

Igor Kovač

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EDITORIAL

SLOVENIA AFTER 35 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE – STRATEGIC REFLECTIONS AND CHALLENGES

In December 2025, the Republic of Slovenia commemorated the 35th anniversary of the proclamation of the results of the independence referendum. In his 26 December address announcing the referendum results, Dr France Bučar, President of the Slovenian Parliament, declared (Bučar, 1993):

Such a decision can only be made by a mature nation that is fully aware of its own individuality, that has a strong will to live in accordance with its capabilities, a nation that is ready and prepared to face the challenges of the times and the environment in which it lives.

This anniversary offers not only a moment for remembrance, but also an opportunity for strategic reflection. To what extent does Slovenia today demonstrate the qualities Bučar believed to be essential? Does it exhibit the maturity and self-awareness required to make the decisions that will shape our future? These questions form the motivational and conceptual foundation of this special issue of *Contemporary Military Challenges*.

Over the past three and a half decades, the political, economic, military, technological, ideational, and security environments in which Slovenia operates have evolved profoundly. The country has transitioned from a newly independent state seeking international recognition to a consolidated member of both the European Union and NATO. One could thus assume that Slovenia now enjoys the most favourable international position in its history – possessing, for the first time, a full set of strategic advantages while embedded within the world's most significant economic and military alliances. Yet, levels of public trust in political institutions remain persistently and worryingly low (Toš, 2025). When this domestic fragility is coupled with intensifying great-power rivalry, the growing assertiveness of revisionist and rogue actors, the erosion of the distinction between war and peace through hybrid and

cognitive forms of conflict, and the broader hollowing out of the West's civilizational wherewithal, the overall outlook becomes increasingly concerning.

It is not possible to address all these issues within a single special issue. We have therefore chosen to focus on the contemporary international environment. The contributions assembled here examine specific global and regional challenges that Slovenia will, in one way or another, be compelled to confront in the near future. The purpose of this thematic issue is thus twofold. First, it seeks to illuminate the key international and security dynamics shaping Slovenia's strategic environment in 2025. Second, it aims to distil insights relevant to the formulation of Slovenia's grand strategy, foreign policy, and defence posture, as the country navigates an era marked by turbulence and uncertainty.

The six contributing papers address a range of pertinent issues, including international hierarchy and the US Lippmann Gap (the imbalance between a state's foreign policy commitments and its available means) (Lippmann, 1925); a systematic evaluation of recent EU initiatives aimed at enhancing defence cooperation between member states; the strategic implications of reducing European dependence on the US defence industrial base in ways that may benefit both the United States and its NATO partners; conventional deterrence strategies available to small states; the cognitive dimensions of geoeconomics; and lessons for countering hybrid threats derived from Latin America's experience with multidimensional security frameworks.

This introductory section integrates the individual contributions into a coherent analytical framework. It first summarizes each paper in the sequence in which it appears – progressing from theoretical and structural examinations to empirically grounded and policy-oriented analyses – and subsequently offers critical commentary on their core insights, with particular emphasis on the implications and lessons relevant to Slovenia.

Andrew Goodhart, of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, in article *U.S. Pressure on NATO: Betraying Friends or Bulding up a Team?* examines the Trump administration's coercive approach to NATO burden-sharing and argues that it reflects a structural shift in US grand strategy, rather than an effort to undermine the Alliance. As Washington reorients its strategic priorities towards countering China and confronts a widening Lippmann Gap, it is seeking to reduce its defence commitments in Europe and induce its allies to assume greater responsibility for collective security. Drawing on theories of alliances, hierarchy, and legitimacy, the article contends that intensified US pressure may paradoxically strengthen NATO by fostering more equitable capability aggregation, while also generating risks associated with diminished US legitimacy.

For Slovenia, the central implication of his argument is the need to move decisively away from patterns of implicit free-riding (Barry, 2012) and towards a posture that meaningfully contributes to collective security. Enhancing defence spending, developing niche military capabilities, and investing in societal resilience constitute

not only obligations arising from NATO membership, but also essential steps for safeguarding Slovenia's national interests in a context where US security guarantees may become less automatic. Slovenia would also benefit from moving beyond superficial rhetoric about the United States and its presidents, and instead engage more seriously with the consistent strategic messages that successive US administrations have conveyed to Europe since the end of the Cold War. At the same time, recognizing that Europe cannot act as a global strategic pole independent of the United States underscores the importance of sustaining a credible and balanced transatlantic partnership. Strengthening Slovenia's defence contributions is therefore integral to maintaining both national security and the broader global democratic alliance.

Davide Fiammenghi from the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and **Andrea Locatelli** of the Catholic University of Milan in the article *Hype or Reality? An Assessment of the First von der Leyen Commission's Defence Initiatives* evaluate the efficacy of the first von der Leyen Commission's defence initiatives in advancing European defence cooperation and strategic autonomy. By systematically reviewing key instruments, including PESCO, CARD, the EDF, EDIRPA, ASAP, and the European Defence Industrial Strategy, their analysis assesses the potential to overcome longstanding political, economic, and military constraints which have historically impeded integration. The analysis highlights persistent structural fragmentation, limited defence investment, and the challenges of aligning operational requirements across Member States. The article concludes that, despite notable institutional innovation, substantial obstacles remain.

