



## LIBERTARIANS AGAINST THE AMERICAN WORLD. A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

LIBERTARIANIE PRZECIW AMERYKAŃSKIEMU ŚWIATU.  
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### ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the view of contemporary world politics presented by American libertarians. Specifically, it examines the claims of Murray N. Rothbard and his successors with regard to the role of the United States of America in the international arena. The article argues that since the Cold War, the libertarian account of international relations has been staunchly critical of the US, while exhibiting a soft spot for competing powers, particularly the USSR and the Russian Federation. As the article submits, this asymmetry is supported by two flawed theoretical contentions: the liberal imperialism thesis (LIT) and the American hegemony thesis (AHT). Moreover, the article shows how anti-Americanism impinges on libertarian analyses of contemporary Central-Eastern European politics, in particular the war in Ukraine.

**Keywords:** Ukraine war; libertarianism; international relations theory; hegemony; decentralisation

### ABSTRAKT

Temat artykułu stanowi ujęcie współczesnej polityki światowej prezentowane przez amerykańskich libertarian. Dokładniej rzecz ujmując, przedmiotem naszych badań są twierdzenia wysuwane przez Murraya N. Rothbarda i jego kontynuatorów odnośnie do roli odgrywanej na globalnej scenie przez Stany Zjednoczone Ameryki. Artykuł wskazuje, że od czasów zimnej wojny libertariańskie podejście do stosunków międzynarodowych cechowała ostra krytyka Stanów Zjednoczonych przy jednoczesnym względnie łagodnym traktowaniu mocarstw konkurencyjnych, zwłaszcza Związku Socjalistycznych Republik Radzieckich oraz Federacji Rosyjskiej. Zdaniem autora artykułu asymetria ta wspierana jest przez dwa błędne rozpoznania teoretyczne: tezę o liberalnym imperializmie (TLI) oraz tezę o amerykańskiej hegemonii (TAH). Artykuł pokazuje ponadto, że antyamerykanizm obciąża libertariańskie analizy współczesnej polityki w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej, w szczególności wojny na Ukrainie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wojna w Ukrainie; libertarianizm; teoria stosunków międzynarodowych; hegemonia; decentralizacja

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of the paper is to critically examine the view of contemporary world politics presented by American libertarians drawing on the legacy of Murray N. Rothbard (1926-1995), an economist, historian and philosopher, known as the founding father of the present-day anarcho-capitalist movement (see Gordon 2007; Raimondo 2000).<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the subject of this study are the claims laid out by Rothbard and his successors (often affiliated with the Alabama-based Mises Institute) with regard to the role of the United States of America in the international arena. Particular attention will be paid to how libertarian perceptions of US foreign policy translate into the analysis of the situation in Eastern Europe, especially the war in Ukraine and Russia's actions.

Three questions are posed: What is the libertarian stance on US foreign policy? What is its theoretical background? And most importantly: Is this background sound? Correspondingly, the article offers three major theses. First, since the Cold War, the libertarian account of international relations has been staunchly critical of the US, while exhibiting a soft spot for its rivals, especially the USSR and the Russian Federation. Second, this disparity is underpinned by two theoretical contentions: the liberal imperialism thesis (hereinafter: LIT) and the American hegemony thesis (AHT). Third, both conceptions are erroneous.

Although the topic concerns a minority voice in both political theory and public debate, it is undoubtedly of general interest. For decades, a Rothbardian attitude to foreign policy has been fuelling the activities of Ron Paul, a former congressman and two-times (2008, 2012) anti-interventionist candidate in the Republican Party's presidential primaries (see his manifesto in Paul 2007). More recently, a group of Rothbardians under the name of Mises Caucus has taken over the American Libertarian Party (Zwolinski and Tomasi 2023, p. 292), result-

