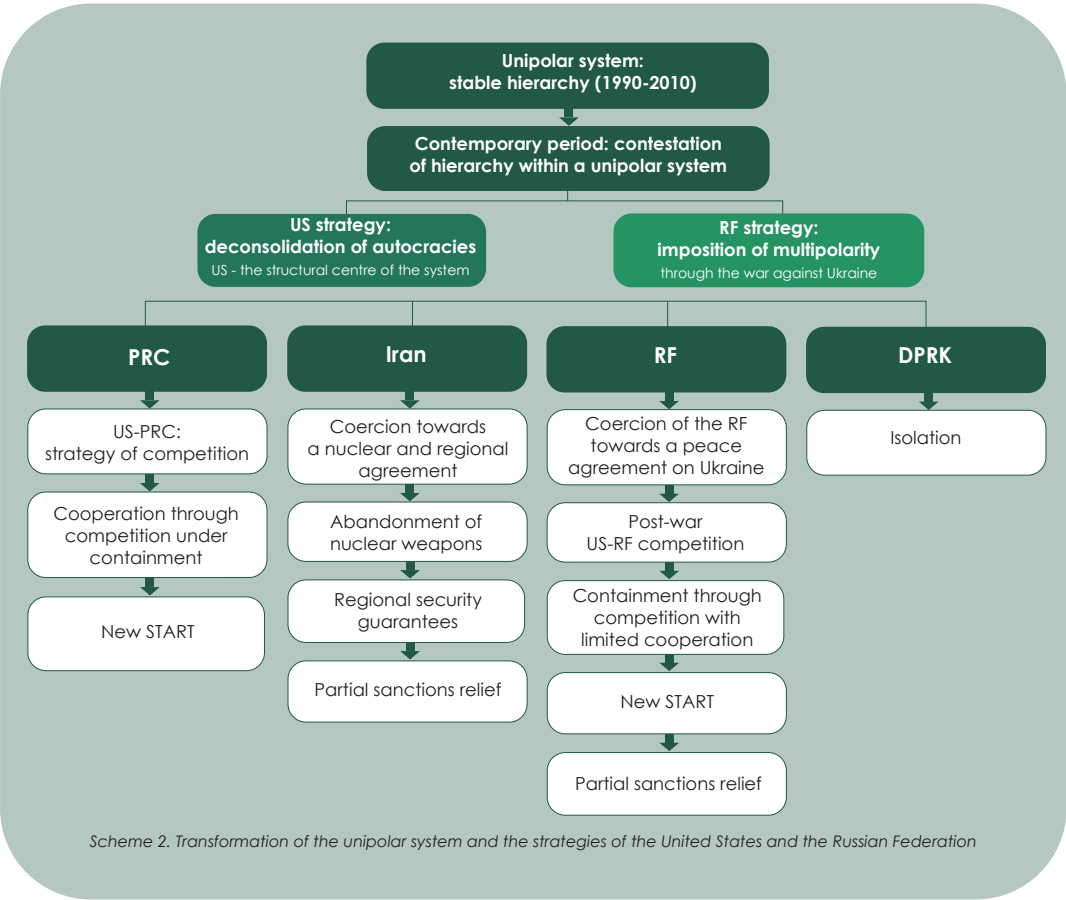
At the same time, this strategy did not produce the result Russia expected. Instead of rapid coercion into accepting the Russian version of multipolarity, it led to prolonged military, sanctions-related, diplomatic and status exhaustion. Therefore, contemporary Russian behaviour is increasingly

taking on an adaptive character: Russia is no longer merely promoting an alternative model of world order, but is seeking to preserve or restore status through destabilisation, the blocking of other actors' formats, the threat of escalation, information pressure and crisis bargaining.

In response, the United States is seeking to prevent the consolidation of autocratic actors into a single counter-systemic bloc. Its strategy is differentiated in character: with regard to China, a model of managed competition with elements of limited cooperation is being formed; with regard to Iran, coercion towards an agreement is applied through sanctions, military containment and negotiation channels; with regard to Russia, containment, sanctions pressure, escalation control and efforts to prevent the legitimisation of the forcible change of borders are combined; with regard to the DPRK, a predominantly isolation-based regime is maintained.

Thus, the contemporary system is not collapsing chaotically, but is passing through a phase of tense restructuring. Its basis remains a unipolar structure, but within it the struggle over rules, statuses, nodes of control and mechanisms of influence is intensifying. This is why it is more accurate to speak not of simple multipolarity, but of the contestation of hierarchy within a unipolar system.





Explanation of the scheme

The scheme shows how the international system is moving from a relatively stable unipolar hierarchy to a stage of its active contestation. At the upper level, the basic change is recorded: the system is not disappearing and is not automatically transforming into a multipolar one, but its internal hierarchy is becoming the object of struggle.

At the centre of the scheme are two strategic lines. The first is the US strategy, aimed at the deconsolidation of autocratic actors and at preventing their unification against the existing system. The second is the strategy of the Russian Federation, which was initially aimed at imposing multipolarity on a negotiated basis through the war against Ukraine, and which later increasingly transformed into a defensive-destructive model of preserving status through coercion, blocking and escalation bargaining.

The lower level of the scheme shows differentiated tracks of interaction with key actors. China is viewed as the main systemic competitor of the United States, but not as an actor that automatically destroys the global system. Iran represents a case of coercion towards an agreement, in which sanctions, negotiations, regional security and possible guarantees are combined. Russia is a separate track in which the war against Ukraine has become the main instrument of contesting the rules. The DPRK remains an example of an isolation track, which has not yet been included in a more complex model of managed competition.

The scheme also shows that contemporary competition takes place not only through military confrontation, but through a combination of different mechanisms: sanctions, negotiations, security guarantees, arms control, partial cooperation, coercion and limited integration. It is through these mechanisms that the system not only reacts to crises, but gradually restructures its own architecture.

The main conclusion from this model is that contemporary international competition has a structural character. The United States is trying to preserve the system through control over rules and differentiated work with different actors. Russia attempted to change the system through coercive force, but is increasingly being forced to adapt to the narrowing of its own strategic space. In this configuration, Ukraine acts as a central node through which the capacity of the international system to prevent the legitimisation of the forcible change of borders is being tested.

This model makes it possible to show that contemporary international competition is not a chaotic clash of states. It has an architecture: actors contest or defend rules, act through key nodes, use different mechanisms of influence, and gradually form new or changed roles in the system.

In this logic, Russia's war against Ukraine is not only a regional war, but a central test for the entire system: whether the forcible change of borders can become an acceptable way of revising the international order, or whether the system is capable of blocking such a precedent.



2.1 Russia as the initiator of systemic confrontation through the war against Ukraine

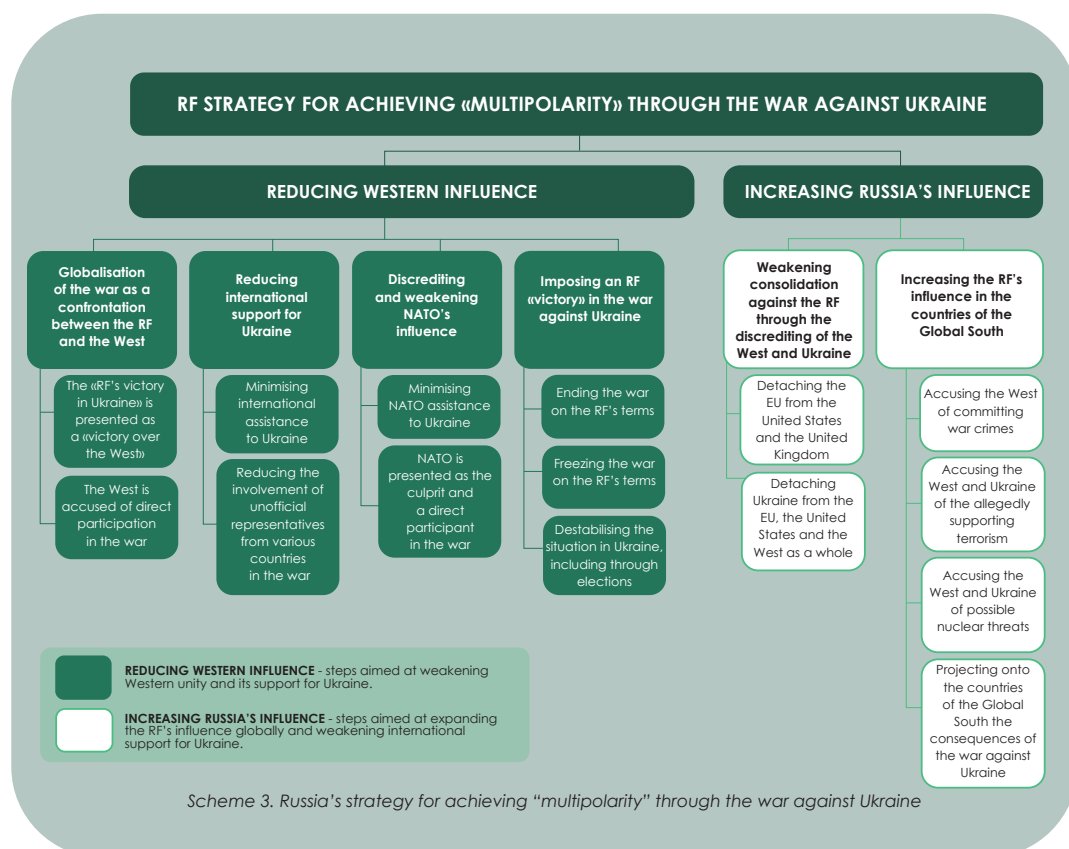
Within contemporary international competition, Russia acts not only as a state waging war against Ukraine, but as an actor that is trying to use this war to revise the broader rules of the international system. Its initial strategic logic lay in an attempt to impose on the world a model of “multipolarity” on its own terms: not through the gradual agreement of new rules, but through the creation of a position of strength, the coercion of Ukraine, and the demonstration of Russia's capacity to change the status quo by military means.