For Slovenia, the key implication of their work is the necessity of adopting a dual-track strategy: actively supporting EU defence initiatives where they are feasible and beneficial, while maintaining NATO and US interoperability as the cornerstone of its security posture. Instead of assuming that EU-level consolidation can resolve national capability gaps, Slovenia should identify and develop specific industrial and technological niches in which it can provide tangible value. Such targeted contributions will better position Slovenia to benefit from, and meaningfully shape, Europe's evolving defence landscape.

Eric Gomez, of the Horizon Institute for Public Service and George Mason University, in his work *(Re)Building Muscle: Reducing Europe's Dependence on the U.S. Defense Industrial Base* examines the growing strain on the US defence industrial base and assesses the strategic imperative for Europe to reduce its dependence on American military production. Drawing on lessons from the war in Ukraine, persistent delays in US Foreign Military Sales, and competing global demands on US armaments, the analysis shows why reliance on US industry is increasingly untenable for NATO. It evaluates the political and military benefits of a more balanced transatlantic industrial relationship, and identifies practical policy measures – including European investment, licenced co-production, and the diversification of suppliers – to strengthen Europe's defence capacity and enable a more resilient alliance.

For Slovenia, the paper underscores the need to complement necessary reliance on US arms with deeper integration into emerging European defence supply chains. Slovenia's procurement strategy should balance NATO interoperability with proactive participation in European industrial initiatives, particularly those aimed at expanding production capacity in high-demand sectors. Given Europe's acute shortages in drones, munitions, and related components, it would serve Slovenia well to invest in specialized manufacturing niches and dual-use technologies where it can add tangible value. Pursuing licenced co-production arrangements, especially in drone systems and associated electronics, would strengthen national resilience while contributing meaningfully to Europe's broader defence industrial renewal.

Eleni Ekmektsioglou, of the University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation and the US National Labs for Nuclear Weapons, contributes an article *Europe's Nuclear Deterrent: How to Erode the Foundation of Russia's Nuclear Threats Capitalizing on Small European Powers' Advantages*, in which she argues that Europe faces renewed nuclear threats from Russia, prompting a reconsideration of deterrence strategy. She claims that European nuclear policy should not mimic US Cold War-era approaches focused on damage limitation or nuclear warfighting. Instead, France, the UK, and small European states should emphasize assured second-strike capability (see Gottenmoeller, 2021) through stealth platforms, resilient command-and-control systems, and stronger conventional forces. Small states can also play a major diplomatic role in stigmatizing nuclear use and raising its political costs. A cooperative, tailored European deterrent – rooted in survivability, restraint, and political unity – could erode Russia's coercive leverage without expanding nuclear arsenals.

For Slovenia, as a non-nuclear state, the strategic value lies in reinforcing NATO's broader deterrent posture through investments in interoperability, resilient infrastructure, and critical enablers such as cyber defence and intelligence capabilities. A sound understanding of how systems such as submarine-launched ballistic missiles with MIRVs support Europe's second-strike capability can help Slovenia more effectively navigate alliance planning, its role in it (port of Koper) and the complex dynamics of nuclear coercion. By strengthening its conventional forces, supporting C3I resilience, and engaging diplomatically to stigmatize nuclear threats, Slovenia can meaningfully raise the political costs of nuclear use and bolster overall European deterrence.

Mark D. Hamilton from the Inter-American Defense College and **Marcio Adriano Anselmo** from the Brazilian National Police in their work *When all you have is a Hammer: Lessons from the Americas on Securitizing State Responses to Hybrid Threats*, argue that Europe's growing exposure to hybrid threats – from coercive migration to criminal infiltration and authoritarian drift – echoes long-standing challenges faced in the Americas. This article distils lessons from Latin America's multidimensional security approach, showing how blurred threat definitions, institutional weakness, and overreliance on the military can erode democratic

governance and civil-military balance. The authors argue that Europe must avoid governance shortcuts and instead adopt multidimensional diagnostics, strengthen cross-sector collaboration, and invest in resilient, inclusive institutions. Latin America's experience warns that militarizing domestic crises offers short-term relief but long-term fragility. A multidimensional, society-wide security architecture is essential to withstand contemporary hybrid warfare.

For Slovenia, the Latin American experience underscores the need for clear definitions of hybrid threats, precise assignment of institutional responsibilities, and adequate capacity building across government. Ambiguous threat categories risk overlap, mission creep, and unnecessary militarization. Slovenia should therefore refine its hybrid-threat framework, strengthen coordination between civilian, security, and intelligence institutions, and deepen cooperation with civil society to build trust – an essential ingredient in whole-of-society resilience. Transparent communication, inclusive policymaking, and long-term institutional investment can prevent overreliance on the military and ensure balanced, democratic responses. By defining threats and roles clearly, Slovenia can more effectively manage hybrid challenges and maintain societal cohesion.