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<sup>1</sup> In both political and academic discourse, the term "libertarianism" takes on various denotations (cf. Bartyzel 2010; Juruś 2012; Sepczyńska 2013; Zwolinski and Tomasi 2023). Similarly, libertarians of different persuasions vary in their approaches to international relations. This paper focuses on the Rothbardian variety of libertarianism, which is a philosophy committed to private property rights viewed as natural and absolute and to the vision of an anarcho-capitalist society founded upon respect for those rights (Kinsella 2009; Rothbard 2006). In this article, the terms „libertarians” and „libertarianism” refer specifically to the Rothbardian current. In addition to Rothbard himself, other notable proponents of this philosophy include Hans-Hermann Hoppe, Walter Block and Stephan Kinsella, although the latter does not frequently address issues related to international relations. The subsequent analysis of libertarian perspectives on US foreign policy will then largely draw upon the works of Rothbard, Hoppe and Block.

ing in, among other things, statements condemning the US support for Ukraine. Last but not least, while by no means mainstream, libertarianism constitutes a lively and developing tradition in political philosophy.

This notwithstanding, the libertarian approach to world politics has rarely been subject to systematic analysis in academic literature. None of the leading libertarian theoreticians has ever written a separate treatise on international relations, so contributions to the field are scattered throughout their writings. Mark R. Crovelli (2007) and Przemysław Hankus (2014, 2017) provided overviews of the libertarian IR theory in general and its critique of US hegemony in particular. What these authors offer, however, is primarily a reconstruction of the libertarian standpoint. In contrast, Dalibor Rohac (2017) aptly observes that American libertarians and classical liberals too often adopt the position of the realist school, thereby paying undue heed to the interests of authoritarian powers and unfairly castigating the US for its efforts to institute a liberal global order. Yet, unlike the present author, Rohac did not seek the reasons for this biased inclination in the intrinsic flaws of libertarian thought.

In methodological terms, the paper is a critical study in applied international relations theory.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, it sets forth an internal critique of the libertarian stance. This means that, having accepted the core tenets of libertarianism for the sake of argument, I highlight the inconsistencies that exist between those principles and the conclusions libertarian writers purport to derive from them. Nevertheless, insights borrowed from more familiar IR paradigms, such as liberalism and realism, are also invoked to the extent that they can fit into the libertarian framework without contradiction. Needless to say, subjecting the theory under discussion, or our arguments against it, to a full empirical test would require far more space than this brief essay can accommodate. The empirical examples cited in the text should therefore be seen as cases in need of theoretical explanation rather than as evidence.

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<sup>2</sup> IR theory is the sole focus of the article. Accordingly, any ethical considerations that provide a rationale for the libertarian opposition to US foreign activism have been left aside. It is also worth emphasising that the scope of libertarian IR theory extends beyond what is presented here (see Crovelli 2007, Hankus 2014, Slenzok 2022). This article, however, addresses only those contributions that justify anti-Americanism, not the entirety of libertarian IR theory.

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AGAINST OTHER VILLAINS

NATO's eastward expansion is depicted by some scholars as the major cause of the Ukraine war, the most influential proponents of this interpretation being the leading realists John J. Mearsheimer (2014, 2018, 2022) and Stephen Walt (2018, 2022). A similar opinion is articulated by some libertarians, such as Hans-Hermann Hoppe (2022a, 2022b). Although this author emphasises the "thuggish" character of Russia, he (2022b) also believes that Russian demands for the neutralisation and demilitarisation of Ukraine are "eminently reasonable." In Hoppe's view, Ukraine's accession to NATO would jeopardize the very existence of Russia. So far, his position, although seasoned with libertarian rhetoric (at the end of the day, two "gangs" are fighting over "turf"), is essentially congruent with the realist one. Nevertheless, Hoppe stresses certain threads absent from the realists. First, he regards the present war as "the latest and most dramatic attempt at centralization and imperialism." Surprisingly enough, the centralising and imperialistic force turns out to be not Russia but the US. Second, while realists tend not to talk about the responsibility of Ukraine's leaders at all,<sup>3</sup> Hoppe does pin the blame on them, which he does in highly denigrating words. For example, he calls Volodymyr Zelensky a "clown" and American "lapdog."

