

Milan Lipovac*

Faculty of Security Studies, University of Belgrade

FROM EMERGENT TO GRAND STRATEGY: THE ABSENCE OF REFLEXIVITY IN IONUT POPESCU'S THEORETICAL SHIFT IN THE ANALYSIS OF TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY

Abstract

This paper examines in detail the theoretical shift of Ionut Popescu in interpreting the foreign policy of Donald Trump over eight years (2017–2025). Starting from the insight that authors change their views under the influence of their own theoretical frameworks, the paper focuses on the issue of reflexivity – the author's ability to re-examine his own assumptions and to explicitly explain changes in his position. Through a systematic review of Popescu's works (books, academic articles, and texts in influential periodicals), four chronological phases are distinguished. The first phase (2010–2017) covers the introduction and operationalization of the concept of emergent strategy, with a consistent application of a contextual framework. The second phase (2018) brings sharp contradictions – simultaneously advocating a grand strategy (in two works) and denying the need for it (in the *Foreign Affairs* article), without any explanation. The third phase (2019–2020) is characterised by the introduction of offensive realism while retaining emergent strategy, accompanied by partial, but incomplete, reflexivity. The fourth phase (2022–2025) culminates in the abandonment of his own contextual framework and a shift to a universal advocacy of offensive realism, without any justification. The paper shows that Popescu does

* E-mail: lipovac@fb.bg.ac.rs; ORCID: 0000-0002-5051-3889

not explain his theoretical shift, does not acknowledge contradictions within the same year, and selectively applies criteria, which indicates a multiple absence of reflexivity. Consequently, the reader remains permanently deprived of the reasons that led Popescu to make his shift from advocating emergent strategy to universally affirming offensive realism within grand strategy. It is precisely this unexplained nature of the shift that makes this case particularly instructive for the discipline of international relations: it warns that one's own theoretical framework can be presented as the only correct view of reality, but also that key theoretical changes can occur in complete silence. This underscores the need for greater methodological self-awareness in foreign policy research.

Keywords: grand strategy, emergent strategy, reflexivity, Ionut Popescu, Trump, foreign policy

INTRODUCTION

One of the most current academic topics in the fields of political and security sciences concerns the decisions that the current US President Donald Trump is making in foreign policy. The dilemma of whether his foreign policy is based on any strategy at all – and if so, what kind – has become one of the most frequently discussed questions in the contemporary literature. While some authors believe Trump acts without a coherent plan (Haass 2017; Lissner and Zenko 2017), others recognize the contours of a grand strategy in his actions, advocating a realist approach (Kroenig 2017; Schweller 2018, Trapara 2026).

What is less often emphasized in these debates is that authors themselves change their views over time, and that their interpretations of Trump's policy are not merely a reflection of changes in Trump's behavior, but also of changes in their own theoretical frameworks. Among the most productive authors in this field is Ionut C. Popescu. Over eight years (2017–2025) he has published two books on the subject (Popescu 2017b; 2025a), as well as a number of works – both academic, peer-reviewed articles in prestigious American journals such as the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *Political Science Quarterly*, *Orbis*, *Parameters*, and non-peer-reviewed texts in influential American

magazines such as *Foreign Affairs*, *The National Interest* and *The American Conservative*.

An analysis of this body of work makes it possible to trace his theoretical shift: from a consistent advocacy of emergent strategy (strategy in the making), which emphasizes improvisation, learning, and adaptation, to a complete acceptance of offensive realism as the only correct grand strategy for the United States. However, the most significant change is not only in the type of strategy he attributes to Trump, but in his very attitude toward the concept of grand strategy itself: in 2018 Popescu argued that Trump “doesn’t need a grand strategy” (Popescu 2018b), while in 2025 he declares not only that Trump “has” a grand strategy, but also that it is “necessary” (Popescu 2025a; 2025b).

This, of course, does not mean that a change in theoretical position is in itself a bad thing. The development of theory is impossible without academic debate, constructive criticism, the confrontation of arguments with counter-arguments, and without a methodological practice that implies a critical re-examination of one’s own theoretical standpoints. That is why the absence of reflexivity is what can be criticised in Popescu’s case. This criticism is not directed at the author’s personal integrity, but at a theoretical-methodological shortcoming that is indicative, and not so rare, in disciplines that study the foreign and security policies of states, especially in real-time research, i.e., in cases where the phenomenon and the research are simultaneous, and where the phenomenon has not yet assumed its final form.

Thus, Popescu is not alone in this kind of theoretical shift. Similar changes can be observed in other authors as well (Brands 2014; 2018; Walt 2018). Nevertheless, Popescu’s theoretical trajectory provides a particularly useful case through which to examine the relationship between theoretical frameworks, empirical interpretation, and scholarly reflexivity. This shift is particularly visible in Popescu’s changing interpretation of Trump’s foreign policy: in 2018, he emphasised “improvisation and adaptation” (Popescu 2018b), whereas seven years later he interpreted Trump’s conduct through the lens of a “coherent grand strategy” (Popescu 2025b). Moreover, he neither explains the reasons for this shift nor explicitly acknowledges that his theoretical position has changed.

