

Comparative Analysis of the National Security Strategies of Bulgaria, the USA, Russia and China Through the Prism of Key Security Theories

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Abstract – In the context of accelerated geopolitical confrontation, militarization of technology, and the “extension” of security to economic, cyber, and societal dimensions, the study of different national security strategies allows us to understand not only what states say in their strategies, but also why they say it. This is critically important for security decision-makers as it will help them anticipate potential conflicts or areas of cooperation, recognizing when a state is acting out of fear (realism), when out of ideology (constructivism), and when out of pragmatic interest (liberalism). The analysis in this report focuses on examining the similarities and differences between the national security strategies of Bulgaria, the United States, Russia, and China, refracted through the prism of the key security theories: realism/neorealism, liberalism/neoliberalism, constructivism, and the Copenhagen School. Each of the countries mentioned is of a different caliber and geopolitical weight, but the choice is not accidental. The United States, Russia, and China represent the three main “power centers” of the modern world, and Bulgaria is the analytical “prism” through which to see how global tremors are felt at the local level.

The study is based on a review of official national security strategy documents and related doctrinal and sectoral policies in the areas of defense, cybersecurity, and international/foreign policy. The analysis integrates contemporary scholarly insights into the transformation of operational art and hybrid operations, emphasizing the need for doctrinal adaptability and theoretical clarity in a context of increasing strategic uncertainty.

Keywords – geopolitical rivalry, national security strategy, security theories

I. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary strategic environment is characterized by a simultaneous “expansion” of the

security agenda and the restoration of sovereignty as the guiding framework for legitimizing policies. In the Updated National Security Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria of 2018, this is visible through the explicit derivation of citizen security and “human security” as the “true meaning” of national security, combined with the protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity and the state border [1]. Donald Trump’s version of the 2025 US National Security Strategy emphasizes the “critically necessary” link between ends and means and links national security to border control, industrial base, supply chains, and technological competitiveness, including in areas such as AI [2]. Russia’s 2021 strategy defines national security as a “state of protection” of national interests and explicitly describes information and space as new spheres of military action [3]. The Chinese White Paper (2025) frames security as “comprehensive, systematic, and relative,” emphasizing the “double-edged” effect of the scientific and technological revolution and explicitly including emerging risks in cyberspace and other “emerging fields” [4].

This combination of state-centric sovereignty, technological and economic vulnerability, and sectoral expansion of threats poses two interrelated tasks for the study of national security strategies: first, to describe what is being securitized (and with what language/tools), and second, to explain why different states attach different “existential weight” to similar risks. It is here that a comparative approach, supported by key security theories, has practical value for analyzing and predicting trajectories of confrontation and cooperation.

In view of the outlined relevance of the research problem, the aim of the article is to identify and interpret the similarities and differences between the national security strategies of Bulgaria, the USA, Russia and China through the prism of theoretical “lenses” that consistently

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emphasize power competition and interest (theories of realism/neorealism), institutional cooperation (theories of liberalism/neoliberalism), the role of ideas/identities (constructivism) and the processes of securitization (Copenhagen School) [6]–[10]. The practical focus is to derive stable comparative indicators (e.g. reference object, types of threats, tools, attitude towards institutions and sovereignty) that will support analytical work in a dynamically changing environment.

In connection with the formulated research objective, the subject of this study is the official framework documents for national security and a limited set of complementary documents such as white papers/texts, which serve as strategic “benchmarks” for priorities, threats and means. The core of the corpus includes: “Updated National Security Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria” (2018) [1], US National Security Strategy (NSS, 2025) [2], “Strategy of National Security of the Russian Federation” (approved by Decree No. 400; 2021) [3], and “China’s National Security in the New Era” (May 2025) [4]. As a secondary, but methodologically useful source for the “military instrument” and the translation of strategic goals into operational feasibility, the analysis of various scholars is used, such as Milko Stefanov (2025) on operational art and the “doctrine–adaptability” dilemma [5]. The subject of the study is the comparative model of: definitions and reference objects of security; threat hierarchies (incl. cyber, information, technological and economic); instrument profiles (military and non-military means, including sanctions/protectionism, institutional mechanisms and technological policy); role of international institutions; concept of sovereignty; and mechanisms and sectors of securitization.