In this logic, the war against Ukraine was intended to perform for Russia not only a territorial or military-political function. It was meant to become proof that the previous unipolar hierarchy no longer worked, and that Russia was capable of forcing the West and the broader international system to take its demands into account. This is why, from the outset, the Russian strategy was connected not only with Ukraine, but with the broader question of international order: who has the right to define the rules, the boundaries of influence, security guarantees and permissible forms of changing the status of territories.

A key instrument of this strategy was the construction of an image of a “position of strength”. Russia sought to present the war not as aggression against a separate state, but as a global confrontation with the West. Within this framework, a potential Russian “victory” in Ukraine was meant to be interpreted as a defeat of the West, and not merely as a change in the situation on the Ukrainian track. This allowed Moscow to transfer the significance of the war from the regional level to the systemic level: Ukraine was presented not as an independent subject, but as a field of struggle between Russia and the Western bloc.

This strategy includes several interconnected directions. The first is the reduction of Western influence through the

globalisation of the war, the discrediting of NATO, the reduction of international support for Ukraine, and the imposition of a formula for ending or freezing the war on Russia's terms. The second is the strengthening of Russia's own influence through the undermining of Western consolidation, attempts to divide the United States, the EU and the United Kingdom, and work with countries of the Global South, where Russia promotes anti-Western narratives and seeks to present itself as the representative of an "alternative majority".



Explanation of the scheme

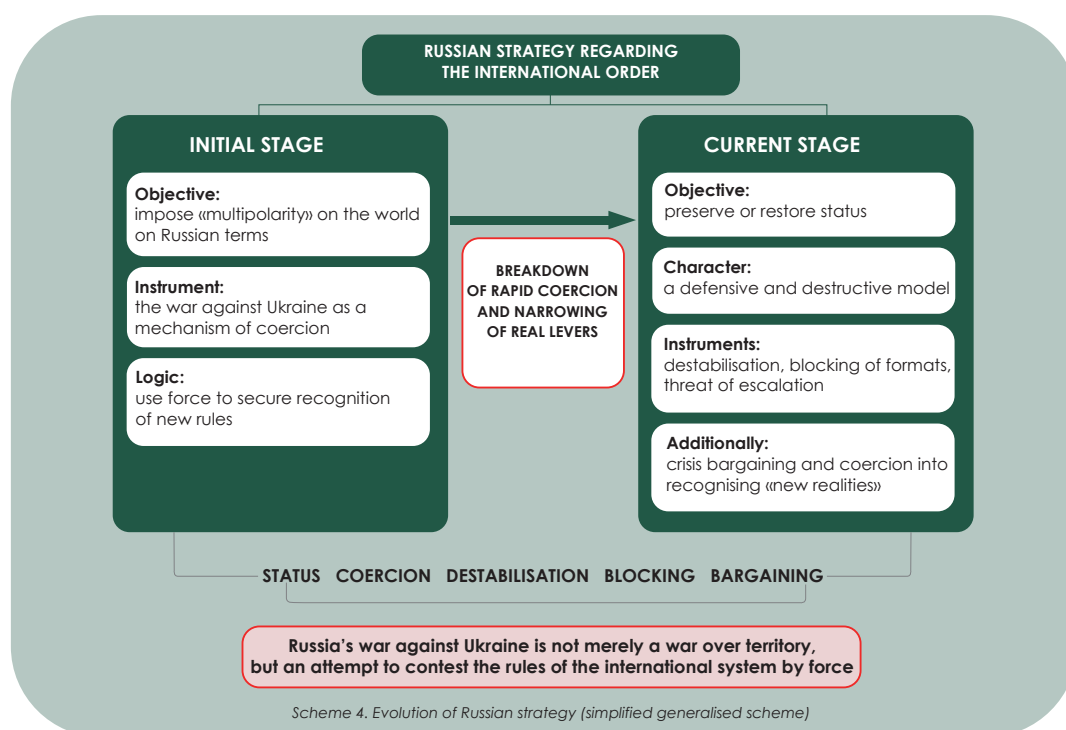
The scheme shows how Russia is trying to use the war against Ukraine as an instrument of systemic coercion. Its strategy consists of two main directions: reducing Western influence and strengthening its own status. The first direction includes the globalisation of the war as a confrontation between Russia and the West, the discrediting of NATO, the reduction



of support for Ukraine, and the imposition of an end to or freezing of the war on Russian terms. The second direction involves undermining Western consolidation, attempts to detach Ukraine from its partners, and the use of the countries of the Global South as a space for anti-Western positioning.

At the same time, this scheme shows not only a set of Russian instruments, but also the evolution of the very logic of Russian strategy. Initially, Russia sought to use the war against Ukraine as a mechanism for imposing on the world a new “multipolarity” on its own terms: through the coercion of Ukraine, pressure on the West, and an attempt to secure recognition of new rules by force. Over time, however, this strategy increasingly took on a defensive and destructive character. Russia is no longer so much creating an alternative international order as trying to preserve or restore its status through destabilisation, the blocking of other actors’ formats, the threat of escalation, crisis bargaining, and coercion into recognising the “new realities”.

It is precisely this change in logic that can be presented in a generalised form in the following scheme.



Explanation of the scheme

The scheme summarises the transition of Russian strategy from the ambition to impose a new model of international order to an attempt to preserve status in a situation where its real levers of influence are narrowing. In this logic, the war against Ukraine ceases to be merely an instrument of coercive pressure on Ukraine and becomes, for Russia, a way of bargaining with the broader international system. Its key objective lies not only in territorial control, but also in coercing other actors into recognising Russia's right to influence the rules of European and global security.

Thus, Russia's war against Ukraine is not only a war over territory. It is an attempt to contest the rules of the international system by force. Its main systemic function is to force other actors to recognise the result of violence as a new norm. This is why the Ukrainian case has central significance: whether the forcible change of borders is legitimised will determine not only the future of Ukraine, but also the capacity of the international system to preserve the basic rule of the inadmissibility of the coercive revision of the status quo.





2.2 The United States as the coordinator of systemic competition

The US strategy for preventing the consolidation of autocratic actors is built not as a single universal model, but as a differentiated system of interaction with key states. Its logic is to prevent the formation of a single anti-Western bloc by allocating different states to separate tracks — competition, containment, coercion, partial integration or isolation.

In this system, the United States acts not only as one participant in international competition, but as an actor that seeks to structure its rules, boundaries and regimes of interaction. This is why the American strategy is not unified, but functionally differentiated: different models are applied to different actors depending on the level of threat, the possibility of bargaining, the degree of integration into the international system, and the potential to change the rules.

With regard to China, a model of managed competition is being implemented. It combines containment, technological restrictions, rivalry over the rules of the international system, and limited cooperation where this serves the interests of systemic stability. It is the China track that is the most systemic for the United States, since it concerns not merely regional rivalry, but the contestation of hierarchy within a unipolar system.