The choice of Popescu as a case study, therefore, does not depend on his being regarded as one of the most influential or prominent scholars of US grand strategy. Nor is the purpose to suggest that his theoretical

trajectory is representative of the discipline as a whole. Rather, Popescu is selected because his intellectual trajectory provides an unusually suitable case for examining academic reflexivity in real-time foreign policy research. Three features make his intellectual trajectory particularly suitable for this analysis. First, he explicitly transposed and adapted the concept of emergent strategy from the business-strategy literature to the study of international relations and foreign policy, and developed a contextual framework for determining when grand strategy or emergent strategy is more appropriate. This makes it possible to examine his later interpretations against theoretical criteria that he himself had previously established. Second, his writings offer a sufficiently long and internally connected temporal sequence – from his early engagement with emergent strategy, through its application to Trump, to his later endorsement of offensive realism – that makes it possible to trace theoretical change within the work of a single scholar. Third, and most importantly, the object of this study is not Popescu's influence, but the relationship between theoretical frameworks, empirical interpretation, and scholarly reflexivity. His case is particularly revealing because the principles that he placed at the centre of his adapted theoretical framework – contextual sensitivity, learning, adaptation, and the rejection of a priori assumptions about the superiority of one strategic model – provide precisely the criteria against which his later theoretical transformation can be examined. In this sense, Popescu is analytically valuable not because he represents the canonical mainstream of the field, but because his corpus allows the dynamics of theoretical transformation and reflexivity to be observed with unusual clarity within a bounded and traceable case.

This absence of reflexivity is not one-dimensional. It manifests itself on at least four levels: (1) through inconsistency in the application of his own theoretical concepts over time; (2) through obvious contradictions between texts published in the same year (January 2018 vs. May 2018; February 2020 vs. September 2020); (3) through the selective application of criteria – when he criticises other authors (e.g., Miller and Rubinovitz cited in: Popescu 2022a) for something he himself does, without linking his own writing to those criticisms; and finally (4) through the abandonment of his own theoretical framework, which he had presented in 2017, and in which he explicitly demanded that the choice between grand and emergent strategy be based on four contextual criteria (predictability of the external environment, time horizon, domestic political polarisation, and style of bureaucratic management).

In 2025, Popescu completely ignores this framework and advocates offensive realism as a universal solution, without explaining why his earlier criteria no longer apply.

All the above makes Popescu's case particularly instructive for analysis. The aim of this paper is to highlight, through a systematic analysis of his works (from 2010 to 2025), the multiple absences of reflexivity and to show that the author's theoretical shift cannot be explained exclusively by changes in the phenomenon under study – i.e., in the foreign policy behaviour of President Trump – but primarily by changes in the theoretical frameworks applied. The paper is organised as follows: after the introduction, a detailed analysis follows through four chronological phases, then a critical synthesis based on three criteria (theoretical consistency, empirical grounding, and reflexivity), and finally a conclusion with implications for the discipline and open questions for further research.

FOUR PHASES OF IONUT POPESCU'S THEORETICAL SHIFT

The analysis of Popescu's works makes it possible to distinguish four chronological phases that illuminate the changes in his positions and his final theoretical shift. The division is based on three criteria: (a) changes in relation to the concept of grand strategy (from advocating emergent strategy towards an offensive realist framework); (b) consistency in the application of his own theoretical criteria; (c) the presence (or absence) of reflexivity, particularly in the form of acknowledging his own change of view or confronting contradictions within the same phase.

The first phase (2010–2017) covers the early academic works and the book *Emergent Strategy and Grand Strategy*, in which Popescu takes over and adapts the theoretical framework and, for the first time, analyses Trump's foreign policy, linking it to emergent strategy. The second phase (2018) brings sharp contradictions – a complete reversal of his previous theoretical position, accompanied by an absence of reflexivity, simultaneously advocating a grand strategy in two works and then denying the need for a grand strategy (Popescu 2018b). The third phase (2019–2020) is characterised by the introduction of offensive realism while retaining emergent strategy, along with partial reflexivity and the first signs of selective criticism of other authors. The

fourth phase (2022–2025) culminates in the abandonment of his own theoretical framework and a shift to a universal advocacy of offensive realism within the grand-strategy framework, with the expected absence of reflexivity.

Phase 1 (2010–2017): Transplanting and Adapting the Concept of Emergent Strategy

The first phase covers the period from his early academic works (2010, 2016) to the article *Grand Strategy vs. Emergent Strategy* (Popescu 2017a) and the book *Emergent Strategy and Grand Strategy* (Popescu 2017b). During this period, Popescu consistently develops a contextual framework for choosing between grand and emergent strategies. When he finally turns to Trump's policy in 2017, he does so in a completely consistent way – he advocates emergent strategy, emphasises learning and adaptation, and shows no need for reflexivity (since he does not change his own theoretical position).

Already in the review essay published in *Orbis* (2010), Popescu critically treats the entrenched belief that good strategy necessarily results from formal, centralised planning. Referring to contemporary studies by Drezner, Rodman, Daalder, and Destler, but also Haass, he points to the complex relationship between the process of strategy making and its final outcomes. On that occasion, for the first time in his academic career, he introduces Mintzberg's distinction between deliberate and emergent strategy: "One of the core insights of the corporate strategy literature is business theorist Henry Mintzberg's contention that 'Strategy formulation walks on two feet, one deliberate, the other emergent'" (Popescu 2010, 660). Emphasising that strategy "sometimes emerges from a process of trial-and-error and organizational learning rather than being the product of careful deliberations and planning done beforehand," Popescu, already at that stage, lays the foundations for his later affirmation of the emergent approach (Popescu 2010, 661).