The author’s working hypothesis is that, on the one hand, the strategic documents of the four countries converge towards a hybrid profile, including sovereignty and “extended” security, in which topics such as cyber, technology and economic aspects are integrated into national security on a par with the classical military dimensions. On the other hand, it is observed that the strategic documents under consideration diverge along two key parameters: (1) dominant referential object (person/citizen; state; political system/ regime; society/identity) and (2) attitude towards international institutions (from collective institutional embeddedness to skeptical/instrumental or competitive reading). As a sub-hypothesis, it can be assumed that where the documents securitize “multi-sector” threats and adopt multi-domain scenarios, the requirement for operational feasibility inevitably enhances the importance of organizational adaptability and the “doctrine-flexibility” synthesis, as is the argument of Stefanov (2025) [5].

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is based on an extensive corpus of official documents and analyses. At its core are the national security strategies of Bulgaria, the United States, Russia, and China. Expert analyses and reports are also used to enrich the context.

The main research methods include:

- Content analysis of strategic texts by reference object, priority threats, tools, attitude towards institutions, concept of sovereignty, securitization processes. This method allows a comparative review of the discourse and content of the strategies.
- A combined theoretical and comparative analysis by applying frameworks from realism, liberalism, constructivism and the Copenhagen School to interpret the comparable results. In this way, empirical findings are linked to academic discourses on security.

For operational purposes, the comparison is structured around five stable indicators applied uniformly across all four cases: referent object, hierarchy of threats, instruments, attitude towards institutions, and concept of sovereignty.

This study has several limitations. First, although the core comparison is anchored in official strategy documents, part of the contextual interpretation relies on secondary literature. This is especially relevant where strategic vocabulary carries strong domestic doctrinal meanings that are not always fully transferable across languages. Second, the Chinese case is examined primarily through an English-language institutional translation rather than through a systematic reading of the full original Chinese-language primary corpus. Third, while the official 2021 Russian national security strategy was consulted, the study did not systematically analyze the broader Russian-language primary corpus of complementary doctrinal, sectoral, and implementation documents in the original. The Russian and Chinese sections should therefore be read as analytically grounded but not exhaustive reconstructions of each state’s strategic discourse.

A further limitation follows from the design of the study itself. The corpus is intentionally selective and centered on framework strategies plus a limited number of complementary texts; it does not cover the full implementation layer of defence planning, budgeting, force development, or interagency practice. In addition, the analysis is qualitative and interpretive, which makes it suitable for identifying stable indicators and theoretical patterns, but less suitable for measuring policy outcomes or predicting future behavior with precision.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Realism and Neorealism: Theoretical Context and Strategic Applications

a) Theoretical context

In the field of international relations, the paradigm of realism is one of the most influential and enduring theoretical lines in the analysis of state behavior in crisis conditions. For the purposes of the report, a strict distinction between the two main directions – classical realism and neorealism – is necessary, since the two directions offer different explanatory models for the origins of international rivalry and the logic of state behavior.

Classical realism emphasizes the anthropological factor and views international politics as a constant striving for dominance. Hans Morgenthau, as the founder of classical realism in the modern era, connects politics with the constant striving for power and formulates the understanding that the national interest should be thought of “in the categories of power”. In this sense, conflict and rivalry are not random deviations, but arise from the persistent tendency towards supremacy, also denoted by the concept of *animus dominandi*. According to Morgenthau, political realism is not limited to an apology for aggression, but also includes the idea of prudence as a key virtue of state action. [11, pp. 4-15].

Neorealism (structural realism), developed by Kenneth Waltz, makes a radical turn, emphasizing the systemic factor. The author argues that the behavior of states does not depend on their internal character (democracies or dictatorships), but on the anarchic structure of the international system. Since there is no “world government”, states are forced to act in a “self-help” mode, because they cannot rely on a higher guarantor for their security and survival. [12, pp. 88-99]. It is for this reason that Waltz is usually associated with the line of the so-called defensive realism (states seek balance and security, not necessarily dominance). Within the realist tradition, John Mearsheimer introduces offensive realism. According to him, the most favorable strategic outcome for a great power is not simply the accumulation of additional capabilities, but achieving a position of regional hegemony, since it is this that provides the highest degree of security in a competitive international environment. [13, pp. 16-21].

