CHAPTER 3

Implications of Donald Trump's Transactional Foreign Policy Style and Isolationism on the United States' Global Leadership

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Introduction

The United States (US) emerged as a global hegemon owing to military, economic, political and ideological factors that characterised the aftermath of World War II (WWII). It is pertinent to note that the US consolidated its global power through military ascendancy, economic preeminence and ideological leadership. The US's effort was shaped by its determination and the structural changes in the global system that followed WWII. Post WWII, the US possessed supreme military capabilities, including nuclear weapons, many military bases around the world and control of many sea routes around the world. The downfall of European powers during World War II and the wreckage of its impact on European economies set the stage for the United States' emergence as an international security hegemon through the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) (Ikenberry, 2002). It was against this backdrop that the US used its military might in containing Soviet Union expansionism during the Cold War.

However, the US's economic dominance started around 1945 when the country accounted for about 50 per cent of international industrial output. Also, the US was equally instrumental to the establishment of the Bretton Woods institutions, namely the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), with the primary objective of stabilising the international economy and promoting liberal economic policies around the world (Gilpin, 2011). Moreover, the US used the Marshall Plan to consolidate its influence by expediting European reconstruction and unification of Western Europe to US economic hegemony. In addition, the US was a key player in promoting liberal democracy and capitalist values around the world, by setting itself as the global leader of the 'free world', contrary to the Soviet Union, which was the key player in promoting communist ideology around the world. One of the instruments used by the US to promote liberal democracy and capitalist culture was Western media, which became an instrument of political education in most developing countries around the world (Nye, 2004).

Given the above role of the US in international affairs, after the Cold War, there was a shift in power configuration in the international system in favour of the US, and the world order became the 'unipolar' world order characterised by the US dominance of the international system in which Charles Krauthammer (1990: 23) describes as the 'unipolar moment'. Since then, the US has continued to shape global institutions to represent its national interest and values. For instance, critical decisions and policies of the Bretton Woods institutions and the United Nations (UN) are influenced by the US. This set the pace for the US institutionalising its leadership in a rules-based global order (Ikenberry, 2011).

With the downfall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US emerged as the global hegemon, with unmatched military and economic capabilities. This era of unipolarity in the international system strengthened the US leadership role through international interventions, economic liberalisation and technological control (Wohlforth, 1999). Today, the re-emergence of President Donald Trump as the 47th President of the US in 2025, has redefined the US foreign policy in many respects, especially the contemporary shift in geopolitical dynamics and declining US foreign aid. Today, Donald Trump remains the President who has issued the highest number of executive orders in recent US history (National Archives, 2021). Although a significant number of Americans disagreed with several of these executive orders (Pew Research Center, 2020), it is pertinent to note that within just three months in office, Trump's administration implemented sweeping changes that sent shockwaves through the global development community. These included the dismantling of components of USAID and a freeze on US foreign aid disbursements (KFF, 2017; Radelet, 2021). This came at a time when many developing countries were still struggling to recover from the economic and social impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic and were simultaneously confronting the consequences of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war (UNDP, 2023).

Moreover, there is an ongoing debate in the field of international relations regarding the perceived decline of the US in the international system (Jacob, Smith and Turner, 2023; Jacob and Momoh, 2023; Nye, 2020). While some studies argue that the role of the US as a global hegemon is diminishing (Layne, 2021; Mearsheimer, 2018), others contend that its hegemonic status remains intact, given its enduring influence and strategic role in global affairs (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2016; Ikenberry, 2020). It is important to note that both sides of this debate have presented compelling evidence to support their positions. However, considering current geopolitical shifts and the noticeable reduction in US foreign aid (Radelet, 2021), it is becoming increasingly difficult for scholars who reject the notion of American decline to maintain their stance. Contemporary political, social and economic realities suggest a reconfiguration of power in the international system that challenges the traditional dominance of the US (Acharya, 2018; Kupchan, 2020).

Overall, the contributions of the US to the growth of the international system cannot be contested, as the US remains the largest donor in the world. One fundamental question in the mind of policymakers and international experts, is centred on China's capability to fill in the gap created by the US, given that China is Africa's largest trade partner and bilateral creditor. However, the US accounted for 22 per cent of the UN budget, 27 per cent for the UN peacekeeping budget and 47 per cent of the UN Population Fund budget (Jacob and Momoh, 2023). It is against this background that this study seeks to investigate the implications of Donald Trump's transactional foreign policy and isolationist posture on the US global leadership.

