CHAPTER 3

Navigating the Strategic Uncertainties of US MAGA Foreign Policy: Implications for Global North-Global South Relations

Sky Lukas Mkuti
Faculty of Humanities, Emeris, South Africa
Department of Social Sciences, Sol Plaatjie University (SPU), South Africa

Introduction

For decades, the governance of the United States (US) has been the cornerstone of a sustainable world order, a world order where global peace, security and international co-operation have been at the forefront of US-led efforts. However, the world as we have known it since the end of World War II in 1945 has taken a new geostrategic turn. Historically, the US has maintained relevant diplomatic relations with both historic allies and foes. However, the ability of the US to lead the formation of numerous multilateral institutions responsible for international co-operation and the expansion of free trade ideals is tainted by the unprecedented strategic reversals in foreign policy (Gregg 2025). To this end, the historic global 'prestige and influence' of the US to bind international agreements and shape the global security sphere has become contentious. One of the historic US multilateral engagements can be traced back to the twentieth century with the 'Big Three' coalition between Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin, before the start of the Cold War (Best *et al.* 2025). Another example was the implementation of the 'Global War on Terror' Foreign Policy under the Bush Administration. During this administrative era, the US took advantage of its global leadership to endorse global counterterrorism strategies through collective action. In the same vein, the Obama Administration also enforced multilateral continuity of US National Strategic goals globally despite existence of relational suspicions with states such as Iran (*The White House* 2013). Nonetheless, Obama's Presidency

strengthened allies' co-operation by sustaining 'a rules-based international order' where all people stood to benefit from the leadership of the US in promoting global security and prosperous partnerships (*The White House* 2015).

In contrast, the Trump Administrations—Trump 1.0 (2017 to 2021) and Trump 2.0 (from 2025)— to some degree, compounded the existing complexities surrounding US relations with the world, due to amplified acts of "dominance and transactionalism" (Kaiser 2025b). Both administrative terms have not only signalled uncertainties but are certainly pursuing unconventional approaches to international relations. Consequently, the changing geopolitical landscape is, to an extent, creating an environment prone to divisive opinions regarding the unfolding events that are shaping the US-World relations in recent times. For instance, drastic US foreign policy measures such as the reciprocal tariffs instituted in 2025, the US-Israel-Iran war and the tensions in US-SA diplomatic relations illustrate the current global instability that continues to unsettle both allies and adversaries in the evolving international world order. Despite being aimed at advancing US national interests, Trump's MAGA foreign policy, which is advanced through the America First ideology, is being pursued at the detriment of long-standing liberal ideals such as multilateralism, interdependence, free trade and allied co-operation (Tierney 2019; Pohl 2025). Clearly, the question of interdependence and global co-operation as traditional features of the US global economic and military footprint requires rethinking. This chapter's contribution tackles three aspects. Firstly, it explores the US unconventional diplomatic trajectory shaping international relations. Secondly, it conceptualises the LIO and interrogates the unprecedented shifts in US-World diplomatic relations in respect to the disruptions they pose to the traditional international co-operation norms. Finally, it zooms into the strategic uncertainties posed by US MAGA foreign policy and their implications for long-term Global North-Global South relations. Concluding remarks and recommendations are also provided in the remainder of this last analytical portion.

Methodology

This chapter analyses the ongoing changes in the landscape of US foreign policy dynamics under the Trump 2.0 administration. It adopts a qualitative research approach using a discourse analysis of textual content deemed relevant to

international relations. In the field of International Relations (IR), a discourse analysis has several methodological approaches commonly used to analyse and to 'discover the various regular frames used to make sense of the world' (Aydın-Düzgit and Rumelili 2019: 291). In the context of this study, a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is employed to bring together a critical analysis of systems in international relations that influence US foreign policy with the world. International systems such as the liberal global order that present a significant course of action for stable international relations will be contextualised. The CDA research method enables the study to focus on a wider, realistic representation of the Trump 2.0 administration and the US MAGA foreign policy norms and practices towards allies and adversaries in both the Global North and the Global South. To accomplish this, the study relies on an extensive analysis of the US diplomatic trajectory from relevant textual content drawn from a series of secondary data. This data is collected from US National Strategy documents, press releases and policy documents. Peer-reviewed literature, drawn from books and journal articles, that engages critically with the research under investigation is also used in this study. The next section explores the US unconventional diplomatic trajectory under the Trump administration as the basis of growing uncertainties in US foreign policy and its relations with the world.