b) Strategic applications

• USA

In the NSS (November 2025) of the USA, developed by the Donald Trump administration, a hybrid concept is observed, which in the text is defined as “Principled Realism” [2, pp. 5-8], an official doctrine introduced in the 2017 strategy, but in political science it is analyzed as “Transactional Realism” [14]. Seen through the prism of realism, the concept of NSS 2025 is “Principled Realism” because the document returns to the classical principles of sovereignty and national interest, rejecting idealistic attempts to “export democracy”. In parallel, the principle of “Flexible Realism” is formulated, according to which the USA seeks good and peaceful trade relations “without imposing... democratic or other social change” on other nations [2, p. 9]. Although the term “Principled Realism” is not used as a separate concept, these provisions support the thesis that the document distances itself from ideological foreign policy goals and returns to sovereignty and interest as a legitimizing framework. The emphasis placed by the USA is on leadership and “Peace through Strength” [2, pp. 8-9], which is a direct application of Mearsheimer’s theses on the regional hegemon. Realism here is focused on the “ends-means” relationship. The referent object is the state, whose security depends on control over its borders and industrial base. In this sense, the realist reading of the NSS (2025) does not treat the economy as a separate sphere, but as the material basis of

national power, including through technological leadership and the sustainability of supply chains [2, p. 5; pp. 13-14].

Seen from another perspective – through the prism of neorealism, the NSS (November 2025) of the USA is “Transactional Realism” [14]. The document emphasizes “economic security as national security” and the protection of sovereignty in the face of global commitments [2, pp. 5-11]. The USA views the international structure as a security market, where alliances are effective only if there is “burden sharing” [14, pp. 320-322]. The goal is to maintain a unipolar position through economic protectionism as a basis for military power.

• Russian Federation

From the perspective of realism, the National Security Strategy of Russia (Strategy of National Security (Decree No. 400, 2021) puts the “protection of traditional spiritual and moral values” at the forefront. The document presents Russia as an independent and sovereign pole capable of resisting external pressure. The conflict with the West is interpreted as a clash of wills and identities [3, section II, item 7, items 20-21], where sovereignty is an absolute value that justifies the use of force [3, section II, items 34-40]. In this sense, one can speak of classical realism, in which the information space is securitized as a new domain of military action, and security is a “state of protection” of the state interest against external pressure. This can be interpreted through the prism of Stephen Walt’s theory of the balance of threats [15, pp. 17-21]. The implicit geopolitical logic that emerges from the document is that Russia officially links its security to the elimination and prevention of hotbeds of tension in Russia’s neighboring countries, which is a classical realist model for protecting the space of immediate strategic interests. Russian strategy is a classic example of protecting “spheres of influence”. The strategy itself does not define Russia as a revisionist power, but its emphasis on sovereignty, spheres of influence, and limiting external pressure lends itself to such an interpretation. Sergei Karaganov presents Russia as a state that is restoring its hard power to deter further NATO expansion and challenge the rules of the order imposed by the West after the Cold War [16]. Here, realism explains the conflict as a clash of geopolitical spaces, where “security for one is a threat to the other” (the security dilemma). If we look at Russia’s strategy through the prism of neorealism, we will notice that the Russian Federation defines the international environment as “the transformation of the world order with an increasing number of centers of power”. The text, analyzing the structural shift of layers, also points out the need for coordination between different centers of development through multilateral cooperation, and not through bloc approaches [3, section I, item 9].

• People’s Republic of China

In the context of realism, China’s National Security in the New Era (May 2025) focuses on “political security” – the survival of the regime and the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, which are identified with the survival of the nation [4, p. 6]. In this sense, the document places

domestic political stability and regime security as the foundation of national security, which can be read in a realist perspective. Seen through the prism of neorealism, China uses in the document a logic close to the concept of “Comprehensive National Power”. The document also places a neorealist focus on the “scientific and technological revolution” as a “double-edged sword.” China defines emerging fields as key to changing the international balance of power [4, pp. 22-30]. This can be defined as structural neorealism. The document acknowledges growing strategic tensions, but at the same time rejects the thesis that the “Thucydides Trap” is a historical inevitability. The “Thucydides Trap” is a deadly pattern of structural tension that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace the ruling power and war becomes structurally likely. In his book “Destined for War,” Graham Allison explains why the “Thucydides Trap” is the best lens for understanding US-China relations in the 21st century, and through unusual historical parallels and military scenarios, he shows how close we are to the unthinkable. Yet, he emphasizes that war is not inevitable [17]. China is preparing for the inevitable structural tension with the US by changing the balance of power through innovation, not just weapons. The strategic goal is structural change of the system through technological superiority (AI, quantum technologies), avoiding direct military confrontation until the moment when the balance of power is irreversibly changed [4, pp. 18-23].