Other prominent libertarians are as confident as Hoppe in blaming the USA, NATO and Ukraine itself for the outbreak of war. According to Walter Block (2022), Russia is actually acting in self-defence in Ukraine, countering NATO – a "mischievous, nasty and malicious organization," which is likely to overrun Russia as Hitler did in 1941. In other words, Block seems to maintain that what Russia started in February 2022 was in fact a preventive war. The same allegedly applies to its earlier incursions into Ukraine (2014) and Georgia (2008), as well as Stalin's seizure of Eastern Europe after World War II. Moreover, Russia's and the USSR's aggressiveness can be justified in terms of *Realpolitik* as "this country has been invaded by Germany several times in the last century, so a case can be made that its expansion was more defensive than offensive" (Block 2018, p. 63). Along the same lines, the founder and former president of the Mises Institute Lew Rockwell (2022) opines: "Putin is nobody's fool and he has decided to act

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<sup>3</sup> This is understandable. From the structural-realist standpoint, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine can be read as a manifestation of a security dilemma: Ukraine feared Russia, so it allied itself with the West; Russia was suspicious of NATO expansion, so it invaded Ukraine.

decisively to free Russia from encirclement.” The practical conclusion is clear: America should not get involved in a war unfolding far away from its territory, not least because its very involvement has reportedly provoked the Kremlin into aggression (Paul 2022).<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the identification of the US as the world’s most predatory imperialist body pervades all analyses of international politics formulated by the Rothbardian circles since the Cold War. As regards the war in Ukraine, the uncompromising opposition to American foreign policy fuels sympathy for Russia’s fear of being invaded by NATO, while turning a blind eye to the aggressive intentions that can legitimately be attributed to it (see Bukkvoll 2016; Gomza 2022; Person and McFaul 2022). This attitude is reminiscent of Rothbard’s well-known praise for the Soviet Union’s seemingly irenic foreign policy, which was said to stem from the USSR’s economic inefficiency and Lenin’s self-determination doctrine. Rothbard (2006, p. 355) asserted: “Thus, fortuitously, from a mixture of theoretical and practical grounds of their own, the Soviets arrived early at what libertarians consider to be the only proper and principled foreign policy.” On top of that, one can find in libertarian political and historical commentaries, to name but a few controversies, mourning the passing of Ernesto Che Guevara (Rothbard 1967a), an epitaph for Slobodan Milosevic (Raimondo 2006),<sup>5</sup> subscribing to “the lost cause of the South” narrative about the American Civil War (Woods 2004),<sup>6</sup> or denouncing Israel as the sole culprit in the Middle East conflict (Rothbard 1967b).<sup>7</sup> All these beliefs reveal one pattern: the US is always at fault and its

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<sup>4</sup> Not all libertarians share these views. The position of the above cited scholars has been sharply criticised by, for example, Krapelka (2022), McCobin and Markevičiūtė (2014), and Slenzok (2022). Characteristically, whereas the anti-American, anti-NATO and anti-Ukraine voices come from the Mises Institute-affiliated Americans (Block, Paul, Rockwell) and Germans (Hoppe), arguments sympathetic with Ukraine and the West are raised mostly by authors from Central and Eastern Europe.

<sup>5</sup> In all fairness, it must be admitted that Raimondo’s article is not an apology of the Serb president. Nevertheless, a libertarian article entitled “Slobodan Milosevic, RIP” certainly qualifies as a provocation, evidently inspired by anti-Americanism.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that Rothbard held a more nuanced perspective on the 1861–1865 war. Unlike libertarian historian Thomas Woods (2004), who asserts that the causes of the war had nothing to do with the slavery issue, Rothbard (2010, p. 125) believed that slavery did work as an indirect cause of the conflict in that the agenda of the secessionists was instrumental to “the aggressive, expansionist aims of the Southern ‘slavocracy.’” Despite this, Rothbard maintained that the immediate cause of the war was the Northern aggression driven by the desire to ‘preserve the mythical abstraction known as the Union’ (p. 127).”