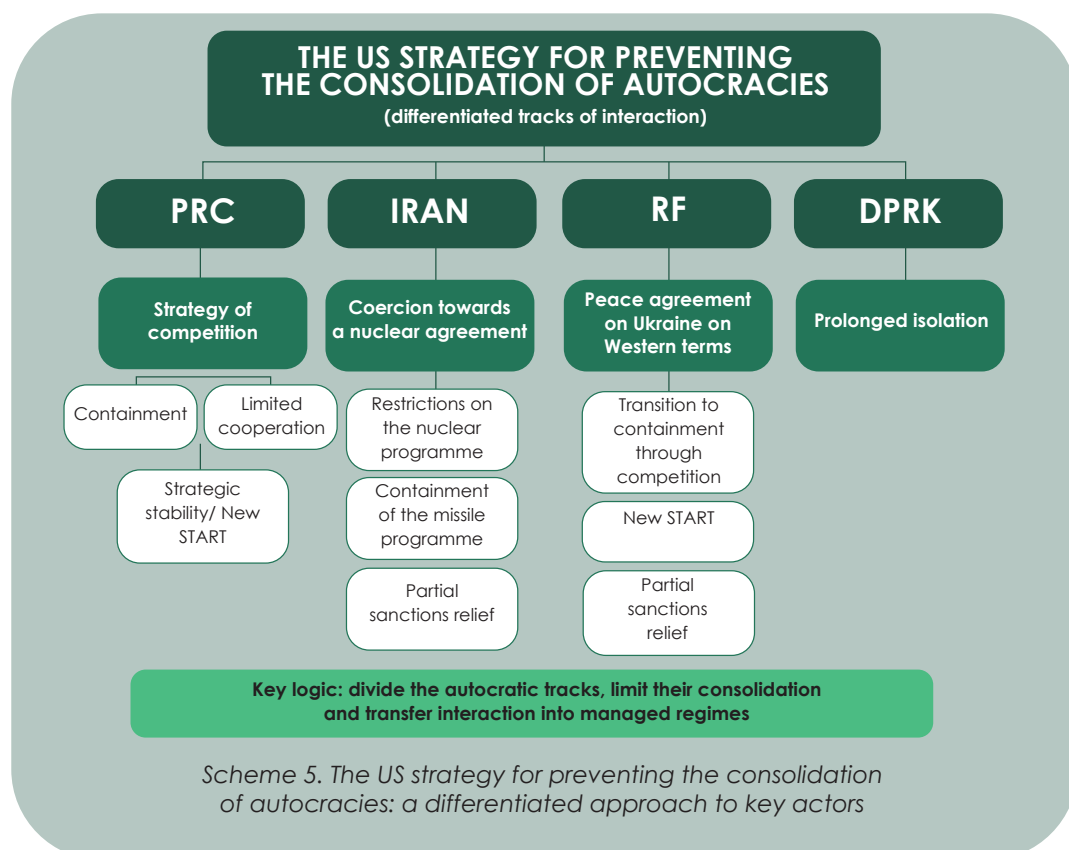
With regard to Iran, a model of coercion towards a restrictive agreement is used. Its purpose is not so much the full transformation of Iran as coercing it into accepting restrictions in strategically important areas — nuclear, missile-related and regional-security — in exchange for partial incentives, including sanctions relief or limited integration into controlled regimes.

With regard to Russia, the American strategy follows a different logic. It is aimed at preventing the forcible change of rules, containing revisionism, and blocking Russia's attempt to restore great-power status through

war. In the event of a transition to the post-war stage, this strategy may involve not normalisation, but the transfer of the Russian track into a regime of long-term containment through competition, restrictions, risk control and, possibly, selected mechanisms of interaction.

In this model, North Korea so far remains outside integration mechanisms and retains a regime of isolation. This reflects a situation in which the United States does not see sufficient conditions for transferring this track into another format of interaction.

Thus, the US strategy does not consist in simultaneous direct confrontation with a “bloc of autocracies”, but in its decomposition into separate regimes of interaction. The key logic of this strategy is to divide a potentially consolidated anti-Western space, limit the possibilities for joint action among its participants, impose different rules of the game on them and, where possible, transfer competition into managed frameworks.





Explanation of the scheme

The scheme shows that the United States does not view China, Iran, Russia and the DPRK as a single monolithic bloc. On the contrary, the American strategy consists in separating these actors into distinct tracks of interaction, each of which has its own logic, instruments and limits of permissible integration.

With regard to China, the United States applies a model of managed competition, in which containment is combined with limited cooperation and attempts to keep China within the framework of controlled systemic interaction. With regard to Iran, the logic is one of coercion towards an agreement through a combination of sanctions, negotiations, restrictions on the nuclear programme and possible partial easing of pressure. With regard to Russia, the strategy is focused on limiting its capacity to change the rules by force, above all through the war against Ukraine, with a possible subsequent transition to containment through competition. In this model, the DPRK remains primarily in a regime of isolation.

Thus, the United States acts not as an actor that simply confronts a “bloc of autocracies”, but as a coordinator of systemic competition that seeks to prevent the consolidation of China, Russia, Iran and the DPRK into a single anti-Western centre of power. The key logic of this strategy lies in the sequence: divide, limit, partially integrate where possible, and transfer competition into managed regimes.

This logic is especially visible in US relations with China. Unlike Russia, which increasingly acts through destabilisation and the forcible contestation of rules, China remains a systemic competitor with which the United States simultaneously competes, contains its technological and military strengthening, but also preserves channels of cooperation. This is why the next section examines the model of managed US–PRC competition.

2.3 The model of managed US–PRC competition

Relations between the United States and the PRC in the contemporary international system should be described not as a direct new bipolarity, but as a model of managed competition within the broader logic of the contestation of hierarchy in a unipolar system. In this model, China acts as the main systemic competitor of the United States, but at the same time remains an actor that Washington does not seek to push completely outside the global system. On the contrary, the American strategy is to combine competition, containment and selective interaction, while preventing both the destruction of the system and the strengthening of Chinese dominance in its key nodes.

This model rests on two interconnected logics. The first is the sphere of competition, where the United States and China compete for technological, economic, political and strategic advantage. This includes trade relations, semiconductor technologies, artificial intelligence, rare-earth metals, investment and financing, activity within international organisations, space and the Arctic. It is here that the main space of rivalry over rules, standards and access to the resources of the future is formed.

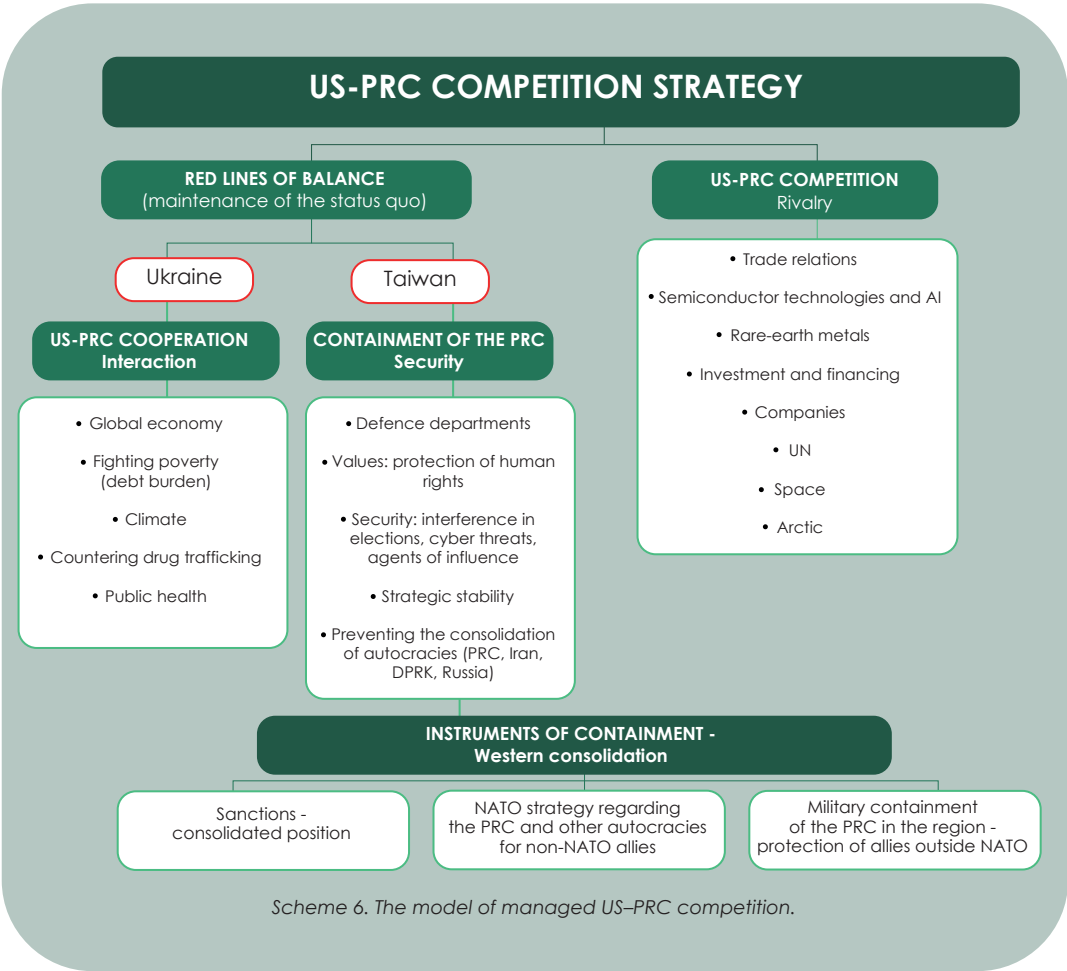
The second logic is the sphere of cooperation and containment, which exists in parallel with competition. The United States retains an interest in interaction with the PRC where the functioning of the global economy, climate policy, public health and the fight against drug trafficking are concerned. At the same time, Washington seeks to contain China in the security sphere — through alliance mechanisms, military presence, the protection of democratic elections from external influence, countering espionage, cyber threats and agents of influence, as well as through preventing the consolidation of autocracies.