• Republic of Bulgaria

Bulgaria is in a specific situation. The Updated National Security Strategy (2018) remains the leading framework document, while the National Defense Strategy (2025) has already been adopted and reflects the new realities after 2022. This “anticipatory” updating of the sectoral strategy shows the realistic need of the military leadership to respond to threats in the Black Sea region, regardless of the delay in the political framework. In view of this, there is a need to cumulatively analyze the two documents. The Updated National Security Strategy (2018), in the context of realism, defines “vital interests” (sovereignty, territorial integrity), but still uses the language of liberal institutionalism, relying on international law as a guarantor [1, p. 18-22]. The National Defense Strategy (2025) is a much more “realistic” document than the framework. It takes into account the war in Ukraine as a direct factor and puts “national resilience” and deterrence as a priority [18, pp. 3-6]. From the perspective of neorealism, the Updated National Security Strategy (2018) recognizes the need for NATO membership, which can be perceived as the only way to survive in the anarchic environment of, for example, the Black Sea region. In terms of the National Defense Strategy (2025), neorealism can be interpreted as Bulgaria’s desire to strengthen its capabilities and alliance integration in the context of growing confrontation between Russia and NATO [18, pp. 10-12].

For the purposes of the analysis, in a deductive form it can be stated that realism is a useful tool because it explains why countries with different ideologies act in a similar way

(e.g. the USA and China fight for influence in the seas). On the other hand, it allows us to understand that the Black Sea will always be a zone of confrontation, while Russia and NATO have incompatible ideas about their security in the region. Last but not least, it shows that “strategic autonomy” is a luxury that great powers can afford, and in the context of Bulgaria, security is a function of the strength of the alliances in which it participates.

B. Liberalism and Neoliberal Institutionalism: Theoretical Context and Strategic Applications

While the realist paradigm emphasizes the inevitability of conflict in conditions of anarchy, the liberal tradition in international relations explores the mechanisms through which cooperation becomes a rational and sustainable choice for states.

a) Theoretical context

The theoretical foundation of the liberal approach to international relations is rooted in the principles of classical liberalism, the main pillar of which is the concept of individual freedom and state legitimacy arising from the consent of the governed. According to John Locke in his “Second Treatise of Government” (1689), the main role of the state apparatus is the protection of the natural rights of the individual – life, liberty and property [19]. In this context, the internal political structure of the state is seen as a decisive factor for its external legitimacy. This classical emphasis on the “internal character” of the political community lays the foundation for the understanding that states are not homogeneous actors, and their behavior on the international stage is a direct reflection of their internal structure and values.

The transition to modern liberalism is most clearly argued by Michael Doyle, who adapts Immanuel Kant’s ideas about “perpetual peace” to contemporary political reality. According to Doyle, the internal political structure of the state is a primary factor in its international behavior. The central thesis is that liberal democracies build a “zone of separate peace” among themselves. This is due to a combination of republican institutional constraints (where the will of citizens acts as a brake on war) and shared liberal norms that guarantee mutual recognition of legitimacy [20, pp. 1151, 1157-1160]. It is important to note that this peace is specific only to relations between liberal regimes, while they can show aggression towards illiberal ones.

The theory of neoliberal institutionalism adopts the neorealist assumption of an anarchic international system composed of rational egoists. According to Robert Cohen, what is characteristic is that international institutions (regimes) qualitatively change the calculations of states. Institutions reduce transaction costs, solve problems of information deficit and create a “shadow of the future” (repeatability of relations), which makes long-term cooperation more profitable than short-term unilateral aggression [21, pp. 51-65, 85-109].

The complementarity of the two theories postulates that a high degree of economic integration and the “spirit of trade” raise the cost of conflict to levels that make it an

irrational instrument of national policy. The liberal state views security not only as military survival, but also as preserving the conditions for economic prosperity.

b) Reflection in strategic documents

• USA

The new US NSS (2025) demonstrates a shift from global liberalism to instrumental neoliberalism. The document does not present international institutions as an end in itself, but as useful insofar as they support American interests, sovereignty, and burden-sharing. The US strategy defines alliances as “a broad network of alliances,” but at the same time formulates the principle of “Primacy of Nations,” according to which the nation-state remains the primary political entity, and international institutions should be evaluated according to whether they strengthen, rather than limit, national capacity for action [2, pp. 6, 9]. Arguably, we can point out that according to Trump, institutions are useful only if they serve American technological competitiveness and share the financial burden. In this sense, Trump’s NSS 2025 marks a transition to transactional neoliberalism. This logic is also confirmed in the section “Burden-Sharing and Burden-Shifting”, where it is insisted that allies take greater responsibility for security in their regions [2, p. 12]. Therefore, it is most accurate to define the strategy as an example of selective instrumental institutionalism, rather than universalist liberalism.