Exploring the US unconventional diplomatic trajectory shaping international relations

The state of US diplomatic affairs in recent years, specifically under the Trump Administrations (Trump 1.0 and Trump 2.0), has eroded the dilution of the traditional norms of the LIO. Consequently, questions about whether globalisation still matters for America remain debatable because the phenomenon is much broader than just a process that leads to open trade opportunities. In essence, the process of globalisation cannot be halted because of its accelerative and ongoing interconnectedness, which forms an integral part of how global economies, financial, developmental and defence institutions, as well as civil societies, function in society (Ravenhill 2021). However, with the dramatic shifts in global relations accentuated by the unfavourable diplomatic trade stance of the US, the present state of globalisation is uncertain. These global shifts began during the Trump 1.0 leadership (specifically between 2018 and 2019)

and have persisted since the start of the Trump 2.0 administration. During the Trump 2.0 period, the predicted implementation of trade tariffs has expanded global economic volatility as well as socio-political tensions domestically and internationally (Bahree 2024; Nadeau 2025). The Trump 2.0 administration has raised economic and political concerns, which have heightened diplomatic tensions among long-term allies from both the Global North and the Global South. Americans seem to be divided about whether the MAGA foreign policy is advancing the interests of all Americans. This clash of ideas has emerged despite warning signs during the Trump 1.0 administration. During that period, Trump's governance and foreign policy had already signalled the possible implementation of an imbalanced trade policy practice through its preference for a protectionist approach over multilateralism. Despite these revealing warning signs, the world did not anticipate that the asymmetric and unpopular trade practices would eventually culminate in a worldwide trade war with emerging regional powers, such as China. Therefore, the introduction of reciprocal tariffs, in a bid to advance US national interests and foreign policy, shifted the traditional international trade practices significantly. In turn, these unpopular trade practices led to an inevitable, turbulent and uncertain global trade environment (The White House 2025).

These drastic changes have not only resulted in retaliatory trade tariffs from longstanding US major trade partners, notably China, Canada and some EU countries such as Germany, but have also affected global markets where the economic shock has lowered international investor confidence since 2018 (Chen, Fang and Liu 2023). It is worth noting that not all US trading partners adopted a retaliatory stance. Some states refrained from engaging in reciprocal tariffs given the potential trade risks, which would further escalate the existing trade conflicts which affected both domestic and international companies (Baker, Mulholland and Wardak 2025). Unlike China, Canada and Germany, Japan opted to pursue trade tariff negotiations instead of retaliation. Nonetheless, despite entering into tariff negotiations with the US, Japan also expressed its concerns about the uniformised application of a reciprocal tariff approach across all US trade partners. For Japan, this indiscriminate and blanket approach to tariffs not only raised global discontent because of the erosion of multilateral trade norms, but it also signalled a deeper rift in the international world order and global trade dynamics. For Japan, reciprocal tariffs constitute a betrayal of free trade norms,

particularly because Japan makes 'the largest amount of investment in the United States' and has also been a strong ally of the US since the end of World War II (Reuters 2025).

For the rest of the world, the implementation of trade tariffs disrupted trading systems, specifically among automobile manufacturers such as Mercedes-Benz and BMW, who anticipated a six point five per cent drop in their stock prices (Bahree 2024). Initially, the trade tariffication approach adopted by the Trump 2.0 administration applied a uniform ten per cent rate on all imports to the US. However, an additional individualised reciprocal tariff was also imposed, leading to domestic and international stock market volatility. Most US automobile manufacturing industries suffered economically, with 25% trade tariffs imposed on imported cars (Reuters 2025; Wengerek, Uhde and Hippert 2025).

Wengerek, Uhde and Hippert (2025) argue that despite increased global criticism of the implementation of the trade tariffs imposed by the Trump 2.0 administration, at times, it may benefit large economies. The benefits can range from improvement of trade terms between trading partners, to protection of domestic industries against foreign competition. However, economic stability is not guaranteed with this approach, specifically in a globalised society where the bargaining benefits may only yield temporary gains, as was the case during the Truman and Roosevelt Administrations in the 1930s (United States 1930). During that era, the US implemented the infamous Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act of 1930, led to a significant decline in international trade. In addition, the Hawley-Smoot Tariff also exacerbated a turbulent global economic climate where some partner states retaliated, resulting in a drastic fall in US exports (Burchett 2022). Likewise, in the Trump 2.0 administration, the world witnessed a similar trend with China imposing retaliatory trade tariffs. The consequences of the US-China 'trade war' have led to trade conflicts affecting the entire global economy, as witnessed in the rise in commodity prices and the creation of imbalances in the contemporary economic landscape.