Conceptual review

Transactional foreign policy

A transactional foreign policy is one driven by direct, short-term gains, rather than long-term strategic objectives or shared values (Haass, 2017). Under this model, relationships between states are seen through the lens of cost-benefit analysis, with cooperation conditional on reciprocal advantage. Donald Trump epitomised this approach through his 'America First' doctrine, which emphasised renegotiating trade deals, demanding increased financial contributions from allies such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and placing national interests above global commitments (Lissner and Rapp-Hooper, 2018). The transactional style marked a departure from traditional US leadership, which often combined strategic interests with a sense of responsibility for maintaining global order. This shift undermined trust and predictability in international affairs, as allies and adversaries alike struggled to understand the US's long-term intentions (Brands, 2018).

Isolationism

Isolationism refers to a foreign policy stance that seeks to minimise a country's involvement in international affairs, especially military and political alliances. Trump's rhetoric and actions such as the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the WHO signalled a clear turn toward isolationist tendencies (Drezner, 2022). This revival of isolationism weakened traditional alliances, reduced America's diplomatic engagement, and led to a decline in global influence. As the US stepped back, other powers, notably China and Russia, expanded their influence in regions once dominated by American leadership (Ikenberry, 2020).

Global leadership

Global leadership involves a state's capacity to influence international norms, shape multilateral agendas, and maintain global stability. Historically, the US has played this role through a combination of military power, economic strength, and ideological appeal. However, under Trump's administration, this leadership was questioned due to perceived unpredictability and unilateralism. The retreat from cooperative global governance diminished America's soft power, its ability to attract and persuade others based on values and culture rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004). As trust in US leadership waned, global institutions faced increased fragmentation, and emerging powers gained ground in setting international norms.

Theoretical framework

International relations theorists have developed several theories for the study of foreign policy. One notable theory is the realist theory. Realism emphasises the anarchic nature of the international system, state sovereignty and the pursuit of national interests defined in terms of power by states. Realists argue that states act primarily to ensure their own survival and dominance in a competitive international environment. Within the context of realist theory, Trump's foreign policy, particularly his emphasis on 'America First' and a focus on bilateral engagement over multilateral engagement, as well as his withdrawal from international obligations such as the Paris Climate Agreement and the Iran Nuclear Deal, is a clear reflection of realist tenets. Trump prioritised short-term national gains over long-term global stability and alliances (Mearsheimer, 2018). The implication of Trump's foreign policy approach is that, while asserting US sovereignty, it tends to weaken its global leadership by eroding alliances, diminishing soft power and allowing rivals like China to fill the gap created by the US.

However, constructivism emphasises the role of ideas, identities and norms in shaping relations between states at the international level. Within the framework of constructivist state behaviour, it is influenced not only by material interests but also by ideational factors and perceptions. Thus, Trump's magniloquence and chauvinistic speech reshaped the perception of US identity, moving from a global leader to a transactional actor. This shift altered how allies and adversaries interpreted American intentions at the international level (Wendt, 1999). The implication of Trump's foreign policy is that it changes US identity and narrative, as it weakened its normative power and global image by reducing its ability to lead by example or shape international norms.

Liberal institutionalism posits that international cooperation and institutions mitigate anarchy and promote global order. Liberal institutionalism emphasises interdependence, rules-based systems, and the importance of institutions such as the UN, NATO, and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). It is pertinent to note within the theoretical explanation, that Trump's rejection of multilateralism, criticism of NATO and withdrawal from WHO signify a retreat from liberal internationalism. By undermining global institutions, Trump's policies destabilised the rules-based order that traditionally upheld US leadership (Ikenberry, 2020). Therefore, the implication of Trump's foreign policy of isolationist shift, diminished trust in US commitments, weakened global governance and challenged the legitimacy of American leadership by emerging global powers like China.

Nevertheless, this study adopts the liberal institutionalism as its framework for analysis. This is because liberal institutionalism offers the most comprehensive framework to assess the implications of Trump's foreign policy style on US global leadership. Trump's withdrawal from multilateral institutions and treaties has significantly disrupted international collaboration and challenged the international liberal order established after WWII (Ikenberry, 2020).

The implications of Trump's foreign policy can be best understood through liberal institutionalism, which emphasises the role of international institutions, rules and cooperation in maintaining global order. According to Ikenberry (2020), US leadership after WWII was based, not solely on power, but on the creation of a liberal order that promoted democracy, free markets and multilateral governance. Trump's rejection of this model disrupted decades of institutional trust. Trump's preference for bilateralism over multilateralism weakened international regimes, challenged the credibility of US commitments and opened space for revisionist powers to assert influence (Patrick, 2017). Therefore, the erosion of institutional dependence and commitment directly undermined US reliability, making this theory most apt for understanding the long-term leadership consequences.