• Russian Federation

The 2021 National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation contains a clear criticism of the Western countries’ desire to maintain their hegemony, the weakening of international institutions, and the crisis of the Western liberal model. In this sense, the document reflects a strong skepticism towards the Western-dominated international order and the use of sanctions, political, and information pressure as tools of rivalry [3, sec. II, paras. 7, 19, 21]. At the same time, it would be inaccurate to claim that the strategy simply places sovereignty “above” international law. It is more accurate to say that it combines the protection of sovereignty with an insistence on international relations based on international law, equal and indivisible security, and the strengthening of universal international institutions. The document also speaks of multilateral interaction “without dividing lines and bloc approaches,” as well as mechanisms for coordinating the interests of different centers of development [3, sec. II, paras. 9, 24; sec. IV, paras. 97, 101]. Russia is striving to build alternative “illiberal” formats for cooperation (e.g. BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization) that exclude the Western model of universal values. Therefore, a more correct qualification is institutional skepticism towards the Western-dominated order, rather than a complete rejection of the international legal and multilateral framework as such.

• People's Republic of China

The document China’s National Security in the New Era focuses on political security, a systematic approach,

and coordination between security and development. The English version used emphasizes that national security should place people’s security at the core, political security as the foundation, economic security as the cornerstone, and rely on coordinated development of security and growth [4, p. 12]. In China’s National Security in the New Era (2025), China demonstrates a complex strategy for “institutional transformation.” China maintains active participation in existing institutions (UN, WTO), multilateral formats (e.g. BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization) and rules, including a rules-based multilateral trading system, while simultaneously developing its own initiatives such as the Global Security Initiative [4, pp. 31-35]. Therefore, it is more accurate to interpret the document as an example of pragmatic institutionalism, rather than as evidence of pure neoliberal universalism.

• Republic of Bulgaria

Bulgaria is closest to the liberal-institutional model. In the Updated National Security Strategy of 2018, NATO membership is defined as a “strategic choice” and “one of the main guarantors of our national security”. The same section also emphasizes the multilateral approach to ensuring peace and security [1, para. 145]. The National Defense Strategy of 2025 places a clearer emphasis on collective defense, interoperability, multinational initiatives and national resilience. It explicitly states that security in the Black Sea region is possible only with the collective efforts of NATO and the EU, that Bulgaria will adapt its armed forces to NATO plans, and that national and collective resilience are key to security [18, pp. 10-11, 17]. Furthermore, the modernization of the armed forces is tied to the requirements of interoperability and standardization [18, pp. 22, 24]. Therefore, Bulgaria should be considered as an example of union institutionalism of a small state, and not simply as a “typical liberal case” in the abstract sense.

From the analysis conducted, we can justify the conclusion that the liberal and neoliberal-institutional perspectives remain useful because they show why even in a conflict environment, states continue to invest in alliances, regimes and multilateral formats. This is most clearly seen in Bulgaria and in a more pragmatic version in China. In the US, institutions are read instrumentally, and in Russia – selectively and with a high degree of skepticism towards the Western-dominated order.

At the same time, the documents also show the limits of the liberal reading. The US NSS (2025) subordinates institutions to national interest and burden-sharing. The Russian strategy criticizes Western hegemony and the selective application of norms, and the Chinese document defends multilateralism, but through a clearly state-centric framework. The Bulgarian Defense Strategy of 2025 puts deterrence, alliance commitment and resilience at the forefront. Therefore, the more accurate conclusion is not that liberalism is “failing”, but that in contemporary strategic discourse, institutional logic is everywhere subordinated to security, sovereignty and the utility of alliances.

C. Social constructivism: identity, norms and strategic narratives

While realism and liberalism focus on material factors (military power and institutions), constructivism offers a critical look at ideal factors. The main thesis is that security is not an objectively given reality, but a social construction arising from shared perceptions, identities, and historical stratifications.

a) Theoretical context

According to Alexander Wendt, international anarchy does not automatically impose a single logic of behavior. The behavior of states depends not only on material capabilities, but also on the way in which states recognize and position themselves in relation to each other [22, p. 22; pp. 247-248]. It follows that threats are not purely material. The same capabilities can be perceived differently depending on whether the other state is thought of as an enemy, a rival, or a friend. In this sense, one can speak of the intersubjectivity of the threat, and not simply of its "subjectivity" in a psychological sense [22, pp. 247-248].