<sup>7</sup> An opposite, pro-Israeli perspective is presented by Block and Futerman (2021).

enemies are usually looked at more favourably than one would expect from radical free-marketeters. In Guevara's obituary (!), for example, Rothbard (1967a, p. 3) writes: "we all knew that his enemy was our enemy – that great Colossus that oppresses and threatens all the peoples of the world, U. S. imperialism." In the same vein, Hoppe (2007, p. 244) accuses dramatically: "...Almost from its very beginnings the U.S. government relentlessly pursued aggressive expansionism. Beginning with the Spanish-American war, reaching a peak in World War I and World War II, and continuing to the present, the U.S. government has become entangled in hundreds of foreign conflicts and risen to the rank of the world's dominant imperialist power. Thus, nearly every president since the turn of this century has also been responsible for the murder, killing or starvation of countless innocent foreigners all over the world."

While certainly not exhaustive, this succinct overview of libertarian historical and foreign policy commentary is sufficient to conclude that the Rothbardian perspective is decidedly biased against the USA and leans towards its opponents. Of course, this does not mean that libertarians are always wrong. Nor is it necessary for the purposes of this study to engage in an in-depth discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of particular libertarian arguments concerning international politics in the past and present. What matters is their pronounced partiality: for instance, individuals such as Che Guevara might be otherwise contemptible but receive praise for opposing the US, which, on the other hand, is so evil that it does not deserve similar credit for fighting Guevara and other communists. Likewise, Russia's aggression is morally inexcusable, but at least it can be explained in terms of national security; as for the US, such extenuating circumstances are never mentioned.<sup>8</sup>

With this established, we can now address the theoretical underpinnings of the libertarian approach.

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Block, as we already know, deems Russia's security concerns regarding NATO expansion perfectly understandable because of the country's history of past invasions from the West. I have not encountered any statement by either Block or any other leading libertarian that, for example, the US invasion of Afghanistan was equally understandable given that the Taliban were harbouring the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks.

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## THE LIBERAL IMPERIALISM THESIS AND ITS PITFALLS

In the libertarian literature, little has been written about which domestic arrangements facilitate peace and which induce warlikeness. Rothbard, for instance, did not touch on this question at all, except for his aforementioned remarks on socialist inefficiency fostering a restrained foreign policy in the case of the USSR. The only major libertarian author writing extensively on the topic is Hoppe, who, expanding on Rothbard's insights, turns the standard democratic peace theory upside down. He argues that because expansion requires material resources, the states that are most liberal in domestic affairs simultaneously prove to be the most successful at waging wars.<sup>9</sup> Thanks to the relatively moderate exploitation of their own populations, these countries have the most prosperous economies at their disposal. And because military conflict offers them better prospects for success, relatively liberal states are also more likely to wage wars. In contrast, socialist states, because of their economic inferiority, at least in the long run, turn out to behave in a comparatively peaceful fashion (Hoppe 2006, pp. 102–103). The events of the Cold War are said to be the best example of this.<sup>10</sup> According to Rothbard and Hoppe, the Soviet Union (however despicable it was domestically) not only pursued a foreign policy far less adventurous than that of the US, but was also finally defeated and laid to rest in 1991, giving way to the US hegemony (Rothbard 2006, pp. 329–370; Hoppe 2021, pp. 228–229). Evidently, it is LIT that provides the theoretical basis for libertarian vehement opposition to US global domination and sympathy for its illiberal challengers. Indeed, as Hoppe (2022b) remarks, to embark on a truly imperialist project, Russia “is too much of an economic lightweight.” It is also LIT that will be subject to criticism in the remainder of this section.

Leaving aside the highly controversial interpretation of the Cold War, there is one vivid counterexample to the LIT: the rest of Russia's history. Starting as a minor principality subordinated to the Mongols, Moscow gradually managed to build the largest state on earth. This was achieved mainly through military

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<sup>9</sup> Hoppe (2007, pp. 33–39) is also known for his claim that democracies are more belligerent than monarchies because of the „no skin in the game” problem: while monarchs are private proprietors of sorts and are thus incentivised to refrain from destructive endeavours (such as war), democratic politicians, according to this argument, face no such constraints. As debatable as this claim may sound, I shall not discuss it further since it seems irrelevant for the purposes of this study. After all, neither the US nor the Russian Federation is a monarchy.