The so-called red lines of balance, linked to maintaining the status quo in key territorial nodes, are of particular importance in this model. In this logic, Ukraine and Taiwan



matter not only as separate regional cases, but as systemic nodes through which the willingness of the international system to prevent the forcible revision of rules is being tested. For the United States, this means that managed competition with China can be combined with limited cooperation only on the condition that the basic principles of the status quo are not destroyed by force.

Thus, the US–PRC model is not a model of total rupture, but a model of complex structured interaction. Its key logic is to contain China in the security and technological spheres, compete with it over rules and influence, but at the same time preserve limited channels of cooperation where this is necessary for the stability of the system. This is why the American strategy towards the PRC combines confrontational and cooperative elements within a single architecture of managed competition.



Explanation of the scheme

The scheme reflects the structure of US–China interaction, in which competition, cooperation and containment are combined. It shows that relations between the United States and the PRC are built around two main blocks: on the one hand, rivalry in the areas of technology, trade, finance, international organisations and strategic spaces; and, on the other hand, selective interaction on issues of the global economy, climate, public health and countering drug trafficking. A separate place in the model is occupied by the status quo nodes — Ukraine and Taiwan — which act as red lines of balance and define the limits of permissible competition.

The distinctive feature of this model is that it is neither pure confrontation nor coexistence based on trust. Its essence lies in the managed combination of rivalry and interaction. This is why the red lines of balance, above all Ukraine and Taiwan, are of key importance, as they mark the limits of what is permissible in relations between the United States and the PRC. If these nodes are matters of the status quo, then the other elements of the system — technology, trade, international organisations or security coordination — become a space of competition and partially controlled interaction.

If, in the case of the PRC, the United States implements a model of managed competition, combining containment, selective cooperation and the defence of the red lines of the status quo, then with regard to Iran the American strategy follows a different logic. Here, the centre is not long-term systemic rivalry, but the combination of coercion and negotiations aimed at changing Tehran's strategic behaviour, limiting its nuclear and regional capabilities, and at the same time preventing major regional destabilisation. This is why the next section should appropriately be devoted to the US model of applying coercion and negotiations with regard to Iran.



2.4 The US model of applying coercion and negotiations with regard to Iran

The US strategy towards Iran is formed not as a simple model of pressure, but as a combination of coercion, negotiations, sanctions control and regional architectural design. Its main objective lies not only in limiting the Iranian nuclear programme, but also in the gradual inclusion of Iran in a controlled regime of behaviour, where its strategic assets — the nuclear programme, missile potential, proxy structures, sanctions adaptation and control over risks in the Strait of Hormuz — are to be transferred from a mode of threat into a mode of negotiated regulation.

Unlike China, which is a systemic competitor for the United States, Iran is not viewed as an equal participant in global competition. It acts as a regional actor capable of creating high risks for security, energy, maritime logistics and the non-proliferation regime. Therefore, the American strategy towards Iran does not envisage full integration on equal terms, but is oriented towards limiting its behaviour through a combination of pressure, negotiations, partial concessions and regional mechanisms of control.

In this model, coercion remains an important instrument, but it is no longer self-sufficient. Sanctions, military pressure, isolation, strikes against affiliated structures or the threat of a forceful response create a framework of pressure. However, this framework does not in itself complete the process. It is used to enter negotiations, strengthen the US position and form conditions under which Iran must agree to limits on its own strategic capabilities.

The distinctive feature of the Iranian case is that negotiations may take place not as a single package, but as a system of parallel or partially separated tracks. The nuclear programme, sanctions, missile potential, regional security, the Strait of Hormuz, proxy activity and guarantees for the Gulf states may be discussed separately, but in practice remain connected to one another. This is why the Iranian strategy often appears fragmented: Tehran may

demonstrate readiness for negotiations in one track while simultaneously increasing pressure in another.

This is also connected with the internal structure of Iranian signalling. Iran does not always act as a fully unified centre of communication. The political channel may preserve the possibility of negotiations and de-escalation, while the military or ideological channel may maintain rhetoric of pressure, threats or readiness for escalation. In SPA/TESPA, this can be described as dual signalling: Iran simultaneously preserves negotiation space and raises the price of an agreement through the demonstration of risks.

In the newer dynamic, the Hormuz dimension is becoming increasingly important. The Strait of Hormuz is not only a regional security issue, but a strategic node of access. Iran may use the threat of instability in Hormuz as a negotiation resource, but at the same time this very threat creates the need for a future regime of access, control and guarantees. Therefore, the American strategy may gradually move from simple coercion of Iran towards the formation of a broader regional security architecture, in which freedom of navigation, energy stability, Iran's behaviour and guarantees for regional states become parts of a single mechanism.

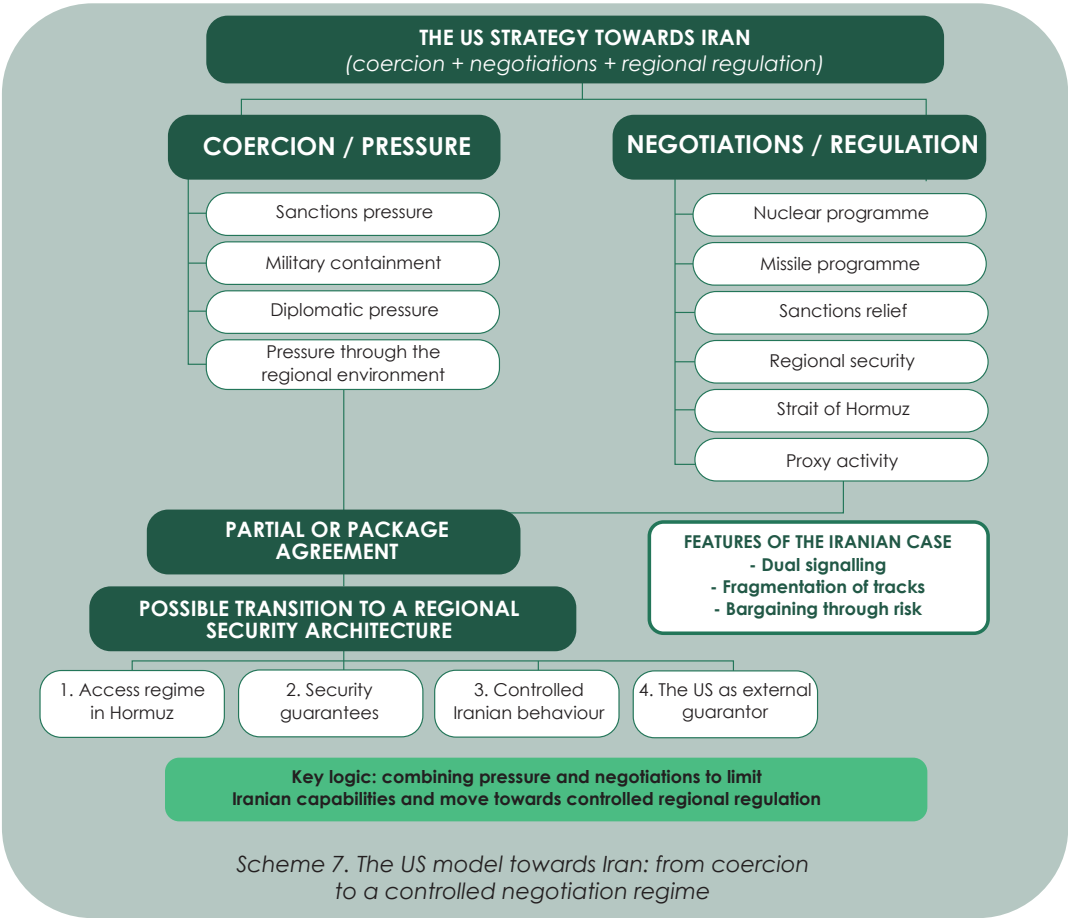
In this architecture, the United States retains the role of external guarantor and forceful limiter. Israel performs the function of local containment and a potential instrument of coercive pressure. The Gulf states act as interested participants in stability. China and India have an economic interest in uninterrupted access to energy routes. The EU may perform a diplomatic or technical function, especially where mediation, monitoring or sanctions coordination is concerned. Russia, by contrast, may seek not to be excluded from this process, but its real influence in the Iranian track depends on whether it is able to offer Iran practical resources, and not merely political support.

Thus, the US model towards Iran can be described as managed coercion with the possibility of an architectural



transition. At the first level, the United States uses sanctions, military pressure and diplomatic isolation. At the second level, it keeps open a negotiation channel. At the third level, the possibility of partial arrangements or a package agreement is formed. At the fourth level, the Iranian case may move into a regional security architecture, where the subject of agreement becomes not only the nuclear programme, but a broader regime of Iranian behaviour in the region.

In this logic, Iran is not simply being “coerced into an agreement”. It is gradually being drawn into a negotiation system where its threats are transformed into objects of regulation, and its strategic assets into elements of bargaining. This is why the Iranian case is important for TESPA: it shows how coercion can move into bargaining, bargaining into a partial regime, and a partial regime into a possible regional security architecture.