It is undeniable that the Trump 2.0 administration has shaken the traditional philosophy of trade. Traditionally, the US was a multilateral trade partner capable of implementing relevant multilateral engagements domestically and internationally (Axelrod and Vanderveer 2020). Conventionally, the US has capitalised on its global influence through the worldwide reach of institutional networks and economic interdependencies in the post-World War II era. In

contemporary international relations, the global interconnectedness transformed the twentieth century through linked socio-economic and political processes which are considered irreversible (Van Benthem 1997). In the twenty-first century, the world order has taken a new turn. Because of the decline of US hegemonic supremacy, the evolving global power dynamics are marked by the rise of Global South economic power contenders such as China and Russia, with South Africa finding itself in-between. As an economic partner of the West, South Africa has maintained a neutral stance in the ongoing geopolitical tensions between the US and China while playing a strategic economic role as a member of the BRICS bloc (consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, with additional members) (Kaiser 2025a).

Although the changing nature of the world order has shifted the relational power dynamics of the Global North and the Global South, the global influence of the US has remained unabated. Following the successful post-World War II alliances, the US has dominated the diplomatic trajectory of economic resource redistribution, and for decades it has been influencing the strategic military power in the world. The post-World War II trade policies pursued by US Administrations amplified global markets through foreign policies known as rule-based international trade that freed up global markets. For instance, the General Agreement on Tariffs (GATT), which was a post-International Trade Organisation (ITO) of 1947, reflected the ability of the US to 'maximise free trade' among its Western allies (Grieco, Ikenberry and Mastanduno 2022: 339). Additionally, the 1995 GATT institutional upgrade into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) brought a more progressive resolution to trade disputes by reducing trade tariff barriers among industrialised countries of the Global North. These developments have resulted in the expansion and sustainability of 'America's long-term economic and strategic interests' around the globe (Gregg 2025).

The Global South, on the other hand, has always been concerned with maintaining a fair international trade with the Global North, given the long-standing colonial structures that accentuate 'power imbalances' through disparities in wealth distribution that have slowed sustainable development capacity (Pavlik 2023: 207). The economic dominance levelled by institutions such as the WTO, established by richer and globally dominant states such as the US, has to some extent slowed the economic development of many

Global South states. Developing states across Asia, South America and Africa collectively represent the Global South. Among them, countries such as Russia, India and China have emerged as rising economies, with China now strategically positioned as the second-largest global economy competing with the US. This intensifying competitiveness has made China increasingly vulnerable to US tariff penalties under Trump's extraordinary MAGA agenda. Amid an unprecedented US-China trade war marked by the unilateral imposition of import tariffs on all US trading partners, China was disproportionately targeted with a tariff of 145% in comparison to the blanket ten per cent import tariffs imposed on the rest of the world (Lee and Chen2025). This turn of events has led to unfavourable trading relations between the US and its traditionally established trade partners. The Global South's increasing drive to balance the world economic status quo has been strengthened by its desire to expand market accessibility and reduce the conventional dominance of the US currency in the global markets. The Trump Administration has unapologetically used its dominant status to warn any state or multilateral organisation, particularly the BRICS bloc, against attempting to devalue the US dollar (US $) and its currency prominence in the global market (Ryanto 2025).

As a result, a massive international trade uncertainty has erupted in the twenty-first century. There are genuine concerns about international order moving from rules-based co-operation to the 'law of the jungle' (Davidson 2025). This concern aligns with Realism— an ideology that views the international system as anarchic, meaning that it is characterised by the absence of a central governing authority. In such a system, states act unilaterally and pursue foreign policies that secure their access to more resources, in order to advance their own national interests (Grieco, Ikenberry and Mastanduno 2022; Lincicome, Manak and Obregon 2022).

Despite the Trump 2.0 administration's view of its MAGA foreign policy as positive, specifically in relation to the redistributive and 'broad-based, indiscriminate' trade tariffs to 'friend and foe alike', many believe that this approach 'is not a win for the American people' and certainly not for the US trade partners (Bradner 2025). Apart from signalling a sharp reversal of its own underwritten and established liberal rules-based principles, particularly its soft-power influence, the US is now resorting to a volatile illiberal international order (Bradner 2025; Vinjamuri et al. 2025).

A volatile illiberal system represents the opposite of a conventional diplomatic environment. In a conventional diplomatic environment relations are shaped by liberal political systems, and international relations are anchored on liberal norms. These liberal ideals emphasise the significance of democratic values that include international co-operation, anti-imperialism, open markets and tolerance of political and religious affiliations (Singh 2014). However, when governments choose to act contrary to liberal norms in democratic systems, illiberalism becomes an imminent feature of the global order. As such, the very notion of liberalism rests in the possibility of illiberalism. Therefore, while the former presents an opportunity for 'tolerance of differing ideas as to what constitutes a good life', the manifestation of the latter is equally permissible (Singh 2014: 101). The bold declaration of US 'Liberation Day', which refers to the formalisation of the US 'reciprocal' Trade Tariff Policy, formally institutionalised on 2 April 2025, exemplifies how a liberal international order can abruptly transition into an illiberal trajectory. This move is considered illiberal as the Trump 2.0 administration used it strategically by ensuring that the trade tariffs serve as a "weapon of both economic and geopolitical policy" to leverage its foreign policy and national economic interests in international relations (Rutter et al. 2026). As a result, this move has disrupted the economic stability of the entire global market as well as a series of US Diplomatic engagements with both allies and foes. Consequently, the illiberal stance of the Trump 2.0 administration is straining US foreign policy, which established liberal norms decades ago. These traditional norms not only expanded the US global influence but also ensured allies of its longstanding commitment to trade negotiations and agreements on non-tariff trade barriers (NTBs), (Hartzenberg and Erasmus 2025).