Nature of Trump's transactional and isolationist foreign policy

A critical assessment of Trump's transactional approach to US foreign policy shows that his administration prioritised short-term US gains and bilateral deals over multilateralism and long-standing diplomatic alliances with other nations. Besides, Trump's 'America First' doctrine has shown that all US foreign relations must produce direct benefits for the US or else it should not be considered. It is pertinent to note that US short-term benefits are measured in terms of economic or strategic benefits. This US foreign policy posture has not changed much, when compared to Trump's first term as US president (Thrall and Goepner, 2017).

One important example was Trump's repeatedly criticised NATO allies, especially Western European nations for failing to meet their defence spending obligations of over two per cent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Recently, Trump has threatened to reduce US commitment to NATO, unless other NATO members increased their contributions, which shows a change from US collective security foreign policy posture to conditional alliance assistance (Brands, 2018). Economically, Trump began trade wars with China, Mexico, Canada and the EU by imposing tariffs on goods from these nations, thereby treating trade negotiations within the context of competitive business transactions rather than tools of cooperation (Bown, 2020).

However, US–North Korea relations under Trump has a transactional undertone. For instance, Trump's contact with Kim Jong-un was conceived within the context of a business deals between two relegating, diplomatic processes and human rights issues to the background (Cha, 2018). Moreover, since 2025, no opportunity has availed itself for both leaders, Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un, to meet and engage in dialogue on matters of mutual concern. However, considering the evolving dynamics of US foreign policy, especially under the 'America First' paradigm, it is likely that Trump would express renewed interest in such a meeting, particularly if it aligns with advancing the USs' economic and strategic interests.

Trump withdrew the US from several key international agreements, including the Paris Climate Accord, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Iran Nuclear Deal), the Trans–Pacific Partnership and the WHO. All these actions signalled a deep scepticism toward international institutions and a preference for unilateral action (Drezner, 2019).

Also important, Trump emphasised domestic protection through aggressive immigration policies, such as the Muslim travel ban, refugee reductions and the construction of a border wall with Mexico and deployment of the US military to the border with Mexico. These measures taken by Trump are driven by a national security narrative, especially the curbing of illegal immigrants into the US, which has been responsible for the growing crime rate and the competition for available jobs that are arguably meant for US citizens. All these embodied a broader isolationist ideology rooted in protecting American sovereignty and identity (Gessen, 2017).

In essence, Trump's foreign policy in recent years has been defined by pragmatic unilateralism, characterised by transactional alliances and conditional international engagement. Trump's 'America First' stance translated into a retreat from multilateralism and a narrowing of US global leadership, focusing instead on self-interest, economic nationalism, and domestic security. While International Relations scholars viewed this as a necessary correction to decades of overextension, some International Relations scholars have argued that Trump's foreign policy posture undermined US credibility and disrupted global stability (Sloat, 2020).

Strategic advantages of Trump's transactional foreign policy and isolationist posture on the United States' global leadership

Under Donald Trump's current administration, the economic nationalism that defined his first term has continued to shape US foreign policy. One of the hallmark strategies initiated during his earlier tenure was the imposition of tariffs on strategic sectors such as steel, aluminium, automobiles and agriculture. These protectionist policies, integral to the broader 'America First' doctrine, were originally designed to reduce trade deficits, revive domestic manufacturing and strengthen national self-reliance in critical industries. During his first term, Trump invoked Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 to impose a 25 per cent tariff on steel and 10 per cent on aluminium, effectively providing US producers a competitive edge against imports (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2018). This led to short-term boosts in domestic production, such as the reopening of US Steel's Granite City Works in Illinois, which rehired hundreds of workers (Tankersley and Rappeport, 2018).

Now, in his renewed leadership, Trump has signalled a return to or even an expansion of these tariff-based strategies, reaffirming his commitment to protecting US industries and workers. In agriculture, the legacy of the US–China trade war continues to influence policy, with Trump again pledging to defend American farmers through trade leverage and direct subsidies if necessary. The retaliatory tariffs on US soybeans during Trump's first term were countered by multibillion-dollar farm aid packages, and similar measures are likely to re-emerge as he seeks to bolster rural support. Moreover, Trump's prior renegotiation of trade deals, such as the US–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA), has laid a foundation for more assertive trade diplomacy in his current administration, particularly in securing favourable terms for US agricultural and industrial sectors.

Under Donald Trump's current administration, the emphasis on renegotiating trade deals to favour American workers and industries remains central to his foreign policy agenda. A key example often cited by Trump as a model for future trade diplomacy is the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was replaced by the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA) in 2020. This agreement, which continues to define US trade relations with its North American neighbours, incorporated several provisions that significantly benefitted US industries and aligned with Trump's long-standing 'America First' approach.