A more concrete adaptation of the theoretical framework occurs in the article "Strategic Uncertainty, the Third Offset, and US Grand Strategy" (Popescu 2016). Relying on concepts developed in business management, Popescu distinguishes four levels of uncertainty and recommends an appropriate strategic approach for each. Under stable, predictable conditions (Level 1), classical planned planning can yield

good results. As uncertainty increases (Levels 3 and 4), emergent strategy becomes increasingly preferable. Referring again to Mintzberg's viewpoint, Popescu states that "in conditions of high uncertainty short-term goals should be prioritised [...] the strategist would be more of 'a pattern recognizer' and 'a learner,' as opposed to a 'designer'" (Popescu 2016, 79).

The culmination of Popescu's theoretical contribution in the first phase is the article *Grand Strategy vs. Emergent Strategy in the Conduct of Foreign Policy* (2017a) and the book *Emergent Strategy and Grand Strategy* (2017b), published the same year. In these works, Popescu systematically sets out four criteria that should determine when it is desirable to follow a grand strategy and when an emergent strategy: (1) predictability of the external environment – the greater the uncertainty, the more suitable emergent strategy becomes; (2) time horizon – long term goals favour a grand strategy, short term and incremental goals favour an emergent strategy; (3) domestic political environment – the existence of a broad consensus favours a grand strategy, high polarisation favours an emergent strategy; (4) style of bureaucratic management – a centralised, hierarchical style suits a grand strategy, while a decentralised, flexible style suits an emergent strategy (Popescu 2017a, 446–453). It is particularly important to note that at this stage Popescu does not claim that either approach is a priori better; rather, success depends on context: "Success (or failure) could come from either Grand Strategy or Emergent Strategy, and therefore an administration's successes and failures must be judged primarily by analyzing the results of its actions, not its plans, and by analyzing how well they adapted to unforeseen circumstances and how well they learned from their mistakes" (Popescu 2017a, 455).

Although Trump is only sporadically mentioned in the article *Grand Strategy vs. Emergent Strategy*, Popescu deals with his policy more extensively in the book *Emergent Strategy and Grand Strategy* (chapter *Strategy Design and Emergence in the Trump Era*). There, he distinguishes two prevailing criticisms of Trump's approach: those who claim that Trump has no strategy at all (Lissner and Zenko 2017) and those who claim that he has a bad strategy (Brands and others). Popescu takes a third position: "Trump's style resembles an emergent strategy, but his success will depend on whether he is able to learn and adapt" (Popescu 2017b, X; 176). At the same time, he does not hide his criticism of some of Trump's positions (regarding NATO, Russia, and

the promotion of values), but concludes that the ability to learn and adapt will be decisive.

Ionut Popescu does not create the concept of emergent strategy “from scratch” in this phase; he transplants it from business management into political science and adapts it to make it applicable in the analysis of foreign policy, while simultaneously emphasising the differences from grand strategy. The findings presented in this phase indicate that Popescu is fully consistent with his theoretical framework, and that there are no signs that he will later abandon it. Precisely because he possessed these analytical abilities already at the beginning of his career, his later absence of reflexivity becomes particularly striking and theoretically-methodologically problematic.

Phase 2 (2017–2018): Affirming Grand Strategy, Contradictions, and the First Absence of Reflexivity

The period from April 2017 to May 2018 represents the first turning point. In this short span of time, Popescu publishes four works that, taken together, reveal contradictory views on whether President Trump should have a grand strategy. In the first three texts: *Trump and Emergent Strategy: The First 100 Days* (Popescu 2017c), *Conservative Internationalism and the Trump Administration?* (Popescu 2018a) (online December 2017, printed January 2018), and the co-authored article with Ian Ona Johnson, *The Missing Element in Trump’s NSS: A Competitive Strategy* (Johnson and Popescu 2018), Popescu advocates a grand strategy, i.e., he argues that Trump’s foreign policy contains elements of a grand strategy. In his probably most famous article, *Trump Doesn’t Need a Grand Strategy: Why Planning is Overrated* (*Foreign Affairs*, May 2018), however, he argues that Trump “doesn’t need a grand strategy” and that an emergent strategy is perfectly sufficient (Popescu 2018b). Popescu never explained these contradictions, nor did he show that he had even noticed them.

In his conceptualisation of conservative internationalism, Popescu draws primarily on the work of Henry Nau, Colin Dueck, and other scholars associated with this tradition. As he presents it, the approach combines a strong US international role with an emphasis on national sovereignty, military supremacy, and the pursuit of clearly defined national interests (Nau 2017 cited in: Popescu 2018a, 98; Dueck 2017 cited in: Popescu 2018a, 100). In Popescu’s presentation, conservative

internationalists are sceptical of extensive international institutions and projects of global governance, favouring instead a world of sovereign states that cooperate where their interests overlap while remaining primarily responsible for their own defence and economic affairs (Nau 2017 cited in: Popescu 2018a, 98). At the same time, Popescu stresses that conservative internationalism is not reducible to a purely material conception of power: military and economic strength should also serve to advance American values and sustain a favourable international order, captured in the idea of a “balance of power that favors freedom” (Popescu 2018a, 102). The approach also reflects a distinctly Clausewitzian understanding of the relationship between force and diplomacy: conservative internationalists view the willingness to use force as a means of increasing the US leverage in negotiations and argue that, when force is employed, it should be used decisively and without unnecessarily constraining military or intelligence operations (Popescu 2018a, 99). Thus, in Popescu’s conceptualisation, conservative internationalism combines an emphasis on power and national interests with what he describes as a distinctively American realism, in which power is placed “in the wise service of freedom” (Bromund, Auslin and Dueck 2017 cited in: Popescu 2018a, 102).