Explanation of the scheme

The scheme presents the American strategy towards Iran as a combination of sanctions, military, diplomatic and regional pressure with the simultaneous preservation of a negotiation channel. The model shows that Iran is not integrated as an equal systemic competitor, but is limited through treaty-based, sanctions and security mechanisms. The Strait of Hormuz has particular significance as a strategic access node around which a future regional security regime may be formed.

In this model, the United States uses coercion not as an end in itself, but as an instrument for entering a negotiation architecture. Sanctions, military presence, Israeli containment, regional channels and mediation do not operate separately, but as elements of a broader construction. Its potential objective lies not only in limiting Iran's nuclear programme, but in forming a regional security regime in which Iran can be partially integrated into rules, but without the ability freely to use the nuclear, missile, proxy or Hormuz lever as an instrument of uncontrolled pressure.

The Iranian case shows a model in which the United States combines coercion and negotiations in order to limit a regional actor and transfer its behaviour into a controlled regime. In the case of Russia, the logic is different. Russia is not a regional actor that merely creates local risks. It is trying to contest the rules of the international system by force, using the war against Ukraine as an instrument of coercion into recognising the "new realities". Therefore, the US strategy towards the Russian Federation is built not only around an agreement, but around coercion into ending the forcible revision of rules, followed by a transition to a model of managed competition.



2.5 The US strategy towards the Russian Federation: from coercion to managed competition

If the Iranian case demonstrates a model of coercion towards a restrictive agreement, the case of Russia is more complex. Here, coercion is implemented not around a separate programme or a single negotiation track, but in the conditions of an active war, where what is at stake is not only the behaviour of the Russian Federation, but also a basic rule of the international system: whether the forcible change of borders can be legitimised as a new political reality.

In this logic, the US strategy towards the Russian Federation is a transitional model. Its task is not only to force Russia to agree to certain parameters for ending the war against Ukraine, but also to transfer interaction with the Russian Federation afterwards into a more controlled format of competition. In other words, coercion is used as an instrument for changing behaviour, and not as an end in itself.

At the centre of this model is the combination of pressure and a conditional exit. Pressure includes sanctions, secondary sanctions, restrictions on access to resources, technologies and financial channels, as well as support for Ukraine as a key node of containment of Russian strategy. The distribution of roles between the United States and the EU has particular significance: the United States retains the systemic level of management, while Europe gradually takes on more of the regional burden — financial, defence-industrial, sanctions-related and security-related.

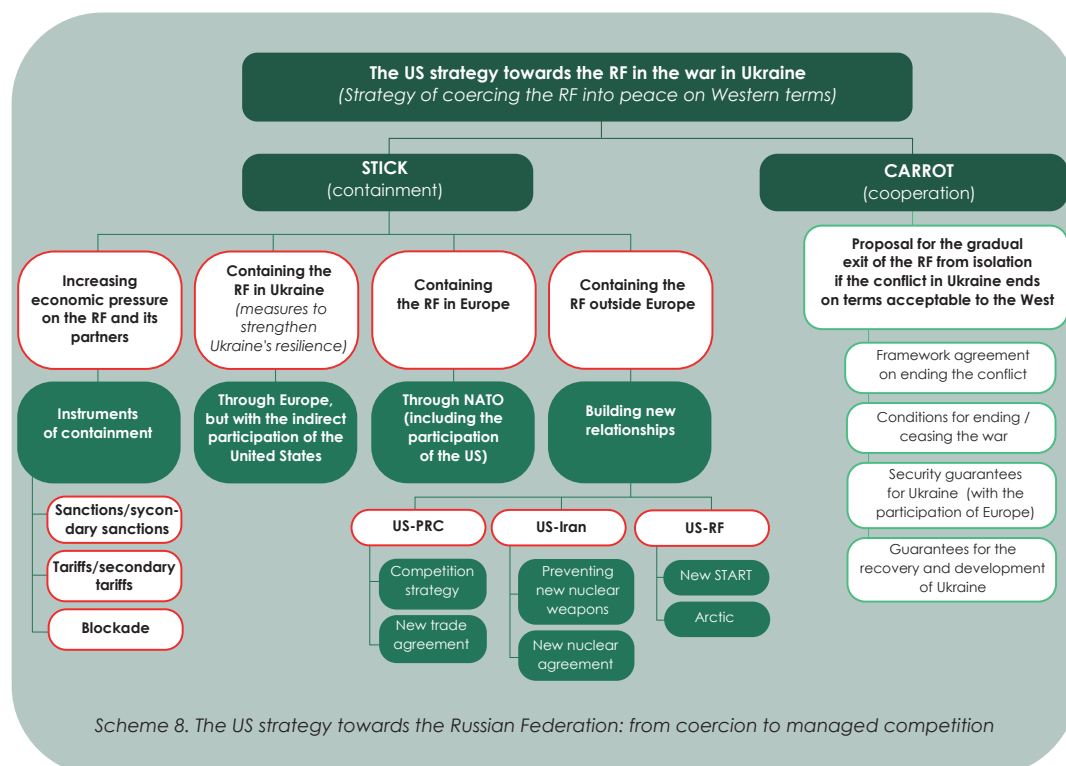
The conditional exit consists in the fact that the Russian Federation may receive limited space for future interaction only on condition that it changes its behaviour and accepts a framework for ending the war that does not legitimise the forcible change of borders. Such an exit does not mean full normalisation or a return to the pre-war status. Rather, it concerns a possible transition to managed competition, where the Russian Federation remains a competitor and



a source of risk, but its behaviour is limited by new rules, mechanisms of containment and conditions of access to selected formats of interaction.

In this model, Ukraine is not a passive object of arrangements between the United States and the Russian Federation. It acts as a central node through which the system's capacity to prevent the legitimisation of Russian revisionism is being tested. It is precisely Ukraine's resilience, its demands for security guarantees, partner support and future integration into the European architecture that create the boundary beyond which the Russian Federation cannot be "returned" to the system on its own terms.

Therefore, the US strategy towards the Russian Federation cannot be reduced to a simple formula of "defeat" or "reach an agreement". Its logic is more complex: to contain Russian coercion, prevent the legitimisation of the forcible change of borders, support Ukraine as a strategic node, transfer part of the regional burden to the EU and, where possible, move further interaction with the Russian Federation into the format of managed competition.



Explanation of the scheme

The scheme presents the US strategy towards the Russian Federation as a combination of several contours. The first contour is pressure: sanctions, secondary sanctions, economic restrictions, support for Ukraine and military-political containment of the Russian Federation in Europe. The second contour is the distribution of roles: the United States preserves the systemic framework, while the EU gradually takes on more regional functions around Ukraine. The third contour is the conditional exit: the Russian Federation may receive space for limited interaction only after accepting a framework that does not legitimise the forcible change of borders and provides security guarantees for Ukraine.

In generalised form, this model shows that the United States is not seeking simply to return the Russian Federation to the previous format of relations. Rather, it is an attempt to change the parameters of its behaviour: from an actor that seeks to revise rules by force into a competitor limited by new conditions, mechanisms of containment and architectural boundaries.

If the US strategy towards the Russian Federation is a model of coercion towards behavioural change followed by a transition to managed competition, then the next level of analysis concerns broader competition around Russia as a strategic actor. Here it is important to examine how the United States seeks not only to contain the Russian Federation in the war in Ukraine, but also to limit its capacity to use other tracks — nuclear stability, the Arctic, energy, relations with China and Iran — to restore great-power status.