<sup>10</sup> Other cited examples of liberal imperialism are the Netherlands and the British Empire in their heyday.

conquest and despite the fact that, with the exception of short periods of the February Revolution and the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, Russia never adopted the basic tenets of liberalism. Furthermore, not only did Russia rise to the status of a great power despite its illiberal political system, but it also, along the way, defeated far more libertarian and, at least at the outset of the rivalry, economically, territorially and demographically comparable adversaries: the Novgorod Republic and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Medieval Novgorod was a merchant republic, in stark contrast to the absolutist rule of the grand dukes and tzars of Moscow (Plokhly 2017, chap. 1.). The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, in turn, was obviously not a liberal country since only the ruling nobility (called *Szlachta*) was bestowed with full citizenship and liberty rights. It was, however, an elective monarchy where each member of parliament could overturn all laws proceeded (the right to *Liberum Veto*). *Szlachta* enjoyed a wide range of individual rights, and taxation was virtually non-existent (Davies 2005, chap. X).

The fall of Poland in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century also hardly fits in the LIT picture. Indeed, Polish nobility was less concerned about overseas threats than about the possible rise of a tyrant at home, which translated into a pacific attitude to foreign policy and forceful opposition to taxation and armaments. As a result, Poland had become part of the Russian sphere of influence by the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and was eventually erased from the map by Russia, Prussia and Austria – each of which imposed a heavier tax and regulatory burden than Poland – in 1795 (Davies 2005, chap. XVII, XVIII).

These examples suggest that LIT needs to be attenuated. Clearly, economic potential is a key factor contributing to a state's military power (Mearsheimer 2001, chap. 3). Domestic liberalism can also be assumed to be conducive to economic capacity. However, there are other important factors related to liberalism or the lack of it, some of which may offset the benefits that liberalism brings. Non-liberal states, although economically inferior, are in a better position to compel the obedience of the governed in wartime. Moreover, the aggressiveness of liberal states is always (albeit imperfectly and to varying degrees) constrained by internal checks and balances. In a liberal democracy, the executive cannot wage wars on a whim, and some form of the parliament's consent is usually required, whereas in autocracies, foreign policy choices are essentially at the discretion of the ruler (Doyle 1986).<sup>11</sup> Additionally, while liberalism can take up

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<sup>11</sup> Libertarians (Rothbard 2000a, pp. 70–80; Hoppe 2007, pp. 271–277) are highly critical of the liberal doctrine of separation of powers. In short, they argue that, as parts of one and the same entity



the form of liberal interventionism (Mearsheimer 2018, Walt 2018), it also has the potential for mitigating belligerence when developed into a doctrine of liberal anti-interventionism, a phenomenon deeply entrenched particularly in the Anglo-Saxon political culture and epitomised by the legacy of numerous movements from Manchester liberalism to the American Old Right (Rothbard 2007; Waltz 2018, pp. 103–109). As the attentive reader might have already noticed, libertarians themselves follow in the tradition of liberal anti-interventionism (Hoppe 2018, p. 91–92; Paul 2007, Rothbard 2006, p. 329–370). On the other hand, some (though certainly not all) sorts of illiberalism are inherently bellicose (the cases of international communism and Nazism readily spring to mind). It strikes one as an unacceptable one-sidedness that this elementary fact has escaped the attention of libertarians, who on other occasions time and again emphasise the role of ideas in history (Hoppe 2006, p. 53; Rothbard 2000a, pp. 61–62). As Hoppe (2007, p. 43) points out: “Ultimately, the course of human history is determined by ideas, whether they are true or false. Just as kings could not exercise their rule unless public opinion accepted their rule as legitimate, so democratic rulers are equally dependent on public opinion to sustain their political power.” Finally, constantly stressing the importance of ideas and the indispensability of free markets, libertarians should realise that the source of a state’s position in international politics may not only be its naked strength but also economic and cultural attractiveness (*soft power* [Nye 2005]). A more liberal state such as the US possesses better assets in these dimensions than an oppressive and relatively backward competitor such as Russia. Hence, of the two states, it is Russia that has to rely more on violence in its foreign policy.<sup>12</sup>

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(i.e., the state), all three branches of government ultimately aim at increasing the power of the state over the individual. Be that as it may, one cannot help but concede that dictators and quasi-dictators (such as Vladimir Putin) enjoy more discretion than liberal-democratic politicians do.