Against this conceptual background, in *Conservative Internationalism and the Trump Administration?*, Popescu sets out seven principles of this approach and concludes that, despite problematic rhetoric, Trump nevertheless follows a conservative-internationalist framework in his key moves (Syria, Afghanistan, NATO, North Korea) (Popescu 2018a). Moreover, he explicitly praises Trump’s emergent style of learning and adaptation: “Less than a year into his tenure, it is obvious that Trump’s management style relies less on long-term strategic designs and more on improvisation and learning” (Popescu 2018a, 92). Referring to his 2017 book, Popescu simultaneously advocates a grand strategy and affirms an emergent strategy, without noticing the tension between the two approaches. He repeats the same conclusion in the text *Trump and Emergent Strategy* (Popescu 2017c).

It is evident that Popescu considered this conclusion about Trump’s emergent style important enough to repeat it in two separate texts. However, while simultaneously advocating conservative internationalism as a grand strategy, he nowhere explains how these two claims can be reconciled, that Trump’s management style follows an emergent strategy, and that his policy fits into a conservative-

internationalist framework. Such an omission is not a mere oversight but an indicator of the absence of reflexivity.

The co-authored article with Johnson (January 2018) analyses the then newly released National Security Strategy (NSS). The authors praise the NSS for recognising the return of intense great-power competition, but point out that it lacks what Andrew Marshall and his Office of Net Assessment called “Competitive Strategy.” Johnson and Popescu advocate precisely what can be described as a grand strategy: setting clear priorities, focusing on China, economic decoupling, energy dominance, and strengthening alliances (Johnson and Popescu 2018). Notably, there is no mention of emergent strategy here – on the contrary, the authors argue for deliberate, centralised planning, concluding that “The new NSS signals a sea change in American strategy. Making it work will require the sort of long-term thinking pioneered by Andy Marshall and the Office of Net Assessment” (Johnson and Popescu 2018).

This position is directly opposite to the view expressed only a few months later in *Foreign Affairs*, where Popescu argues that Trump “doesn’t need a grand strategy” and that an emergent approach is sufficient. In that article, he repeats the importance of emergent strategy: “The important thing is not to plan but to learn” (Popescu 2018b). He also offers an assessment (though with some reserve) of whether the administration is actually learning and adapting: “Do these shifts on North Korea and Russia show the administration is learning and adapting, as opposed to simply engaging in ad hoc guesswork? Maybe” (Popescu 2018b). Here we are not dealing merely with a description – “Trump has no grand strategy” – but with a prescription: “President Trump doesn’t need a grand strategy. He needs to learn and adapt – and that is exactly what emergent strategy is about” (Popescu 2018b). Thus, the contradiction with his earlier texts (in which he advocated a grand strategy) becomes even more obvious.

At the same time, Popescu does not mention his previous works from the same year, does not explain such a sudden change of stance in such a short period, and does not link his texts together. A reader who read only the *Foreign Affairs* article would get the impression that Popescu consistently advocates an emergent approach, not knowing that only a few months earlier, he had written in favour of a grand strategy. This is the first unambiguous manifestation of the absence of reflexivity in Popescu. He certainly shows basic academic correctness in terms

of self-citation (e.g., in the 2018a article, he cites 2017c), but he lacks the ability to recognise and explain his own contradictory positions. This failure to acknowledge his own contradictions is not a one-time oversight – it will be repeated in the following phases, culminating in the complete abandonment of his own theoretical framework in 2025.

Phase 3 (2019–2020): Introduction of Offensive Realism, Partial Reflexivity, and Continuation of Contradictions

One year after the contradictory texts of 2018, Popescu published an article in the prestigious journal *Political Science Quarterly* entitled *American Grand Strategy and the Rise of Offensive Realism* (2019). This is a turning point – he introduces offensive realism as a normative framework, but simultaneously continues to advocate emergent strategy and does not claim that Trump has a grand strategy. Popescu begins the article with the thesis that the United States should adopt offensive realism instead of liberal internationalism (“deep engagement”) or defensive realism (“restraint”) (Popescu 2019, 377). He sets out four pillars of offensive realism – focus on revisionist powers (China and Russia), military preponderance, the zero-sum nature of international politics, and the priority of hard power – and analyses the extent to which the Trump administration fits into them (Popescu 2019, 383–401).

Crucial for understanding his later shift is what Popescu does not claim in this article. He still advocates emergent strategy: “reliance on emergent strategy based on learning and adaptation is more likely to succeed than the pursuit of a coherent long-term grand strategic design” (Popescu 2019, 377). He describes Trump’s policy as an “offensive realist emergent strategy,” that is, as an emergent strategy placed within an offensive-realist framework (Popescu 2019, 381; 401). Thus, Popescu does not claim that Trump has a grand strategy; on the contrary, he emphasises that the shift in that direction is still incomplete (“this shift is incomplete” – Popescu 2019, 381).