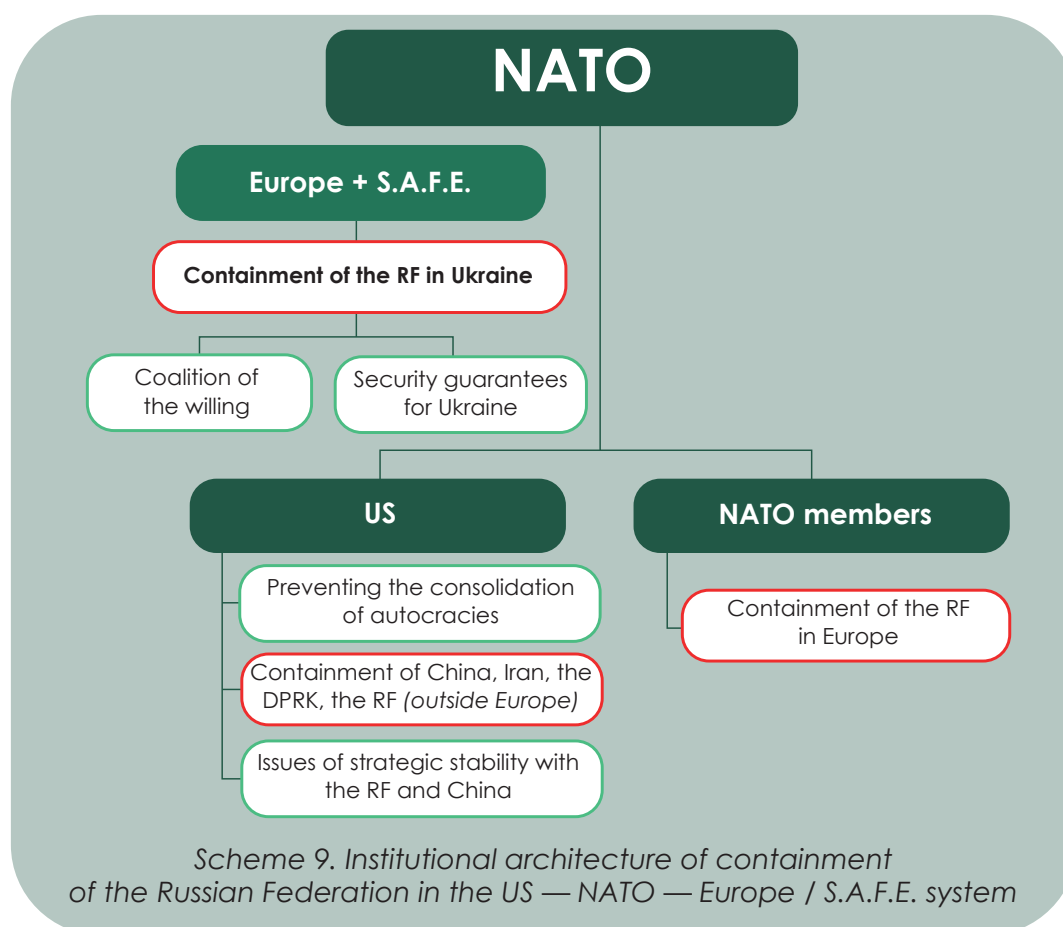


2.6 Force-based instruments of the United States and the West in containing the Russian Federation

Having outlined the general logic of the US strategy towards Russia as a transition from coercion to managed competition, it is necessary to show through which instruments this coercion is implemented in practice. One of the key elements is the force-based dimension: military support for Ukraine, the strengthening of European defence capacity, coordination through NATO, the development of the defence-industrial base, security guarantees, and the formation of a long-term system of containment of the Russian Federation.

In this logic, the containment of Russia can no longer be viewed only as a response to the current war. It is gradually turning into a multi-level architecture in which local, regional and global levels are combined. The local level is centred on Ukraine as the main operational node. The regional level is formed around Europe, NATO and S.A.F.E. mechanisms. The global level is connected with the broader US strategy of preventing the consolidation of autocracies and maintaining strategic advantage in systemic competition.

Within this model, the United States performs the function of global architect and strategic coordinator. NATO provides the institutional framework through which military, political and security decisions are coordinated. Europe is gradually moving from the role of an auxiliary partner to the role of regional executor and security manager. Ukraine remains the central node through which the effectiveness of the entire system of containment of Russia is being tested.



Explanation of the scheme

The scheme shows that the containment of Russia is organised as a multi-level institutional system. At the upper level, the United States forms the global logic: preventing the consolidation of autocracies, containing China, Iran, the DPRK and Russia outside the European contour, and maintaining strategic stability. NATO performs the role of a coordination framework that connects the American, European and Ukrainian levels. Europe, together with S.A.F.E. mechanisms, ensures the regional implementation of this strategy.

In this architecture, Ukraine is not merely a recipient of assistance. It acts as the central operational node of containment of the Russian Federation. It is through the Ukrainian theatre that military support is implemented, mechanisms of coalition interaction are tested, the future

system of security guarantees is formed, and a practical basis for a new European security architecture is created.

Analytically, this scheme demonstrates the distribution of functions: the United States sets the global framework, NATO coordinates, Europe implements, and Ukraine is the point where force is applied and the entire system is tested. This means that the containment of the Russian Federation in Ukraine is not an isolated policy, but part of the broader management of international competition.



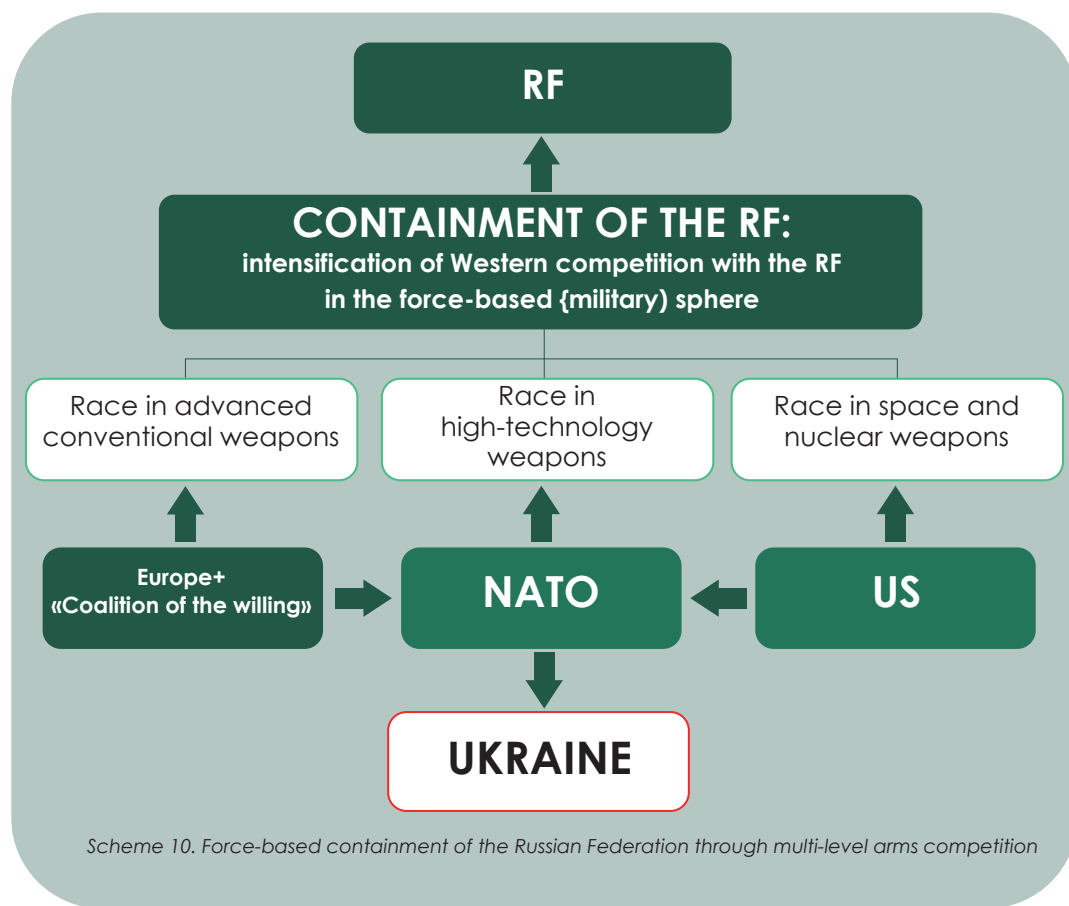


2.7 The force-based dimension of containment of the Russian Federation

The force-based containment of Russia is formed through the combination of several directions. At the local level, it is implemented through military and financial support for Ukraine, arms supplies, training of Ukrainian forces, intelligence support and possible formats of a “coalition of the willing”. At the regional level, it is connected with the expansion of the European defence industry, the development of modern conventional weapons, and the formation of security guarantees for Ukraine and Europe. At the global level, it moves into the sphere of strategic stability, high-technology weapons, the space component and the nuclear balance.

Such a system does not mean a direct transition to a NATO war with Russia. Its logic is different: to increase the cost of further aggression for the Russian Federation, limit its capacity for the forcible revision of rules, and gradually transfer interaction into the format of long-term managed competition.





Explanation of the scheme

The scheme reflects the force-based model of containment of the Russian Federation, built on multi-level competition in weapons and military capabilities. NATO acts as the central coordinating element, combining the resources of the United States, Europe and separate coalition formats. Europe ensures the expansion of conventional weapons and the defence-industrial base. The United States retains its advantage in the high-technology, space and nuclear dimensions. Ukraine acts as the operational centre where this model acquires practical application.

In this logic, the containment of the Russian Federation moves from short-term military assistance to long-term force-based competition. This is not only about transferring weapons to Ukraine, but about restructuring the entire system



of European defence, where military support for Ukraine, the European defence industry, NATO coordination and American strategic advantage function as interconnected elements.

The general conclusion is that the force-based containment of Russia is gradually acquiring an architectural character. Ukraine is the point where this system is applied, Europe is the regional mechanism of its implementation, NATO is the institutional coordinator, and the United States is the global architect. This is why the war against Ukraine becomes not only a local conflict, but part of broader systemic competition.

The force-based instruments of the United States and the West towards the Russian Federation perform a dual function. On the one hand, they are aimed at the direct containment of Russian aggression in Ukraine. On the other hand, they form a long-term architecture within which Russia is gradually transferred from a mode of military coercion to a mode of managed competition.

This means that current assistance to Ukraine, the development of S.A.F.E., the strengthening of NATO, the growth of European defence budgets and discussions on strategic stability are not separate processes. They form a single logic: Russia must be deprived of the ability to impose new rules by force, while at the same time, in the future, it may be subject to attempts to embed it in a limited regime of competition, where its behaviour is controlled through a balance of power, sanctions, security guarantees and new mechanisms of strategic stability.