However, in recent years, the imposed trade tariffs have served as a strategy to put 'America First', where the Trump 2.0 administration is using reciprocal trade tariffs as an economic tool to negotiate 'fair' settlements. This rebalancing trade strategy has not delivered the much-anticipated lucrative returns for the US (McManus, Mulholland and Miller 2025). Instead, global markets experienced a sharp decline in exchange rates. This sudden and ambitious "revolutionary project", driven by the Trump 2.0 administration's desire to 'remake the economy, the bureaucracy, culture and foreign policy', and the very notion of what America stands for, has resulted in a widespread economic shock (The Economist 2025).

Developing nations across Africa have been hit the hardest, some facing the

highest trade tariffs ever seen in the history of America's international trade. For instance, a 50% tariff was placed on imports from Lesotho despite being a small, land-locked Southern African country. Botswana tariffs were capped at 37%, Namibia at 21%, Nigeria at fourteen per cent and South Africa at 30% (McManus, Mulholland and Miller 2025). Meanwhile, US longstanding allies such as the EU were subjected to ten per cent tariffs. In Asia, tariffs on import products from Japan and South Korea were capped at twenty per cent, while China was slapped with a massive 125% tariff on all imports to the US, prompting a massive trade war between the two countries (Boak 2025). The effects of the Trump 2.0 tariffication triggered a looming wave of global inflation, ultimately leading to a 90-day pause on the increased global tariffs (The Economist 2025).

This trade policy interruption provided an opportunity for the US to re-evaluate the global viability of its strategy. However, while this tariff pause seemed beneficial, it widened criticism across the globe. Critics noted that Trump's choice of unconventional diplomatic engagements not only intensified an unsettling US-China trade war but also undermined global perceptions of US moral standing (Mason 2025).

Throughout various stages of global instability, the US Dollar has served not only as the primary international trading currency but as a key financial instrument through which the US has sustained its global relevance and led strategic security alliances. These alliances have been forged through America's military power as well as negotiated international peace processes, anchored in democratic political liberties, human rights and co-operation (McManaus, Mulholland and Miller 2025).

In essence, the US has upheld its undeniable hegemonic posture for decades, not through costly economic uncertainties but by adhering to the legitimacies of LIO principles. Over the years, these post-World War II principles have guided the trajectory of US foreign policy and its relations with both allies and adversaries (Curran 2018; Boak 2025; Davidson 2025). However, in the current world order, where the developments on the global stage indicate an ideological shift, states are modifying their political engagements by diverting slightly from the traditional liberal norms which have long shaped US relationships with its allies and partners through decades-long of co-operative relations.

Conceptualising the Liberal International Order shaping US relations in post-war era

IR brings to the fore the intricacies of individuals, states and non-state actors' relations in the international system. A vast number of international relations scholars focus their attention on interactions between states. These interactions are strengthened by diplomatic engagements that advance each state's foreign policy. A state's foreign policy represents socially constructed executive decisions shaped by identities underpinning perceived ideological realities (Jung 2019).

As an internationally accepted system, the LIO governs states' foreign policies by ensuring that peace and security are advanced. However, because their foreign policies can be considered a 'free-floating enterprise' in IR, the understanding of the LIO cannot be delinked from a realist nor a liberal paradigm (Jung 2019: 8). This means that, from a state-centric analytical perspective, whether viewed through realism or liberalism, over time states' interactions can shift from being cooperative to being highly anarchic. Hence, Realism asserts that international relations in an anarchic environment is an incontestable reality, specifically when marked by competitiveness between stronger and weaker states (Jung 2025). Contrary to this view is Liberalism, which, despite presenting compelling principles and norms aimed at sustaining stability in the world, it frames competitiveness as a persistent feature of international relations which is managed by strong institutions. But, notwithstanding the existence of strong institutions such as the UN and WTO, the escalation of conflicts into military invasions or economic trade wars in international relations cannot be overruled (Edmonds 2019; Axelrod and Vanderveer 2020; Grieco, Ikenberry and Mastanduno 2022; Best et. al 2025).