As regards reflexivity, Popescu shows basic academic correctness – in the footnotes, he cites his earlier works, including the *Foreign Affairs* article (2018b) in which he argued that Trump “doesn’t need a grand strategy” (Popescu 2019, footnote 9). However, he does not attempt to explain why, in 2018, he advocated emergent strategy without offensive realism, and now he introduces it. He does not acknowledge that there is a contradiction between his works that advocate a grand strategy

(Johnson and Popescu 2018) and those in which he argued the opposite (Popescu 2018b). He simply ignores the works that do not suit him and selectively cites only those that support his current argumentation.

The significance of this article for Popescu's theoretical trajectory is twofold. First, it shows that already in 2019, he was ready to normatively advocate offensive realism, but he was not yet ready to attribute the possession of a grand strategy to Trump. Second, it represents a bridge between the contradictory positions of 2018 and the complete shift that would follow in 2025.

At first glance, the year 2020 seems to be a continuation of the earlier pattern – Popescu still changes his views without explanation. Nevertheless, it also brings the first, albeit only partial, sign of reflexivity. In February 2020, he published a review of Colin Dueck's book *Age of Iron: On Conservative Nationalism* (*The National Interest*). There, he approvingly presents conservative nationalism as a coherent school of thought and argues for abandoning liberal internationalism in favour of a realist framework. Especially interesting is his observation about the Trump administration, which he says possesses "good grand strategic instincts": "Whether the current administration's good grand strategic instincts will be harmed by tactical errors in implementation remains to be seen" (Popescu 2020a). Thus, he still supports a grand strategy, but expresses reservations about its implementation.

Seven months later, in September 2020, Popescu published an article entitled "It's Too Soon to Kill Grand Strategy" (*The National Interest*) in which he entered a polemic with Drezner, Krebs, and Schweller, who had argued that grand strategy is dead. Here, Popescu defends grand strategy, emphasising that emergent strategy should be its complement, not a substitute. At the same time, he sharply criticises the Trump administration, accusing it of "ad-hocism, self-contradictions, incoherence, and inconsistency" and noting that "not much learning or successful adaptation and improvisation occurred" (Popescu 2020b). Most importantly, for the first time, something resembling reflexivity appears: "At the beginning of the Trump administration, a plausible argument could have been made that emergent strategy is likely to suit the style of this administration better than grand strategy. Three years into this presidency, however, the accumulating evidence makes it very hard to keep holding on to that view" (Popescu 2020b).

This admission that at the beginning of Trump's term, there existed a "plausible argument" in favour of emergent strategy is a

significant step. Popescu shows that he is aware of the change in context and that the earlier view is no longer sustainable. However, he does so in the third person: he does not say “I advocated that argument,” but “a plausible argument could have been made.” Thus, he acknowledges that a change has occurred, but he does not relate it to his own theoretical transformation. His reflexivity remains partial – it is only a hint of what it should be, because it does not meet the requirement of explicitly re-examining his own earlier positions.

A comparison of these two texts from 2020 reveals another contradiction that Popescu does not explain. In February, he praises Trump’s “good grand strategic instincts,” (Popescu 2020a) while in September, he writes about the “ad-hocism and incoherence” (Popescu 2020b) of his administration. He gives no answer to the question of whether Trump’s policy changed fundamentally between those two dates, nor does he link his texts. This represents yet another example of the absence of reflexivity – not only in the sense of failing to acknowledge a change of stance over the years, but also in the sense of failing to re-examine his own contradictory positions within the same year.

The 2019–2020 phase is important for understanding Popescu’s later shift for two reasons. First, it marks the beginning of the introduction of offensive realism as a normative framework. Second, it shows that Popescu is capable of partially re-examining his own views (the admission that a “plausible argument” existed), but that this reflexivity remains limited – he does not admit his own authorship of that argument, nor does he explain why he changed his mind about Trump between February and September 2020. Third, this phase foreshadows the future shift: the criticism of Trump’s incoherence and the advocacy of grand strategy in September 2020 are closer to the position he will adopt in 2025.

Phase 4 (2022–2025): Selective Application of Criteria and Definitive Abandonment of His Own Framework

The final phase marks the definitive separation from the earlier transplanted and adapted theoretical framework. From 2022 onward, Popescu increasingly advocates offensive realism as the only correct grand strategy for the United States, completely ignoring his own 2017 criteria (level of uncertainty, time horizon, domestic polarisation, and management style). Thus, he not only abandons his own theoretical

apparatus, but also demonstrates a selective application of criteria: he criticises other authors for what he himself has done, without linking his own publications to those criticisms.

Taken together, these two frameworks share an important realist concern with power, national interests, and the limits of liberal internationalism, but they differ substantially in their underlying theoretical logic and strategic implications. In Popescu's earlier conceptualisation, conservative internationalism combines an active US international role with national sovereignty, military strength, alliances, and the defence of an international order favourable to American interests and values. Its realism is therefore qualified by a commitment to freedom and by the possibility of using American power in the service of a particular political and normative order. Offensive realism, as Popescu later presents it through Mearsheimer's framework, rests on a more systemic and structurally determined logic: great powers are driven primarily by the distribution of capabilities and the imperative to prevent potential rivals from achieving regional hegemony, irrespective of their domestic political systems, ideological orientations, or declared values. The difference is therefore not simply one of emphasis, but of the theoretical principles used to identify threats, explain state behaviour, and determine appropriate grand strategy. In the former framework, power is a means through which the United States can sustain a favourable order and advance its interests and values; in the latter, preventing rival hegemony becomes the overriding strategic imperative. This distinction is particularly important for assessing Popescu's theoretical trajectory, because his later embrace of offensive realism is not merely a refinement of his earlier position but a shift toward a different explanatory logic and a substantially different basis for evaluating the US grand strategy. Yet Popescu never explicitly identifies, discusses, or justifies this theoretical transition.