If, during the war, the main logic of the United States and the West is to coerce the Russian Federation into ending the conflict on terms acceptable to Ukraine and the West, then the post-war stage may require a different model. This is no longer only about coercion, but about managed competition: containing Russia, limiting its revisionist potential, arms control, partial sanctions regulation and preventing renewed aggression.

2.8 Post-war US strategy towards the Russian Federation: managed competition and containment

After the end of the active phase of the war, the US strategy towards Russia is not limited merely to the cessation of hostilities or to a formal settlement. Its broader logic lies in changing the form of the conflict: from direct military coercion to long-term containment, competition and the controlled limitation of Russian revisionist behaviour.

In this model, a peace agreement or another format for ending the war does not mean a return to the previous state of relations. On the contrary, it may become a point of fixation for a new balance, within which Russia remains a competitive and revisionist actor, but its ability to revise rules by force must be limited through a system of guarantees, red lines, sanctions mechanisms, military containment and the institutional consolidation of the West.

The key element of this strategy is the transition from the logic of “coercing Russia to stop the war” to the logic of “preventing the restoration of Russia’s capacity to revise the order by force”. In other words, the post-war US strategy towards the Russian Federation must not only end the conflict, but also transform its consequences into a new system of containment.

In this system, Ukraine remains the central node. Its role is not limited to the status of a party to the conflict. Ukraine becomes an element of the broader architecture of containment of the Russian Federation, because it is precisely through the Ukrainian case that the basic rule of the international system is being tested: the forcible change of borders must not be legitimised as an acceptable way of revising the international order.

The post-war US model towards the Russian Federation may include several interconnected levels.



The first level is the fixation of red lines. This concerns preventing renewed large-scale aggression, limiting Russia's ability to restore military pressure on Ukraine, and anchoring minimum rules of behaviour through a peace agreement, security guarantees or other formats of arrangement.

The second level is limited cooperation. Even in a regime of competition, the United States may keep open separate channels of interaction with the Russian Federation on issues of global significance: strategic stability, arms control, nuclear risks, the Arctic, and selected economic or humanitarian issues. But such cooperation does not mean political normalisation. It is an instrument of risk management.

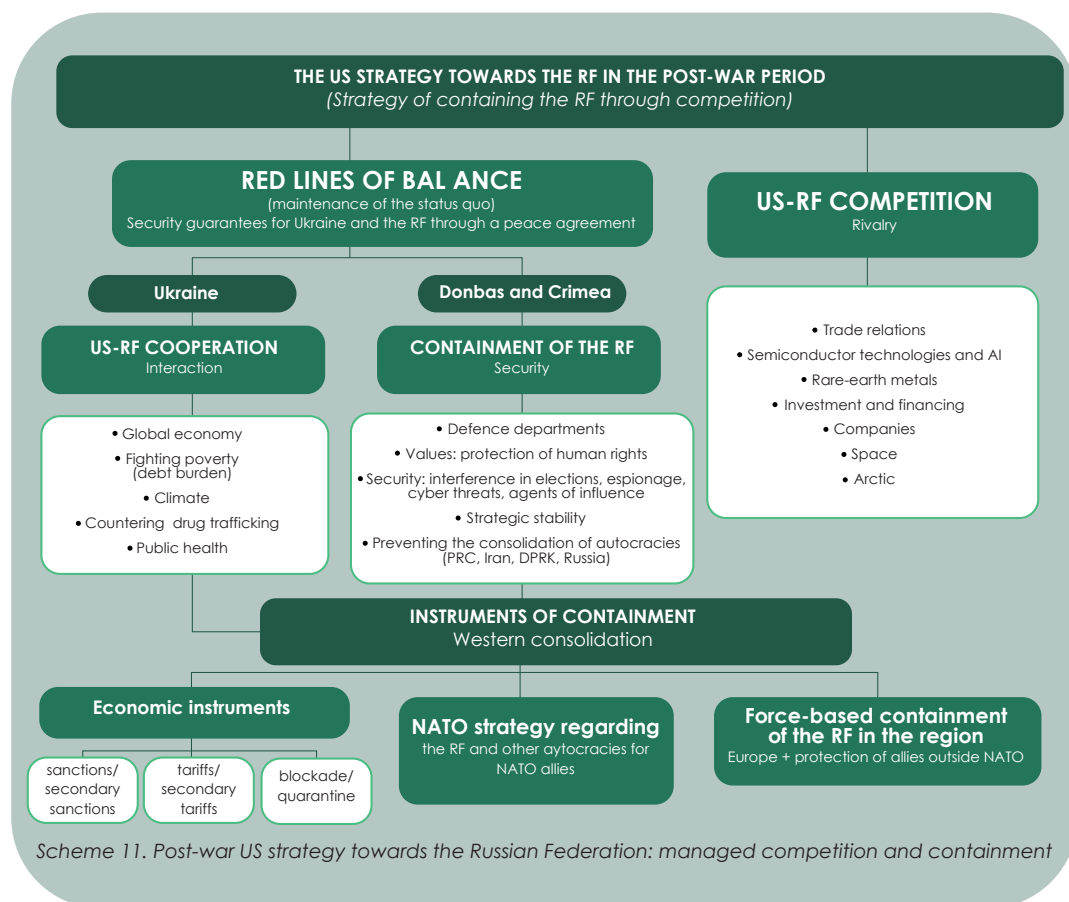
The third level is systemic containment. This includes sanctions, military presence, support for Ukraine, NATO adaptation, the strengthening of the European defence component, and countering cyber threats, espionage, interference in elections and agents of influence. At this level, Russia is viewed not as a partner, but as an actor whose behaviour must be limited through permanent mechanisms.

The fourth level is competition in strategic spheres. The United States and the Russian Federation remain competitors in matters of energy, the Arctic, armaments, technologies, resources, influence over countries of the Global South and the interpretation of the rules of the international order. It is here that post-war interaction shifts into the format of long-term managed competition.

In this logic, the United States does not integrate Russia as an equal architect of the new system. It seeks to transfer it into a regime of limited participation, where cooperation is possible only in selected controlled spheres, while the strategic behaviour of the Russian Federation is contained through economic, military, institutional and normative mechanisms.

Thus, the post-war US strategy towards the Russian Federation is not a return to "business as usual" / the usual

format of relations. It is an attempt to institutionalise a new form of conflict: less military, but more systemic. The war may end as an active phase, but competition with the Russian Federation does not disappear. It moves into a long-term architecture of containment.



Explanation of the scheme

The scheme shows a possible model of US strategy towards Russia after the end of the active phase of the war against Ukraine. At the centre of the model is the transition from direct coercion to long-term containment through competition. It combines the fixation of red lines, limited cooperation on global issues, systemic security containment, competition in strategic spheres and instruments of Western consolidation.

The scheme reflects that the post-war US strategy towards the Russian Federation does not envisage full normalisation



of relations. Its logic lies in transferring Russia from a mode of active military coercion into a mode of long-term managed competition.

The first block is connected with red lines and the status quo. Ukraine, Donbas and Crimea remain key nodes around which the boundaries of permissible behaviour by the Russian Federation will be defined. It is precisely here that it will be tested whether Russia can fix the results of the forcible revision of borders, or whether the system will be able to block the legitimisation of such a precedent.

The second block shows the possibility of limited cooperation. The United States may preserve channels of interaction with the Russian Federation on issues of strategic stability, nuclear risks, the Arctic or selected global problems. But such cooperation does not cancel competition. It performs the function of risk control.

The third block reflects containment. This concerns sanctions, NATO, support for Ukraine, European security mechanisms, countering cyber threats, interference in elections and destabilising actions by the Russian Federation. It is this block that must prevent Russia from returning to the model of coercive pressure.

The fourth block shows competition in strategic spheres: technology, trade, resources, energy, space, the Arctic, the defence industry and influence over third countries. This means that even after the end of the war, the Russian Federation will remain part of broader systemic competition.

The overall meaning of the scheme is that the United States seeks not simply to end the war, but to change the form of the Russian challenge: from military escalation to controlled, limited and structured competition.

The post-war US strategy towards the Russian Federation can be described as a model of conflict transformation. Its objective is not the complete elimination of competition with Russia, but the transfer of this competition into a

form that can be controlled through rules, mechanisms, guarantees, sanctions and the institutional consolidation of the West.

In this model, Russia does not receive the status of an equal co-creator of the new architecture. On the contrary, its revisionist behaviour is limited, while access to cooperation becomes conditional and partial. Ukraine, meanwhile, remains the central node of containment, because it is precisely the Ukrainian case that determines whether the forcible change of borders will be legitimised or blocked.

Thus, the post-war period does not mean the end of systemic confrontation. It means its transition into a new form: from war as direct force-based confrontation to managed competition, where the main task of the United States and the West becomes not only to contain the Russian Federation, but also to prevent the restoration of its capacity to impose rules by force.