Therefore, it goes without saying that despite its good intentions, a LIO is not devoid of anarchy, and the existence of liberal institutions cannot fully eliminate the military and economic rivalry between states. However, given the philosophical roots of LIO, its compelling legalistic principles of international peace and democratisation have been instrumental in overcoming potential global (dis)order. For instance, since its emergence in the late 1940s after World War II, the LIO was structured to promote economic growth in capitalist societies that are highly industrialised and to a large extent democratic. Lake, Martin and Risse (2021) maintain that systems driven by the LIO have been instrumental

in bringing into effect collective support for principles of democratic peace. In the same vein, LIO systems have been able to facilitate deterrence of common security threats despite the contending capitalist and communist ideologies of the 1940s. For example, the Big Three conferences held in Tehran and Yalta between Joseph Stalin, the leader of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and his western allies, Franklin Roosevelt, the US president, and the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, prompted a pivotal shift in diplomatic relations. These uncommon yet symbolic international relations between allies and former adversaries were influenced by the progressive dynamics and security imperatives of the LIO.

Much of LIO's successes in the 1940s can be attributed to America's dominant economic and military position. This advantage placed the US in an 'excellent shape', allowing it to not only extend substantial economic assistance to its allies, but also to shape the political trajectory of its adversaries in both Europe and Asia (Best et al. 2025: 206). Arguably, notwithstanding a clear ideological divide between East and West, the negotiations between the Big Three demonstrated the unmatched ability of the US to engage diplomatically with its *frenemies* (both friends and enemies). By engaging diplomatically with both allies and adversaries, the US established a reputation as a strategic global actor in promoting the peaceful resolution of international conflicts.

By safeguarding international peace and ensuring global stability, Stalin and Roosevelt ultimately reached consensus on establishing a 'new' international organisation. The replacement of the League of Nations with the United Nations (UN) in 1945, for example, was one of the successes of the US's influential role in promoting a rules-based international community (Jung 2025). International organisations such as the UN, along with the establishment of the Security Council, provided a platform for shared peace and security responsibility among the then four superpowers, the US, Britain, the former USSR and China (Reiman 2016: 147).

Fundamentally, in pre-Trump eras, the international community shared non-threatening international peace and global economic stability interests. Multilateral co-operation was, therefore, made possible by virtue of the three critical principles anchoring a stable LIO, specifically, 'a commitment to democracy and the rule of law; a commitment to open trade; and a commitment to institutionalized *[sic]* multilateralism as the main form of cooperation'

(Vinjamuri et al. 2025: 4). As such, the significance of the LIO is rooted in its core value of expanding international co-operation and economic interdependence through multilateral partnerships. Arguably, since the World Wars, the LIO has also set the tone for strategic co-operation beyond the US military might by extending liberalisation of free trade and capital markets.

To reflect on this reality, the US capitalised on its global footprint and has consistently exerted significant influence on the general economic and security issues in the international arena. Apart from playing a vital role in exerting influence in the democratisation of many regimes globally, the historic successes established by the LIO between the 1950s and 2016 can be attributed to the explosive economic growth in the US and Western European countries. Similarly, the advancement of free trade liberalisation policies also created opportunities for countries in the Global South to emerge as influential global players. For these reasons, Global South nations, including India, China and South Africa, began to thrive and take advantage of the open markets to rebuild and develop their economies (Lake, Martin and Risse 2021: 226).

It is worth noting the significance of the economic global transformation which emerged from free trade liberalisation, which contributed to the rise of new emerging economic markets. The economic state of most Global South nations, specifically in Africa, has been severely ravaged by the legacies of colonial exploitation. As a result, free trade and economic integration have become crucial strategies for the sustainable development quest of many Global South nations. For instance, in the wake of the 2008 global recession, states in the Global South, namely, Brazil, Russia, India and China, formed BRIC in 2009. A year later, South Africa joined, and the organisation became BRICS in 2010. By 2024, this regional economic bloc had expanded its membership in an effort to redress deep-rooted economic inequalities rooted in global competitiveness and asymmetric trading practices. However, the inclusion of additional members in the BRICS alliance, namely Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates, has not been embraced as a genuine Global South economic coalition but is rather perceived as a 'threat' to US traditional hegemonic power (Ryanto 2025).

Against this backdrop, the origins of the LIO suggest a continuum in the US historic global posture in the undertaking of its foreign policy engagements with the world. However, the implementation of the Trump 2.0 administration's national strategic priorities has fractured the LIO, even though global co-

operation and international trade have since been nestled under the banner of American prosperity.