Gyula Csurgai, of the Geneva Institute of Geopolitical Studies, in his article *The Use of Cognitive Warfare in Geoeconomics* analyses how Cognitive Warfare has become a central instrument in modern geoeconomic competition. As states shift from free-market to strategic capitalism, economic rivalry increasingly relies on indirect tools – psychological operations, lawfare, influence campaigns, reputational attacks, and manipulation of civil society organizations. Cognitive Warfare targets the cognitive processes of publics, elites, and institutions to shape decisions, weaken adversaries, and achieve economic outcomes without open conflict. The study highlights the integration of AI, social media, and NGO networks into Cognitive Warfare operations, and argues that Europe's neoliberal policy mindset has left it unprepared for such a threat environment, underscoring the need for stronger economic-intelligence and societal resilience frameworks.

For Slovenia, the rise of Cognitive Warfare in geoeconomics underscores the urgent need to strengthen national cognitive resilience. This requires investment in governmental analytical capacity, particularly in strategic assessments, economic intelligence, and early-warning mechanisms which can detect manipulative influence campaigns. Enhancing media literacy across society – schools, public administration, and the private sector – can reduce susceptibility to disinformation, deepfakes, and targeted narratives (Hynek et al, 2025). Slovenia should develop coordinated procedures for identifying hostile cognitive operations, and improve cooperation between government, civil society, and independent media. By building trust, analytical competence, and societal awareness, Slovenia can mitigate cognitive vulnerabilities and better protect its political, economic, and security interests.

Across the six contributions, a clear and consistent message emerges: the international system which welcomed Slovenia in the early 1990s is undergoing profound structural change. The assumptions that have shaped our strategic posture for three decades – stable US engagement in Europe, gradual EU defence integration, predictable Russian behaviour, and a clear line between war and peace – no longer hold. US strategic retrenchment driven by competition with China, Europe's slow and uneven defence consolidation, and the rise of hybrid and cognitive warfare all demand a fundamental reassessment of Slovenia's national-security thinking (see Silove, 2018).

The papers assembled in this issue collectively outline the contours of a new strategic imperative. Slovenia must strengthen its defence credibility at a time when American attention is shifting towards the Indo-Pacific. It must engage pragmatically with EU defence initiatives, yet avoid the illusion that the EU can or will replace NATO as the cornerstone of European security. It must balance transatlantic procurement with the development of its own industrial niches, contributing meaningfully to Europe's defence-industrial renewal. It must understand nuclear coercion, support NATO's conventional deterrence posture, and invest in critical enablers such as intelligence (Britovšek, 2024), cyber defence, and resilient infrastructure (see Beckvard, 2022; Jančárková, 2022; Štrucl, 2022). It must adopt a multidimensional approach to security, grounded in clear definitions of hybrid threats, coherent institutional roles, and close coordination between state and society. Above all, it must build cognitive resilience, strengthening analytical capacity, media literacy, and early-warning mechanisms to protect the public sphere from manipulation.

After thirty-five years of independence, Slovenia finds itself in the most complex and demanding strategic environment since becoming part of the Euro-Atlantic community. The comfort of assuming that others will ensure our security has evaporated. The words of France Bučar which opened this volume – on the need for a nation to understand its own individuality, its capabilities, and its responsibility to confront the challenges of its time – are no less relevant today, precisely because Slovenia now faces a different kind of strategic environment which compels us to re-examine our individuality and capabilities, and how we can best protect our national interests. The analyses in this volume therefore serve not merely as academic reflections, but as a roadmap for shaping a resilient and forward-looking grand strategy capable of safeguarding Slovenian sovereignty, prosperity, and stability in the turbulent decades ahead.

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E-mail: kovacir@mail.uc.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-3041-5536

Dr. Igor Kovač je raziskovalec na Centru za kibernetiko strategijo in politiko na Univerzi v Cincinnatiju, kjer je tudi doktoriral. Pred tem je deloval kot raziskovalec na Inštitutu za varnostne in konfliktna študije Univerze George Washington ter na Centru za mirovne in varnostne študije na Univerzi v Kaliforniji v San Diegu. Njegovi raziskovalni interesi obsegajo strukturo mednarodnih odnosov, stabilnost in varnost, odnose velikih sil ter presečišče mednarodne varnosti in mednarodne politične ekonomije, s posebnim poudarkom na ameriški hegemoniji.

Igor Kovač, PhD, is a researcher at the Center for Cyber Strategy and Policy at the University of Cincinnati, where he also earned his doctorate. Prior to that, he worked as a researcher at the Institute for Security and Conflict Studies at George Washington University and at the Center for Peace and Security Studies at the University of California, San Diego. His research interests include the structure of international relations, stability and security, great power relations, and the intersection of international security and international political economy, with a particular focus on American hegemony.

E-mail: kovacir@mail.uc.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-3041-5536

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