After considering the post-war US strategy towards the Russian Federation, it is important to move to a broader generalisation. The Russian case shows only one variant of the American model for managing competition. In the case of China, the United States applies the logic of systemic competition with elements of cooperation; in the case of Iran, a combination of coercion, negotiations and regional regulation; and in the case of the Russian Federation, coercion towards ending the war followed by transfer into a regime of long-term containment.

Together, these cases demonstrate that the United States uses not a universal strategy, but a differentiated architecture of interaction with key actors that contest its hierarchical position in the international system.



CONCLUSION

Contemporary international competition is not a chaotic set of separate crises, wars, sanctions conflicts or diplomatic confrontations. It has its own architecture. Its basis is the struggle over rules, roles, mechanisms of influence and control over the key nodes of the international system.

After the end of the period of stable unipolar hierarchy, the world did not automatically move towards classical multipolarity. A more accurate understanding of the current stage is the contestation of hierarchy within a unipolar system. The United States remains the central system-forming actor, but its leading role is being increasingly contested by other states — each in its own way.

China seeks to reformat the rules of the international system, weaken the Western normative monopoly and expand the space for its own influence without directly destroying globalisation. Its strategy is built not so much on open confrontation as on the gradual promotion of alternative standards, the demand for reciprocity and the strengthening of its own role as a systemic competitor of the United States.

Russia tried to use the war against Ukraine as an instrument for the forcible revision of the international order and for imposing “multipolarity” on the world on its own terms. Over time, however, its strategy has increasingly acquired a defensive and destructive character. Russia is no longer so much forming an alternative order as trying to preserve or restore its status through destabilisation, the blocking of other actors’ formats, the threat of escalation, crisis bargaining and coercion into recognising the “new realities”.

Iran acts primarily through regional assets, sanctions adaptation, dual signalling and the threat of escalation. Its strategy lies not only in confrontation with the United States,

but also in using crisis nodes — the nuclear programme, missile potential, proxy structures, the Strait of Hormuz and regional security — as elements of bargaining. In this sense, the Iranian case shows how a strategic asset can move from the plane of threat into the plane of a potential regulated regime.

The European Union and NATO are gradually changing their own roles. If the EU was previously perceived mainly as an economic and normative actor, Russia's war against Ukraine has strengthened its regional-security function. NATO, in turn, remains the main military-political framework of containment, but is increasingly operating within a broader logic of resilience, defence-industrial mobilisation, collective readiness and the long-term limitation of the Russian threat.

Ukraine has become one of the central nodes of this transformation. Russia's war against Ukraine is not merely a regional war over territory. It is a systemic test for the international order: whether the forcible change of borders can be legitimised as a new political reality, or whether the international system is capable of blocking such a precedent. This is why the Ukrainian case matters not only for Europe, but for the entire international architecture.

The US strategy in this system cannot be reduced to direct confrontation with a single bloc of autocracies. On the contrary, it has a differentiated character. China is included in a regime of managed competition; Iran is limited through a combination of pressure, negotiations and regional regulation; Russia is contained through Ukraine, Europe, NATO, sanctions and the prospect of post-war managed competition; the DPRK remains in a regime of prolonged isolation. This strategy is aimed at preventing the consolidation of autocratic regimes into a single anti-Western centre of power.

This is the key logic of contemporary systemic competition: the main struggle takes place not only between states, but between different ways of organising the international



order. Some actors seek to defend the basic rules, while others seek to change them through force, bargaining, alternative norms or crisis pressure. This is why not only military capabilities become important, but also sanctions regimes, negotiation formats, security guarantees, logistical routes, technological restrictions, defence-industrial programmes and mechanisms of strategic stability.

The approach proposed in this work makes it possible to view contemporary international competition as a system of interconnected tracks. Ukraine, Taiwan, the Strait of Hormuz, sanctions, nuclear deterrence, strategic stability, energy, technology and regional security formats are not isolated topics, but nodes of a broader architecture. Through them, actors test the limits of what is permissible, test the response of the system, create new mechanisms of influence or try to consolidate rules favourable to themselves.

Thus, contemporary international competition is not a transition to a simple multipolar world, but a complex process of redistributing roles, functions and rules within a system in which the United States retains the central position, but is forced constantly to manage the contestation of its hierarchy. In this system, the future order will be determined not only by the outcome of individual conflicts, but by the ability of actors to consolidate or block new rules of behaviour.

The main conclusion of this work is that the contemporary world is not simply “changing”. It is being restructured through competition over architecture. This is why the analysis of international processes must go beyond the description of events. It is necessary to see which roles are being formed, which rules are being contested, which mechanisms are being created, and which nodes are becoming central for the future international order.





SUMMARY: THE ARCHITECTURE OF CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION AND THE ROLE OF UKRAINE

Contemporary international competition is not a chaotic clash of individual states. It has its own architecture: actors, rules, nodes of competition, mechanisms of influence and roles that gradually change under the pressure of wars, sanctions, negotiations, technological rivalry and the struggle for legitimacy.

After the end of the period of relatively stable unipolar hierarchy, the international system entered a stage of contesting that hierarchy. The United States remains the central system-forming actor, but its leading role is increasingly being questioned by other states. This does not mean an automatic transition to simple bipolarity or full multipolarity. A more accurate definition of the current stage is the contestation of hierarchy within a unipolar system.

In this system, different actors use different strategies. China seeks to weaken the Western normative monopoly and expand the space for its own rules, standards and influence, without necessarily destroying globalisation as such. Iran uses regional assets, sanctions adaptation, negotiations

and the threat of escalation as instruments of bargaining for its own place in the regional security architecture. Russia initially sought to impose “multipolarity” on the world on its own terms through the forcible contestation of the unipolar system, but over time its strategy has increasingly acquired a defensive and destructive character: destabilisation, the blocking of other actors’ formats, the threat of escalation, crisis bargaining and coercion into recognising the “new realities”.

The United States, for its part, seeks to prevent the consolidation of autocratic regimes into a single anti-Western bloc. Its strategy is not the same towards all actors. China remains a systemic competitor, with which containment, competition and limited cooperation are combined. Iran is viewed through the logic of pressure, negotiations and possible regional regulation. Russia, in the context of the war against Ukraine, is subjected to coercion towards ending the war on terms that do not legitimise the forcible change of borders. North Korea remains primarily in a regime of isolation. This differentiation allows the United States to work not with a “single bloc of autocracies”, but with separate tracks, each of which has its own logic of containment, limitation or partial integration.

Ukraine occupies a special place in this architecture. Russia’s war against Ukraine is not merely a regional war and not merely a conflict between two states. It has become a central test for the international system: whether the forcible change of borders can be accepted as a way of revising the international order, or whether the system is capable of blocking such a precedent.

This is why the Ukrainian case matters not only for Europe. It is connected with broader questions of international architecture: the status of force, the limits of revisionism, the role of security guarantees, the West’s capacity for consolidation, the future role of NATO, the EU’s strategic autonomy, China’s behaviour towards the status quo, and the ability of the United States to preserve systemic



management under conditions of simultaneous competition with several actors.

In this system, Ukraine performs the function of a node of containment. Through the Ukrainian case, it is tested whether an aggressor can turn military force into a political right, whether war can become an instrument for imposing new rules, and whether the international system can prevent the legitimisation of the results of aggression. If the forcible change of borders is accepted as a new norm, this will have consequences far beyond Ukraine. If, however, such a precedent is blocked, this will strengthen the principle that rules cannot be changed through unlawful force.

At the same time, the war against Ukraine has accelerated the transformation of the Western security architecture. Europe is gradually moving from the role of a predominantly economic and normative actor towards a more distinct regional-security function. NATO remains the central military-political framework of containment, but additional mechanisms are forming around it: defence-industrial coordination, long-term financing, sanctions regimes, security guarantees, “coalitions of the willing”, the development of European defence capacity and the broader logic of societal resilience.

Thus, contemporary international competition takes place not only between states, but also between different models of organising order. One model seeks to preserve the basic rule that force must not legitimise the change of borders and rules. Another model seeks to use crisis, war or escalation as an instrument of coercion towards new recognition of status. A third model seeks to change rules gradually — through standards, economic weight, negotiations, institutions and alternative formats.

In this sense, the main question of the contemporary international system is not only who has more resources. The main question is who will be able to consolidate the rules according to which those resources are used. This is why the struggle over Ukraine, Taiwan, the Strait of Hormuz, sanctions

regimes, technologies, energy and strategic stability are parts of one broader architecture of competition.

To summarise, the contemporary world is not simply moving from one order to another. It is in a phase of struggle over the rules of transition. Ukraine has become one of the key nodes of this struggle, because it is through Ukraine that the boundary of what is permissible in the international system is being tested.

If this boundary is preserved, the international architecture will have a chance to be renewed without the legitimisation of forcible revisionism. If it is destroyed, this will open the way to the broader normalisation of coercion as a way of changing the order.

This is why Ukraine's role is not peripheral. It is systemic. Ukraine is not only defending its own statehood. It is taking part in determining what the rules of international competition will be in the next stage of world politics.

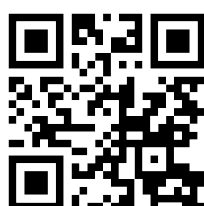




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