States often act not only according to their material self-interest, but also according to what is considered "right" or "normal" within their specific strategic culture. In *World of Our Making*, Nicholas Onuf writes that rules, as "guiding, but not determining, human conduct," give "social meaning." States therefore act within normatively structured understandings of permissible, right, and legitimate behavior, and not only under the pressure of interest in a narrow material sense [23, p. 22].

b) Application to strategic documents and national narratives

• USA

In NSS (2025), the constructivist element is strongly expressed through a redefinition of American identity. The document does not only list interests and means, but also frames a specific image of the American political "self". The reference object is national sovereignty and the economy. The "continued survival and safety" of the USA as an "independent, sovereign republic" is placed at the center and it is stated that the country wants to protect "its way of life" from "hostile foreign influence". In addition, the strategy emphasizes the industrial base, technological leadership and the restoration of American spiritual and cultural health. Therefore, we can say that it is talking about an identity and value framing of security [2, pp. 3-4].

• Russian Federation

The Russian strategy is an example of constructivism embedded in a state document. It introduces as strategic priorities "the protection of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values, culture and historical memory" as a vital interest for security [3, sect. III, item 25(7), 26(8)]. At the same time, section II of the document presents the West as a significant value-political "other": Western countries are described as striving to preserve their hegemony; there is talk of a crisis of the Western liberal model, of attempts to dilute traditional values, of information campaigns to form

a hostile image of Russia and of using internal socio-economic problems to split Russian society. Therefore, the constructivist conclusion that security is also framed through a value-identity opposition is justified [3, sect. II, item 7, 19-21]. In this sense, the referent object is the state/civilization, and security is socially constructed around the idea of protecting "traditional values" from Western infiltration into the information space.

• People's Republic of China

In the first section of the document China's National Security in the New Era, China is presented as a source of "certainty and stability" in a "volatile and unstable world", while the global environment is described in terms of the revival of hegemonism, power politics, zero-sum games and the risks of a "double-edged" scientific and technological revolution. Therefore, one can speak of a Chinese narrative of stability, order and development, opposed to hegemonism and coercion [4, pp. 9-10]. The document frames security as "comprehensive, systematic, and relative". The English translation used states that Chinese national security "takes people's security as its purpose, political security as its foundation, and national interests as its criterion". At the same time, the document emphasizes that China coordinates its own security with common security, rejects coercive security practices and threats, and follows a national security path with Chinese characteristics. This allows us to speak of a strong ideological and political-normative framing of security [4, pp. 7-8]. In this sense, the political system can be defined as a reference object, because security is defined as "comprehensive" and inextricably linked to regime stability and social harmony.

• Republic of Bulgaria

The updated National Security Strategy of 2018 brings the security of the citizen to the forefront and explicitly states that the "true meaning" of national security is the guarantee of human security and the protection of the freedom and dignity of the citizen. In this sense, the reference object is the person/citizen. At the same time, the strategy directs the country's resources towards "unity and prosperity in accordance with the European civilizational choice", and Bulgaria is framed as a member of the EU and NATO, which also considers its security in a collective format. Therefore, one can speak of a liberal-constructivist element [1, para 3-4, 8].

The National Defense Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria 2025 does not contain an explicit statement that threats in the information space are directly aimed at national identity. Instead, the document emphasizes that national resilience represents the "first line of deterrence and defense" and examines the information environment through the prism of strategic communications. In this context, it emphasizes the need to counter fake news, disinformation campaigns, propaganda impacts, manipulation of public opinion and processes of erosion of trust in state institutions. Therefore, it is more correct to assume that the strategy primarily addresses impacts on public trust, social attitudes and institutional resilience, and

does not formulate national identity as a direct object of attack [18, pp. 17, 19-20].

This conclusion also corresponds to the analysis of hybrid operations presented in the study by Ralitsa Borisova, which allows for a more precise interpretation of the nature of contemporary threats. The author points out that in the preparatory phase of hybrid actions, strategic, political, economic, social and infrastructural vulnerabilities of the target state are identified and exploited, including by building networks of influence and impact on the public environment. In the subsequent phase, intensive information operations are carried out, aimed at hindering the decision-making process and weakening public and institutional resilience [24, pp. 82–83]. In this sense, the emphasis on trust, public attitudes and institutional stability, laid down in the National Defense Strategy, can be interpreted as reflecting precisely these mechanisms of impact.