<sup>12</sup> In the literature, one finds many more arguments that liberalism produces peacefulness rather than bellicosity, usually associated with some form of liberal (democratic) peace theory. However, many of these claims are highly debatable (cf. a classic treatment of the trade peace theory in Copeland 1996 and a recent realist discussion of democratic peace theories in Mearsheimer 2018). Note, however, that this section argues only that LIT is false, not that the opposing theories of democratic or liberal peace are correct. In fact, it may be that different systemic arrangements engender different incentives for *both* warlikeness *and* peaceability. The empirical record does not appear conclusive either. Although earlier research (see Pinker 2002; Rummel 1983) seemed to support theories of liberal peace, Cirillo and Taleb recently (2016) argued that no such regularities can actually be discerned.

## AMERICAN HEGEMONY AND DECENTRALISATION

In the libertarian scholarship on government and international relations, one claim has won virtually unanimous approval: the more monopolists of coercion (states) operate, the better in terms of economic prosperity and individual freedom. This is supposed to stem from the following equation: political disintegration means economic integration. The smaller states are, the easier it becomes to migrate between them. For fear of losing their productive population and capital, states are thus forced to compete with one another. The result is internal liberalisation. For in the long run, it is the more market-oriented nations that are capable of offering a higher standard of living and a more business-friendly environment (Hoppe 2007, p. 115). Furthermore, the break-up of states reduces their ability to pursue policies of protectionism. Larger countries, such as the US or Russia, can afford to sever economic ties with foreign nations thanks to the resources accumulated domestically. By contrast, an independent Dakota or Liechtenstein adopting protectionism would likely lead to mass starvation (Rothbard 2000b, pp. 83–84).<sup>13</sup>

What does this have to do with the US, other than that it should also follow this pro-secessionist doctrine by dissolving itself (McMaken 2022)? As we have already learnt, from the libertarian point of view, the US is seen as “the world’s dominant imperialist power” (Hoppe 2007, p. 244), the ventures of which constitute the most ominous attempts at centralisation. As evil as they may be, other great powers, such as Russia, ultimately prove benign since they, even if for self-interested reasons, (Hoppe 2022b) try to put a halt to the process. Owing to its unparalleled military and economic capacity, particularly the dollar’s dominant

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<sup>13</sup> On top of that, as the number of countries and national currencies increases, so do transaction costs and exchange rate risks. As a result, political decentralisation generates incentives to institute one international currency, facilitating tighter economic ties between nations (Hoppe 2007, p. 116). Since libertarian thinkers draw on the Austrian School of Economics, such a universal medium of exchange is supposed to be a commodity money (gold, silver, etc.) created by the free market, rather than a *fiat* paper money issued by the government (see the classic exposition in Mises 2009). The present international monetary order based on state-made national currencies or international currencies such as the euro is therefore poles apart from the situation envisioned by Austro-libertarians. Furthermore, the elevation of the dollar to the position of a global reserve currency allows the US government to conduct an ever more inflationary monetary policy by exporting inflation abroad. This is, among other things, the purpose served by political domination over other states. (Libertarians term this “monetary imperialism”) [Hoppe 2006, p. 107–116].) This topic is very important to the libertarian critique of US hegemony, but it involves so many economic technicalities that it is impossible to discuss it in sufficient detail here.

position in the global economy, the US even comes close to establishing itself as the equivalent of a world government without the need to actually eliminate other states (Hoppe 2006, pp.106–107). But is this really the case?