The first concrete manifestation of this theoretical shift appears in the article *Only Offensive Realism Can Contain China* (Popescu 2022b). Here, Popescu systematically presents, for the first time, the principles of offensive realism, drawing primarily on the work of John Mearsheimer (whom he calls "the most influential offensive realist scholar"). These principles will later become the basis of his 2025 book. In Popescu's account, drawing primarily on Mearsheimer's offensive realist theory, international politics is characterised by a persistent struggle among great powers for the status of hegemon. The central threat to a great

power's security is therefore the emergence of another state capable of achieving regional hegemony, while rising powers are assumed to possess revisionist ambitions and to alter the balance of power when circumstances permit (Mearsheimer 2001 cited in: Popescu 2022b). From this perspective, the behaviour of great powers is shaped primarily by systemic imperatives and considerations of the balance of power rather than by their domestic political systems, ideological orientation, or declared values. In Popescu's application of this framework to the US foreign policy, this translates into a strategic priority of preventing China from achieving regional hegemony in Asia and becoming a peer rival to the United States, through the prioritisation of geopolitical and geoeconomic competition, military superiority, and pragmatic alliances over democracy promotion, ideological compatibility, or the preservation of a liberal international order (Popescu 2022b). From this point onward, emergent strategy and the contextual criteria that had structured Popescu's earlier theoretical framework disappear entirely from his analysis. Instead, Popescu argues that the United States must "contain China's ambitious rise to regional, and potentially global hegemony"¹ by following six principles: no peer rivals; geopolitics and geoeconomics over ideology; military superiority over China above all else; winning the tech war and economic decoupling; establishing the US energy dominance; and pragmatic alliances and a realist global institutional order. The goal is unambiguous: "The time to fully embrace an offensive realist grand strategy aimed at countering Beijing is past due" (Popescu 2022b).

Somewhat earlier, in May 2022, Popescu published a review of Benjamin Miller and Ziv Rubinovitz's book *Grand Strategy from*

¹ Popescu's claim is particularly interesting in light of Mearsheimer's original formulation of offensive realism. While Popescu refers to the US "US need to contain China's ambitious rise to regional, and potentially global, hegemony" (Popescu 2022b), Mearsheimer explicitly argues that global hegemony is unattainable for any state, primarily because of the geographical and military constraints that prevent the establishment and maintenance of dominance over the entire international system (Mearsheimer 2001, 41; 84; 236–7). In his view, the highest level of hegemony that a great power can realistically achieve is regional hegemony, after which it seeks to prevent the emergence of other regional hegemons. Popescu's claim thus represents an interesting extension of, or shift in emphasis from, the theoretical framework on which he draws. However, he does not elaborate on this assumption or explain how it fits within Mearsheimer's conception of offensive realism, nor does he return to it in his subsequent work.

Truman to Trump (Popescu 2022a). There, he criticises the authors for not distinguishing between grand strategy and small adjustments, and for not considering the possibility that in certain periods there may be no strategy at all, suggesting that they rely on the literature on emergent strategy, “as I have done in my own work, in order to separate planned grand strategy from emergent strategic shifts” (Popescu 2022a). However, he does not mention that he himself argued in 2018 that Trump “doesn’t need a grand strategy,” nor that in January of the same year, in co-authorship with Johnson, he advocated a grand strategy. Thus, he applies stricter criteria to others than to himself, and does not link his own earlier works with the criticisms he levels against others.

In May 2024, in a co-authored text with Dan Negrea entitled *Donald Trump’s First-Term China Strategy Was A Success* (*The National Interest*), Popescu for the first time explicitly claims that Trump initiated a grand strategy toward China: “Donald Trump’s defining foreign policy legacy is his initiation of a grand strategy to counter China’s military and economic expansionism” (Negrea and Popescu 2024). The article contains no mention of emergent strategy, learning, or adaptation – the focus is exclusively on the fact that Trump successfully established a realist strategy. Popescu, following his established manner, does not refer to his earlier works nor explain why he changed his position.

The year 2024 brings an additional shift. Immediately after Trump’s election victory in November, Popescu published a text in *The American Conservative* entitled *The Promise of Trump’s Realist China Grand Strategy*. Here there is no longer any analytical distance, since he openly advocates Trump’s policy: “President-elect Donald Trump’s decisive election victory gives him a once-in-a-generation mandate to finally implement an America First grand strategy and thus replace the outdated globalist post-World War II framework” (Popescu 2024). At the same time, he warns of bureaucratic resistance, which he says will “certainly attempt to frustrate his realist agenda” (Popescu 2024). Popescu no longer acts as a neutral analyst but as a political advocate.