Constructivism is useful here because it shows why different countries attach different existential weight to similar risks. For Bulgaria, the reference object is primarily the citizen and human security, and for Russia – state sovereignty and traditional values. For China, the reference object is political security and the overall sustainability of the system, and for the US – the sovereign republic, way of life, industrial base and technological superiority. This does not cancel out material factors, but shows that they acquire strategic meaning only when framed through identities, norms and political narratives.

D. Copenhagen School: securitization as a tool of strategic discourse

While previous paradigms sought objective or normative sources of security, the Copenhagen School viewed security not as a given, but as the result of a securitizing speech act.

a) Theoretical context

A problem becomes a security issue when it is presented as an existential threat to a certain referent object and thus legitimizes extraordinary measures beyond the usual political process; full securitization also presupposes the acceptance of this presentation by a relevant audience [10, pp. 24-26]. Critically, M. C. Williams emphasizes that the distinguishing feature of securitization is precisely the logic of exception and exceptionalism through which a given issue is taken beyond normal politics [25, pp. 514-517].

In this framework, the securitizing actor is the subject who articulates a given problem as an existential threat to a relevant audience. The referent object is the value, community, or institution whose survival is presented as threatened, and the emergency measures are those actions that gain legitimacy precisely through this rhetoric of urgency, priority, and permissible deviation from normal political procedures [10, pp. 24-27, 36-37].

b) Securitization processes in current strategies

• USA

In the US NSS (2025), the logic of securitization is most visible in the economic, technological, and industrial spheres. The document explicitly links national security to protection from hostile foreign influence, predatory trade practices, secure supply chains, reindustrialization, defense industrial base, and cutting-edge technologies, including AI [2, pp. 3, 12-14]. In the section on Asia, China is presented not as an abstract civilizational threat, but as an economic and technological competitor whose influence on supply chains must be limited through reciprocity, tariffs, reindustrialization, and protection of critical dependencies [2, pp. 19-22].

• Russian Federation

Russia's 2021 Strategy expands the register of security far beyond the purely military sphere, including information, economic, scientific and technological, public and value security [3, Sect. III, item 25-26]. In Section II, the document emphasizes the growing geopolitical instability, information campaigns to form a hostile image of Russia, attempts at internal destabilization and the need to strengthen sovereignty, and in Section IV, item 47(1), the task of preventing external interference and inspiring "color revolutions" is explicitly set [3, Sect. II, items 17-21; Sect. IV, item 47(1)].

• People's Republic of China

China's 2025 National Security White Paper frames security as comprehensive, systematic, and relative. It places people's security as the goal, political security as the foundation, and national interests as the criterion [4, pp. 6, 13-14]. In this sense, securitization encompasses not only traditional military risks, but also social stability, network security, data protection, and AI. The document speaks of building security barriers for the network, data, and AI sectors, implementing the Data Security Law, data security review, and security review system for foreign investment, as well as maintaining overall social stability in the context of deep internet and technological transformation [4, pp. 22-23, 25-29].

• Republic of Bulgaria

Bulgarian strategic documents show institutionally bound securitization rather than "reactive" securitization in the strong sense of the term. The updated 2018 National Security Strategy presents migration as a potential strategic threat, takes into account the growing migratory pressure, the activation of hybrid actions, the manipulation of public opinion and disinformation, and also highlights energy security and a secure cyberspace as important national interests [1, para. 19, 30, 33 and 166]. The 2025 National Defense Strategy builds on this framework by emphasizing national resilience as the "first line of deterrence and defense," countering fake news, disinformation campaigns, and hybrid actions, as well as the risks associated with migratory pressure, energy security, secure supply chains, and digital transformation [18, para. 18-23, 87-88, 100-105].

Against this background, Milko Stefanov's argument, productive as an analytical perspective, is that

contemporary conflicts are characterized by hybrid threats, information saturation and high technological dynamics, and the success of operational art does not stem from a choice between doctrinal consistency and unlimited adaptability, but from a synthesis between the two [5, pp. 10-11, 25-27]. Applied to the strategies under consideration, this means that the securitization of the economy, data, cyberspace, artificial intelligence, migration and information environment requires not only a new language of security, but also the adaptation of organizational, operational and resource solutions.

Therefore, the usefulness of this analytical approach is two-fold. First, it allows us to identify which topics are moving from the realm of normal politics to the realm of urgency and priority: in the American case – supply chains, reindustrialization and AI; in the Russian case – sovereignty, informational psychological impact and value protection; in the Chinese case – political security, social stability and data/AI security; in the Bulgarian case – resilience, hybrid actions, migration pressure and strategic communications.