First of all, it is questionable whether the US is or has ever been a true hegemon on a planetary scale. The definition coined by Mearsheimer (2001, p. 40) comes in handy here: “A hegemon is a state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system. No other state has the military wherewithal to put up a serious fight against it. In essence, a hegemon is *the only* [italics added] great power in the system.” Obviously, the US is not *the only* great power in the world, nor has it been at any point in its history, including the post-Cold War era. The United States has never been in a position to subdue Russia, China, the entire Western Europe or a coalition of these powers by military means. This is no coincidence. As Mearsheimer (2001, p. 40–42, chap. 4) goes on to argue, achieving global hegemony is indeed a daunting challenge. For it would require having the potential to project military power all around the world, often simultaneously and across large bodies of water, which, as Mearsheimer observes, in the vast majority of cases turn out to be unsurmountable obstacles for invaders. Since the Cold War, an additional factor that supplements this “stopping power of water” in obstructing any attempt at global hegemony has been the proliferation of nuclear weapons. As a result, much more freedom is left for secondary actors (not to mention other great powers such as China or Russia) than libertarians would like to have it. Were this not the case, the US would not be having such a hard time pushing other NATO members to increase their military spending; France would not have removed its forces from NATO’s integrated military command in 1966, Germany would not have been able to pursue its economic partnership with Russia, and so on, and so forth. Thus, serendipitously, a sort of checks and balances practice emerges: the dominant state (the US) is able to influence the policies of its junior partners while not stripping them of their independence and still having to take account of their interests. As G. John Ikenberry (2001, pp. 21–22; 2022, pp. 60–62) points out, international organisations such as NATO, the UN, IMF or the World Bank – which libertarians portray as means of US-led centralisation – despite their flaws, institutionalise this tendency by allowing every member state to have a say.

Moreover, by looking at things solely through the prism of US global dominance, libertarians miss the trees for the woods. As Mearsheimer (2001, chap. 2) has shown, more important than the struggle for global hegemony (which usually proves elusive) is the security competition at the regional level. In this respect,

insular powers such the US or Great Britain often help to preserve the freedom of smaller states. By playing the role of so-called offshore balancers, they keep the regional balance of power between continental competitors. They ensure that none of them becomes a regional hegemon by joining balancing coalitions formed by less threatening players, as was the case during Napoleonic Wars or both World Wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Mearsheimer 2001, chap. 4). Thus, even if the USA has effectively secured its own hegemony in the Western hemisphere, which admittedly lends credence to libertarian scepticism, this does not entail that the US does not work as an antihegemonic (and thus decentralising) power in other parts of the globe. As will be shown, this is precisely what the US is currently doing in Eastern Europe.

### AMERICAN AND RUSSIAN IMPERIALISM

A few words about US and Russian imperialism should be said before the argument is concluded. The libertarian position on the topic is an instructive illustration of two general observations made so far: first, the presence of an anti-American and pro-Russian bias; and second, the tendency to overlook how America's global engagement can sometimes have positive implications for the progress of political decentralisation.

To begin with, the word "imperialism" does not denote every form of domination in international relations. Nor is it synonymous with might or power. Imperialism is always based on force: the direct territorial annexation of smaller units or their intimidation. As Joseph Schumpeter (2007, p. 5) notes: "Whenever the word imperialism is used, there is always the implication – whether sincere or not – of aggressiveness..." Tzarist Russia, as we have seen, was always a full-fledged imperialist entity. The same applies to the Soviet Union. Its expansion rested either upon forced annexation or on the threat of military action in the event of insubordination on the part of satellite states (materialised in Berlin in 1952, in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and in Lithuania as late as in 1990). An imperialistic policy – even if it is considered strategically defensive – is undoubtedly also currently being pursued by the Russian Federation in its aggression of Ukraine. Can the same be said of the US? Sometimes, but not always. Manifestations of imperialism were arguably the famous US interventions in Vietnam (in the 1960s) or Iraq (2003). The same is true of the multifarious moves undertaken in Latin America, or, in part, the US expansion on