The culmination comes in April 2025, when Popescu, in the article *Is There a Trump Doctrine?* (*The National Interest*), declares that Trump indeed has a coherent grand strategy based on three pillars: great-power competition, realpolitik (“America First”), and geoeconomics. He even predicts that if Trump remains focused, he will be remembered as “one of America’s most geopolitically astute presidents” (Popescu 2025b). Here, he not only asserts that the strategy exists, but also that

it is good – thereby completing the theoretical shift from the normative recommendation of 2018 (“he doesn’t need a grand strategy”) to the normative judgment of 2025 (“he has a grand strategy, and it is good”). In the same year, he also published the book *No Peer Rivals: American Grand Strategy in the Era of Great Power Competition* (University of Michigan Press), in which he systematically develops an offensive-realist framework and criticises those who reject grand strategy, calling their approach “unhelpful” (Popescu 2025a, 4). He does not mention that he himself adopted such a position in 2018.

CRITICAL SYNTHESIS: THREE CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING POPESCU’S SHIFT

After the chronological presentation of the four phases, Popescu’s theoretical shift can be assessed through three criteria: theoretical consistency, empirical grounding, and reflexivity. Each of them reveals that Popescu carried out his change of theoretical framework without re-examining his earlier positions, with a selective application of criteria, and without explaining the abandonment of his own contextual framework from 2017.

Theoretical consistency in Popescu’s work is seriously undermined. His early framework (2017) required that the choice between grand and emergent strategy depend on four factors: the level of uncertainty, the time horizon, domestic political polarisation, and the style of bureaucratic management. By 2024–2025, this framework has been completely abandoned; Popescu advocates offensive realism as a universal solution, without explaining why his earlier criteria no longer apply. The shift is particularly significant because it extends beyond the abandonment of emergent strategy: Popescu moves from a conservative-internationalist framework that combines realism with a commitment to alliances, American values, and a favourable international order toward a more structurally determined offensive-realist framework centred on preventing rival hegemony. Additionally, in the book *No Peer Rivals*, he criticises those who reject grand strategy as “unhelpful,” not noticing that he himself had adopted such a position in 2018. The contradictions within the same year (detailed in Phases 2 and 3) further undermine the image of a consistent author.

Empirical grounding of Popescu’s claims is equally problematic. He selectively chooses examples that support his thesis while omitting

those that contradict it. Thus, in 2025, he cites tariffs and criticism of NATO as evidence of Trump's realist strategy, but he does not mention the Signalgate affair, which occurred one month before the publication of his article, and which revealed serious coordination problems within the administration. Moreover, he provides no proof that Trump deliberately follows an offensive-realist framework, and he merely points out that some moves can be interpreted that way. Even when he admits that direct causality is hard to establish (*while a direct causal relationship is hard to establish*), he nevertheless draws a conclusion about the success of Trump's strategy, without resolving the methodological problem of causation.

Reflexivity – the author's ability to re-examine his own assumptions and to explain changes – is what is most lacking in Popescu's oeuvre. As shown in the previous phases, he does not explain his theoretical shift (2018–2025), does not acknowledge contradictions within the same year, and does not link his own writings to the criticisms he levels against others. In the review of Miller and Rubinovitz's book (Popescu 2022a), he criticises the authors for imprecisely defining grand strategy, suggesting they rely on the literature that he himself used, while failing to mention that he himself argued in 2018 that Trump "doesn't need a grand strategy," thereby blurring that very distinction. In his later works (2024–2025), he assumes the role of a political advocate, predicting that Trump will be remembered as "one of America's most geopolitically astute presidents" – a judgment that has no empirical grounding but is normative in character.

A comparison with Kenneth Waltz, the founder of neorealism (the intellectual foundation of offensive realism), can illustrate what a transparent revision of a position means.² Unlike Waltz, Popescu shows

² Kenneth Waltz publicly responded to criticism throughout his career and argued for the revision of his views. His openness to criticism is most evident in the collection *Neorealism and Its Critics* (1986), which includes all the key criticisms directed at his theoretical framework, as well as his response in the essay *Reflections on Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics* (Waltz 1986). Even later, when neorealism faced significantly altered historical circumstances, Waltz continued to reflect and meta-reflect, problematising the applicability of his framework in several works (Waltz 1988; 1993; 1999; 2000; 2008; 2012; Sagan and Waltz 1995). Therefore, Waltz's significance for international relations is not only as the founder of a coherent systemic theory, but also in setting broader standards of academic reflexivity.

no readiness for that kind of (meta)reflexivity. His shift from claiming that Trump “doesn’t need a grand strategy” to claiming that a grand strategy is “necessary” simply takes place in silence, leaving the reader to try to understand the reasons on his own.

In short, Popescu’s oeuvre, although occasionally analytically sophisticated, is ultimately inconsistent and non-reflexive. This represents a serious theoretical-methodological shortcoming, both for his own conclusions and for the discipline of international relations. These findings raise the question of the implications of such a non-reflexive shift, and of how to understand Trump’s foreign policy outside the framework of grand and emergent strategy.

CONCLUSION

Popescu’s theoretical shift from transplanting and advocating emergent strategy (2017) to advocating an offensive-realist conception of grand strategy (2024–2025) is not merely the personal intellectual trajectory of one author. It is an instructive example for the discipline of international relations of how theoretical frameworks shape analysis and how the absence of reflexivity can go unnoticed, even in the work of an author who publishes in top-tier peer-reviewed journals.

The analysis across four chronological phases has shown that Popescu changes his views without explanation – from the claim that Trump “doesn’t need a grand strategy” (2018) to the claim that a grand strategy is “necessary” (2024–2025). At the same time, he advocates both a grand strategy and an emergent strategy in the same year (2018), praises Trump’s instincts and then criticises them (2020), selectively applies criteria to the work of others (2022), and finally abandons his own theoretical framework without any justification (2024–2025). The absence of reflexivity is not an isolated oversight but a general mannerism that runs through his entire opus.