Second, the approach shows that securitization also has resource implications. In the Bulgarian case, the document does not speak of “drastic increases above 2% of GDP”, but fixes 2.0% of GDP as the already achieved minimum necessary level and the basis for subsequent increases [18, para 125]. For this reason, the precise formulation is that the securitization discourse legitimizes priority resource provision and organizational adaptation, and not automatic extraordinary budget increases beyond what is explicitly stated in the strategy.

E. Copenhagen School: securitization as a tool of strategic discourse

The comparative findings can be synthesized through the stable indicators announced in the introduction and applied throughout the analysis. Table I summarizes the country-specific observations in a common analytical matrix and makes visible the main lines of convergence and divergence between the four national security strategies.

TABLE I COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS OF STABLE INDICATORS ACROSS THE FOUR NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGIES

Stable indicator	Republic of Bulgaria	United States	Russian Federation	People's Republic of China
Referent object	Citizen/human security, national resilience, and alliance-embedded state security	Sovereign state, territorial control, industrial base, and the American way of life	Sovereign statehood, strategic autonomy, regime stability, and protection of traditional values	Political security, CCP leadership, system stability, people's security, and national interests
Hierarchy of threats	Black Sea instability, hybrid actions, disinformation, migration pressure, cyber and	Strategic competition with China, Russia as a major challenger, border insecurity, supply-	NATO/Western pressure, external interference, information warfare, sanctions, internal destabilization	External containment, political instability, cyber/data/AI risks, technological dependence, threats to

Stable indicator	Republic of Bulgaria	United States	Russian Federation	People's Republic of China
	energy risks	chain dependence, technological vulnerability	n, erosion of values	social stability
Main instruments	Collective defence, interoperability, modernization, strategic communications, resilience-building within NATO and the EU	Military superiority, border control, reindustrialization, tariffs and trade policy, technological leadership, selective alliances	Military deterrence, sovereign control of the information space, strategic autonomy, partnerships beyond the West, value protection	Comprehensive security governance, technological innovation, party-state control, data and cyber regulation, multilateral initiatives
Attitude towards institutions	Strong positive embeddedness in NATO and the EU; institutions as security multipliers	Selective and instrumental; institutions are useful insofar as they support U.S. interests and burden-sharing	Skeptical towards Western-led institutions; preference for alternative or plural centers of coordination	Pragmatic institutionalism; works within existing institutions while simultaneously developing parallel initiatives
Concept of sovereignty	Sovereignty protected through law, alliances, and collective defence	Primacy of the nation, autonomy of action, and control of borders and the economic base	Absolute and non-negotiable sovereignty as a shield against external interference	Sovereignty and non-interference linked to regime security, development, and political order

Source: compiled by the author on the basis of [1]–[4], [18].

As Table I shows, convergence is strongest in the expansion of security agendas beyond the strictly military domain and in the multidomain character of contemporary strategic instruments. Divergence is strongest in the dominant referent object, in the meaning attached to sovereignty, and in the role attributed to international institutions. In this sense, the comparison supports the working hypothesis only partially: the four strategies converge in what they increasingly securitize, but diverge in what they ultimately seek to protect and in the political logic through which security is organized.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

The comparative analysis shows that the four strategies share an expanded understanding of national security in which cyber, information, technological, economic, and societal dimensions are integrated with classical military concerns. This confirms the first part of the working hypothesis: in all four cases, security discourse has moved toward a hybrid and multidomain profile.

At the same time, the cases diverge in the dominant referent object, the hierarchy of threats, the role assigned to institutions, and the meaning of sovereignty. Bulgaria places citizen security, resilience, and alliance embeddedness at the centre; the United States prioritizes sovereign state capacity and industrial-technological power; Russia foregrounds sovereign statehood, strategic autonomy, and protection from external pressure; China centers political security, regime stability, and comprehensive security governance. The hypothesis is therefore only partially confirmed: convergence is strongest in the expansion of the security agenda, while divergence is strongest in the political logic of protection.

The theoretical comparison indicates that no single approach is sufficient on its own. Realism and neorealism best explain strategic rivalry, balance-of-power behavior, and the salience of military and material capabilities. Liberal and neoliberal institutionalism remain indispensable for explaining alliance dependence and the continued utility of multilateral frameworks. Constructivism and the Copenhagen School clarify how similar risks acquire different existential meanings and how new domains are securitized through strategic discourse. For Bulgaria, the main implication is that resilience, interoperability, and societal cohesion are more realistic sources of security than any strong version of strategic autonomy.

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