On the one hand, the first Bush Administration, with Pres. George Bush (1989-1993) at the helm, sustained core liberal values. These values were anchored in the LIO through diplomatic engagements and foreign policy implementation marked by its internationalist posture. Partly, this liberal international posture was sustained through negotiated peace agreements with contending parties in Europe, the Middle East and Arab nations, despite the socio-political instabilities of the post-Cold War era. Similarly, the Clinton Administration (1993-2001) executed its predecessors' course of Liberal Order and played a crucial role in fostering peaceful negotiations in Africa, specifically in relation to Somalia's famine crisis and Rwanda's genocide. It also managed to contain rogue international actors such as Iraq, North Korea and Iran, amongst other conflicts, such as in the Balkans (Rose 2015). Rogue international actors and nations-states are those that are considered aggressors and violators of the LIO due to their overt defiance of the 'balance of power' and global peace and security. Rogue states are often identified by their erratic behaviour in international relations. They are perceived as global security threats for insisting on acquiring weapons of mass destruction or for being sponsors of terrorist groups. These aggressive actions threaten US national security interests in the world (Lampas 2022: 2).

On the other hand, the uncertainties of the new millennium also characterised a significant shift in US security dynamics. For instance, under the leadership of Pres. George W. Bush (2001-2009), the shift in geopolitical security introduced a dynamic trend in America's relations with the world, even though the US administration demonstrated a diminished commitment to multilateralism. The US continues to grapple with the transforming nature of an LIO which is in a state of flux (Rose 2015: 4). Such transformation was particularly evident when the world witnessed the horrors of the 9/11 World Trade Centre terror attacks. This incident marked a major turning point in US relations with its *frenemies*. During this period, the Global War on Terror National Security Strategy emerged as the justification for a pre-emptive defence strategy against terrorism.

However, although the US justified its unilateral military engagement aimed at uprooting what it labelled illiberal governments, by targeting jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Afghanistan, its military interventions remain controversial. To better understand the unilateral approach taken by the Bush

administration, one needs to frame America's varying approach to international relations within the context of its historical idea of 'American exceptionalism'. This concept is rooted in an Enlightenment idea that infuses American nationalism with liberal internationalism in the undertakings of affairs (Curran 2018). To this end, Bush's exceptionalism legitimised military interventions as a pivotal strategy to secure US national interests.

In the same light, to contextualise Trump 2.0 administration's approach to foreign affairs, it is necessary to highlight Trump's own perceived economic threats, which have significantly shaped the implementation of MAGA foreign policy and his vision for US 'greatness'. The recent absence of the US from key strategic global economic forums, such as South Africa's G20 Presidency, underscores the definitive stand of the US MAGA foreign policy agenda. Unlike other Global North states such as Germany, which supports co-operation with the Global South, Washington's perspective on a reformed global order is, reportedly, viewed as an alien agenda. In relation to the G20 priorities under South Africa's Presidency, for example, the emphasis on 'championing Africa's role in shaping a more equitable and sustainable global future' is received unfavourably (Mapenzauswa and Ferreira 2025). Hence, in a bid to rebalance international trade flows, the Trump 2.0 MAGA foreign policy frames its hegemonic rationale around redistributive and indiscriminate trade tariffs to address perceived threats to its exceptional global posture (Hartzenberg and Erasmus 2025).

Once again, the idea of an 'exceptional' US resurfaces, and it reinforces the idealistic American belief in hegemonic entitlement. This turn of events is, however, hardly unexpected because nearly all US American presidents have invoked the notion of 'American exceptionalism' to justify their foreign policy decisions. Singh (2015) argues that throughout the history of the LIO power landscape, US administrations have shaped the dynamics of international affairs. Thus, remaking and (re)asserting American economic, political and military strength legitimises America's long-standing global role in advancing liberal values, which may at times require "individual action" against perceived threats (Singh 2015: 109).

Evidently, Trump 2.0 MAGA foreign policy is not unique in its invocation of 'American exceptionalism', however, unlike previous US administrations, the Trump 2.0 administration has disrupted the trajectory of international free trade and the future of US global co-operation. These changes have led to

a great relational impact for US allies and trading partners across the Global North and the Global South. Both allies and adversaries are now compelled to devise strategic responses to effectively navigate the challenges posed by Trump's 'exceptional' tariff era.

Navigating the unpredictability of Trump 2.0 foreign policy priorities

In an evident reversal of the LIO, the Trump 2.0 MAGA foreign policy framework negates the traditional US commitment to liberal democratic values and practices supporting trade liberalisation and international co-operation. Its pursuit of a 'pure national self-interest' through the implementation of the unilateral trade tariffs has generated adverse ripple effects. According to Wengerek, Uhde and Hippert (2025), the anticipated benefits of trade tariffs, have instead fuelled trade wars and disrupted global economic growth by reducing competitiveness in exports and investments in domestic and international firms. This remains true even though the trade policy has been extremely popular with voters (Mason 2025). And, while the administration's US MAGA foreign policy has implemented several Executive Orders that align with constitutional powers, the national strategy priorities adopted within the first 100 days have triggered mixed reactions from allies and economic development partners (Radley 2025; *USA Facts* 2025).