The shift is also more substantial than a simple movement from one preferred strategy to another. As the comparison of conservative internationalism and offensive realism demonstrates, Popescu moves between theoretical frameworks that, although sharing a concern with power, national interests, and the limits of liberal internationalism, rest on substantially different explanatory logics. While his earlier conservative-internationalist framework combines realism with alliances, American values, and the defence of a favourable international order, his later

embrace of offensive realism places the prevention of rival hegemony and the systemic logic of great-power competition at the centre of the US grand strategy. Popescu never explicitly identifies, discusses, or justifies this theoretical transition.

For the discipline of international relations, this case carries several important lessons. First, it warns of the danger that an author may present his own theoretical framework as the only correct view of reality, ignoring that it is only one of several possible perspectives. This is particularly problematic in real-time research, where the phenomenon (Trump's foreign policy) has not yet assumed its final form. Second, unlike Kenneth Waltz, who in his works explicitly explained changes concerning the application of his theory, Popescu offers no comparable reflexive account of his own theoretical evolution, leaving the reader without an explanation for the transition from emergent strategy and conservative internationalism to an offensive-realist conception of grand strategy. Third, the results of the analysis point to the need for greater theoretical-methodological self-awareness among foreign policy researchers.

However, one open question remains, which Popescu does not consider. It is possible that Trump's foreign policy is not a strategy in either of the two senses (grand or emergent), but rather represents the transfer of an individual business logic into the arena of international relations. The minerals agreement with Ukraine, the "Board of Peace" with a billion-dollar membership fee, business arrangements in Gaza and around the world in which members of Trump's family participate – these moves fit neither the realist nor the emergent framework. They open the door to different interpretations, for example, the possibility that Trump's policy can be understood as a transfer of business logic in which personal (and family) interests come to the fore, rather than the conduct of a coherent strategy. This possibility does not refute the critique of Popescu's absence of reflexivity; on the contrary, it extends it: Popescu is non-reflexive not only about his own theoretical evolution, but also about alternative explanations that do not fall within his realist framework.

Finally, Popescu's case is instructive because it reminds us that the theoretical frameworks used in the study of international relations are not completely neutral, as they partly determine what the researcher "sees." Therefore, the next time we read in a paper that President Trump (or any other leader of a great power) "has," "does not have," or "does

not need” a strategy, we should ask: What theoretical framework is the author using? What does it allow the researcher to see, and what might it obscure? And is the author reflexively aware of his or her own theoretical position and of changes to it over time? The answers to these questions are not merely a matter of reflexivity, but the necessary precondition for a serious and systematic study of international relations.

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Милан Липовац*

Факултет безбедности, Универзитет у Београду

ОД ЕМЕРГЕНТНЕ ДО ВЕЛИКЕ СТРАТЕГИЈЕ: ОДСУСТВО РЕФЛЕКСИВНОСТИ У ТЕОРИЈСКОМ ЗАОКРЕТУ ИОНУТА ПОПЕСКУА У АНАЛИЗИ ТРАМПОВЕ СПОЉНЕ ПОЛИТИКЕ

Резиме

У овом раду детаљно се разматра теоријски заокрет Ионута Попескуа у тумачењу спољне политике Доналда Трампа током осам година (2017–2025). Полазећи од увида да аутори мењају своје ставове под утицајем сопствених теоријских оквира, рад се фокусира на питање рефлексивности, односно способности аутора да преиспита сопствене претпоставке и експлицитно образложи промене у свом становишту. Систематским прегледом Попескуових радова (књига, академских чланака и текстова у утицајној периодици) издвајају се четири хронолошке фазе. Прва фаза (2010–2017) обухвата увођење и операционализацију концепта емергентне стратегије уз доследну примену контекстуалног оквира. Друга фаза (2018) доноси оштре контрадикције – истовремено заступање велике стратегије (у два рада) и порицање њене потребе (у чланку за *Foreign Affairs*), без икаквог објашњења. Трећа фаза (2019–2020) карактерише се увођењем офанзивног реализма уз задржавање емергентне стратегије, уз делимичну, али недовољну рефлексивност. Четврта фаза (2022–2025) кулминира напуштањем сопственог контекстуалног оквира и преласком на универзално заговарање офанзивног реализма, без икаквог образложења. Рад показује да Попеску не објашњава свој теоријски заокрет, не признаје контрадикције унутар исте године и селективно примењује критеријуме, а што указује на вишеструко одсуство рефлексивности. Читалац, стога, остаје трајно ускраћен за разлоге који су Попескуа определили да направи заокрет од заговарања

* Имејл: lipovac@fb.bg.ac.rs; ORCID: 0000-0002-5051-3889

емергентне стратегије до универзалне афирмације офанзивног реализма у оквиру велике стратегије. Управо та необјашњеност заокрета чини овај случај посебно поучним за дисциплину међународних односа и упозорава на то да се сопствени теоријски оквир може приказивати као једино исправно виђење стварности, али и да се кључне теоријске промене могу одвијати у потпуној тишини. Тиме се наглашава потреба за већом методолошком самосвешћу у истраживањима спољне политике.

Кључне речи: велика стратегија, емергентна стратегија, рефлексивност, Ионут Попеску, Трамп, спољна политика

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