the North American continent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., the war against Mexico in 1846-1848). Despite this, in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, when Washington conducts an imperialist policy, it is relatively mild in nature, with the aim never being to incorporate foreign territories into the USA. At worst, the objective is to establish US-friendly regimes staffed by local politicians. By contrast, supporting the Kremlin's proxies is the least of the goals of USSR-Russian imperialism. Instead, Moscow's intention is very often to directly annex foreign states or their parts, as is the case with Ukraine's Crimea and Donbas (instances from recent history are too numerous and widely known to be listed here).<sup>14</sup> Clearly, it is the latter type of policy that must be deemed more pernicious insofar as decentralisation is concerned. After all, satellite states, even when completely stripped of agency in foreign policy matters, still retain some level of autonomy in domestic politics. Furthermore, the current *modus operandi* of US foreign policy often does not consist in imperialist ventures of any sort. The powers defeated in World War II – (West) Germany and Japan – have become militarily subordinate to the US as a result of their own aggressive actions. Today, they maintain their dependence on a voluntary basis, acknowledging the benefits of shifting a substantial fraction of their defence costs onto the mighty ally. The North Atlantic Alliance is also based on voluntary membership. In particular, the countries of Eastern Europe have joined its ranks because they saw accession as an important guarantee of their own security, although soft power and economic power factors certainly played a role, too (Kuźniar 2008, p. 42-48). The US allying with them was therefore nothing other than a balancing act against the threat posed by the only potential hegemon in the region – Russia.

Two further inconsistencies in the views of the libertarian proponents of AHT become apparent here. First, none other than Rothbard and his libertarian followers argue that aggression and coercion always involve the use of physical violence or a threat thereof (Rothbard 2006, p. 27). And since imperialism undeniably entails the use of violence and coercion, a voluntary alignment of a secondary state with a great power cannot be regarded as an act of imperialism. Second, interestingly enough, the above is reflected in the definition of imperialism set out by Rothbard (2006, p. 342) himself. Imperialism, according to him, “may be defined as aggression by State A against the people of country B, followed by the subsequent coercive maintenance of such foreign rule.” How can this claim be reconciled with the belief that enlargements or even the very

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<sup>14</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee of this journal for drawing my attention to this point.

existence of NATO constitute acts of US imperialism? The anti-imperialist left, employing a far broader concept of coercion that covers a large part of market interactions, may try to defend such a position following the ideas of writers such as Lenin or Wallerstein. For libertarians, on the other hand, it should be – on purely conceptual grounds – a clear non-starter. However, if this is the case, then the whole libertarian justification for relativising US and Russian policy towards Ukraine founders. In invading Ukraine, Russia certainly does not contribute, even if by unacceptable means, to the containment of global centralisation under the aegis of the United States. At least in Central and Eastern Europe, no such imperialist, US-led centralisation occurs.<sup>15</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion reconstructed the criticism of US foreign policy laid out by American libertarians and called into question its two theoretical pillars: the liberal imperialism thesis and the American hegemony thesis. Upon investigation, both claims were found to be faulty. As a matter of fact, their blatant one-sidedness, coupled with the vast number of astonishingly misguided statements made by Rothbardians on international politics, raise the suspicion that both theses may have been concocted precisely to buttress the opposition to American foreign activism. The latter, as is well known, grew out of Rothbard's staunch anti-statism, as well as his early years spent successively among the members of the Old Right and New Left, both of which, while antithetical in almost everything else, including their name, were decidedly anti-war (Raimondo 2000, chap. 2, 4; Rothbard 2016a). Regrettably, the political antipathies of Rothbardians apparently clouded their judgment on both political theory and current politics. To make matters worse, prejudices developed in the tumultuous times of World War II and the Vietnam war, elevated to the status of science, have been passed on to younger generations of scholars and activists.

This is not to say that the libertarian errors are not understandable, given the tremendous havoc that militarism wreaks on individual liberty at home, as well as the damaging ramifications of the foreign adventurism that the US has undoubtedly been involved in on various occasions. This, however, does not

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<sup>15</sup> Funnily enough, on Rothbard's definition of imperialism, the interventions in Vietnam or Iraq do not count either, as they were not aimed at *maintaining* foreign (American) rule.

alter the fact that now that the US is engaging in Central-Eastern Europe, it is actually helping to balance and contain the only truly imperialist power in the region – the Russian Federation.

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