The prime interests of the Trump 2.0 foreign policy agenda are to prioritise the advancement of US sovereignty rather than a more co-operative diplomacy. This, in turn, leads to great impetus in the economic sustainability of both the Global North and the Global South nations. Consider, for instance, the implications of the MAGA foreign policy on the Global North. The same Trump 2.0 foreign policy has strained the liberal norms of longstanding relations among the US and European nations on several strategic issues. Of significance are issues pertaining to unilateral trade tariffs, multiple collective security and development co-operations in the military, such as the US role in NATO, environmental and economic security. These changes have contributed to new, fresh disagreements that have shaken the sustainability of transatlantic relations (Bergmann 2025).

Meanwhile, concerning the Global South, Trump's MAGA-driven foreign policy has wreaked havoc on the sustainable development aspirations of nations in the Southern hemisphere. While legal battles over renaming the Gulf of Mexico

to the Gulf of America, Latin American countries such as Mexico have also been targeted with exorbitant trade tariffs (Ferris 2025). Asian countries have likewise been affected by Trump's MAGA foreign policy ideals. In fact, Asian countries have been facing one of the highest trade tariffs in the history of international trade relations. As a result, an escalation of US-China trade tensions has emerged and has divided US allies and partners in both the Global North and the Global South. Africa has not retaliated against the imposed trade tariffs. However, the Trump 2.0 administration has not only imposed trade tariffs on African states but has also suspended critical foreign aid programmes, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). In turn, this economic partnership shift has not only eliminated preferential market access to the US but has also diminished AGOA's original free market accessibility. On the other hand, although the US imposed a fifteen per cent surcharge on most imported goods, the US-Africa trade partnership has been temporarily retained. Even so, the trading renewal uncertainty surrounding AGOA has not overruled (Bhonsle 2025; Vogel and Olekseyuk 2026).

In light of the existing uncertainty in global economic developments, effectively navigating the unpredictability that has emerged from the implementation of Trump's indiscriminate MAGA foreign policy priorities demands a well-calibrated strategic approach that is capable of mitigating the considerable economic disruptions confronting the LIO. Such counter strategies need to be closely tied to the reinforcement of multilateralism. Given the significance of multilateralism in driving global economic influence, the following strategic approaches are essential to sustain economic growth.

Strengthening Global North and Global South solidarity

The recent geopolitical landscape, influenced by the US MAGA foreign policy, hinders the ability to fully advance economic integration and solidarity. The global economy is under extreme pressure as reflected in the disruptive trade flows and the level of international distrust amongst states (Mazzucato 2025). For this reason, member states from the Global North and the Global South sharing common democratic values anchored in the LIO principles should uphold strong diversified economic co-operation to close the gap of the current

geopolitical divide. The MAGA foreign policy priorities overlook the value of international solidarity and the benefits of interdependence and co-operation. The determined national drive of MAGA's foreign policy against immigration and free trade co-operation, for instance, rejects the multilateral partnerships that traditionally serve as essential drivers of collective economic development (Mkuti 2022; Bradlow 2025). Typically, by taking advantage of the vacuum that the US MAGA agenda is creating, both the Global North and the Global South can draw benefits from expanding and strengthening regional and transregional trade co-operation. To an extent, Russia, China and other regional powers have identified the influential power vacuum which the Trump 2.0 administration is creating. Note, for instance, the expansion of the BRICS bloc, which signals a desire to balance global influence through South-to-South relations despite Trump's persistent tariffication threats (Ryanto 2025).

Reforming trading systems to rebalance global economic asymmetries

A balanced global economy advances inclusive economic cooperation. There is no doubt that multilateral economic forums such as the G20 can mitigate the existing trade imbalances and the effects of the sudden suspension of free trade benefits under the principles of non-tariffs trade and open markets. The persistent asymmetry in the multilateral trading systems drives an urgent need for institutional reforms in international financial institutions, specifically the WTO (Bradlow 2025).

For decades, the architecture of international financial institutions has prevented the acceleration and sustainability of the economic development aspirations of the Global South states, particularly on the African continent. However, the leadership of South Africa's G20 Presidency, along with the African Union's permanent seat on the G20 forum, presents significant opportunities to address the existing asymmetries in global governance. The influence of Global South states, especially those in Africa, in international affairs has been at best marginalised. Meanwhile, billions of dollars in 'illegal logging, fishing and trade in wildlife' as well as mineral resources have been extracted by multinational corporations (Mlamboet al. 2021: 35-36).

When reflecting on the first tier of the G20, member states have recognised the need to support underdeveloped nations and Africa's accelerated

industrialisation, a necessity for sustainable developmental growth. The first tier of the G20 refers to one of South Africa's G20 Presidency agendas for inclusive economic growth, industrialisation, employment and inequality reduction (Task Force 1). It is a goal guided by the three thematic principles of Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability on which the success of the global agenda under South Africa's G20 Presidency depends. It also relies on global partners to support its Global South sustainable development and transformative ambitions. To address the growing, overlapping geopolitical crises affecting marginalised groups in the Global South, it is imperative to take this opportune moment to fast-track uneven global developmental practices (Institute for Economic Justice 2025).

It is necessary to rely on global alliances with like-minded economic partners to attain the required structural economic transformation envisioned by the South African G20 Presidency (Mazzucato 2025). These alliances are instrumental in implementing responsive policies that advance collective priorities, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN 2030 Agenda. By virtue of the existing common objective of promoting inclusion of diverse structural transformation strategies, coalition members can re-ignite international co-operation in "fiscal policies, financial policies and Green Industrial strategies" (G20 South Africa 2025). By so doing, the establishment of a model based on a 'trusted-partner' collaboration will reaffirm strong global partnerships with like-minded and 'trusted' countries. This model can potentially enhance a sustainable free trade environment, investor confidence and the security required to sustain the productivity of multilateral corporations (Reinsch 2024). Furthermore, by adopting these trade models, states are more likely to foster an economic partnership that enhances sustainable, continuous co-operation, particularly because free trade relations would be established amongst trusted and established firms. Consequently, trade partnerships would capitalise on a more balanced and free trade environment. In addition, these established trade allies would further enhance the traditional norms of LIO that were practised by multilateral global institutions such as the WTO. The WTO is committed to minimising trade barriers in international relations. As such, a diversified open trade opportunity is more likely to expand economic development momentum despite the US trade tariffs imposed on both the Global North and the Global South countries since the implementation of MAGA foreign policies.

Conclusion and recommendations

In sum, the future of the LIO remains uncertain amid a highly volatile geopolitical landscape. Since the world has embraced trade liberalisation for decades, sudden changes in trade policy create conditions vulnerable to misperceptions, which can undermine diplomatic trust. Furthermore, it raises concerns about the effectiveness of multilateral organisations such as the WTO in advancing trade co-operation. Consequently, it remains to be seen whether multilateral organisations advance co-operation or hinder the seamless integration of sustainable development strategies aimed at addressing foreign policy transformation.

There is, however, a growing concern about the global economic landscape. These concerns have emerged regarding the role of multilateral institutions. The major concern is whether multilateral institutions can effectively tackle the challenges arising from the adverse economic impact of the MAGA foreign policy priorities. Subsequently, these concerns have also prompted the need to reassess the implications of US MAGA foreign policy strategies in a highly interconnected world. The implementation of the 90-day suspension of uniform trade tariffs underscores the continued importance of multilateralism as a vital global co-operation framework. A multilateral framework shapes pragmatic approaches to economic integration in a globalised world. Through the recalibration of international co-operation among asymmetric global powers, economic development can still be sustained despite the uncertainties triggered by unpopular global economic policies, specifically those driven by US MAGA strategies.

Therefore, the findings of this study recommend sustaining collaborative economic integration among like-minded members of the G20 from the Global North and Global South. A sustained partnership in international relations reinforces the effective implementation of responsive economic policies that support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined in the 2030 Agenda.

It is worth noting that, while the 90-day suspension of global tariffs has averted a premature recession, US socio-political dynamics and mounting tensions with both former allies and adversaries project a negative perception of US MAGA foreign policy. The analytical findings of this study recommend

the implementation of a strategic and co-ordinated approach in which affected countries from both the Global North and Global South safeguard their economic interests. By avoiding retaliatory trade tariffs, policymakers are more likely to reduce the risks of multilateral trade wars. Nonetheless, the shift towards the 'tariffication' focus of US MAGA foreign policy has created an opportunity for affected states to explore mechanisms that strengthen regional trade integration free from tariffs.

Conversely, diverting trade partnerships will have detrimental effects on US local firms and consumers alike, thereby intensifying the pressure on the US to improve its image within the international system. Hopefully, collaborative efforts by like-minded partners in the Global North and Global South will exert pressure and compel the US to end the reciprocal trade tariff policy approach. Nonetheless, it remains uncertain whether the Trump 2.0 administration is likely to respond to any pressures exerted by the international community to reverse its trade tariffs stance.

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