The USMCA expanded market access for US agricultural producers, especially in sectors like dairy, poultry and eggs, by reducing Canadian tariffs and quotas. According to the US Department of Agriculture, approximately 3.6 per cent of Canada's dairy market was opened to US exporters (USDA, 2020), reinforcing Trump's ongoing pledge to prioritise American farmers. In the automotive sector, the USMCA's requirements that 75 per cent of vehicle content be produced in North America and that 40–45 per cent be made by workers earning at least US$16 per hour continue to serve as benchmarks in Trump's current trade talks, aimed at reshoring manufacturing and raising labour standards (Lynch, 2020; Villarreal and Fergusson, 2020).

While the USMCA was a first-term achievement, its structures and outcomes reflect Trump's present foreign economic policy: a transactional, bilateral-focused strategy that seeks to safeguard US industry from global competition. In sectors such as steel and aluminium, where previous tariff policies stimulated production and temporarily revived dormant plants, Trump has renewed calls for strategic protectionism and self-reliance in key supply chains. Though critics argue that such measures lead to higher consumer costs and downstream disruptions (Fajgelbaum et al., 2020), the Trump administration continues to justify them as necessary trade-offs in preserving national economic security and global bargaining power. As Trump reasserts his influence on global trade in this new term, the USMCA stands as a foundation for future deals symbolising the administration's broader objective of rebalancing international trade to favour American interests and industries.

In Donald Trump's current administration, the issue of burden-sharing within NATO has re-emerged as a central theme in US transatlantic policy. Building on the confrontational, but impactful strategy of his first term, Trump has once again made allied defence spending a litmus test for US commitment to NATO. During his previous presidency, Trump frequently criticised member states for failing to meet the 2 per cent of GDP defence spending benchmark and even proposed a far more ambitious 4–5 per cent target; an idea dismissed by many allies as unrealistic (Braw, 2018). Nonetheless, Trump's pressure campaign during 2016–2020 yielded measurable results: non-US NATO members increased defence spending by nearly 20 per cent, from US$262 billion in 2016 to US$313 billion in 2020 (NATO, 2021), with countries like Poland, the UK, and the Baltic states accelerating military modernisation efforts.

Now, in his renewed leadership, Trump continues to leverage NATO spending as a strategic foreign policy tool, doubling down on the argument that the US has carried a disproportionate share of the alliance's defence burden. In public remarks and diplomatic engagements, Trump has reiterated his belief that European allies must take more financial responsibility for their own security, particularly considering evolving threats from Russia and the need to reduce dependency on American military might. Trump's administration has revived calls for conditional US engagement, suggesting that continued American support may hinge on the financial commitments and defence readiness of member states.

Moreover, Trump's earlier rhetoric has had a lasting impact on NATO's internal political dynamics. Former NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg credited Trump with influencing the alliance's financial trajectory, attributing over US$130 billion in new defence investments between 2016 and 2019 to US pressure (Stoltenberg, 2019). That legacy has now been embraced by Trump's current foreign policy team as justification for maintaining leverage in NATO-related negotiations, particularly regarding troop deployments, military basing agreements and arms procurement.

However, while Trump's renewed emphasis on burden-sharing has reinforced defence spending commitments, it has also reignited diplomatic tensions. Several European leaders continue to express concern that Trump's transactional approach undermines the spirit of collective defence enshrined in Article 5 of the NATO Charter. Despite these frictions, the Trump administration argues that increased allied spending, spurred largely by past and present US pressure, has strengthened NATO's interoperability and responsiveness, making the alliance more effective and equitable. In summary, Trump's current foreign policy toward NATO represents a continuation, and in some areas, an intensification of his earlier approach: demanding greater allied contributions, asserting US strategic dominance, and recalibrating transatlantic relations through the lens of national interest and fiscal fairness.

In Donald Trump's current administration, immigration policy continues to reflect the 'restrictionist' approach established during his first term (2017–2021), with renewed vigour and an expanded political mandate. Building on his earlier emphasis on protecting American jobs and national security, Trump has once again prioritised a hardline immigration stance as a core pillar of his foreign and domestic policy agenda. The foundational belief remains that both undocumented and certain forms of legal immigration pose economic and security threats to the US, especially for low– and middle-income American workers (Huffman, 2019). During his previous tenure, Trump introduced stringent caps and increased scrutiny on legal immigration channels such as the H-1B visa, commonly used in the tech and engineering sectors, arguing that foreign labour undermined opportunities for American professionals (US Department of Labour, 2020). That policy logic persists today, as Trump's administration resumes efforts to restrict employment-based visas, prioritise merit-based immigration, and scrutinise foreign labour sponsorship under the banner of 'protecting American workers'.

The 'public charge' rule, expanded in 2020 to deny green cards to immigrants likely to use public benefits, is now being revisited and potentially broadened under the current administration to include additional forms of federal assistance. This reflects Trump's continued focus on minimising perceived fiscal burdens posed by low-income immigrants and safeguarding taxpayer resources (Pierce and Bolter, 2020). Furthermore, Trump's prior use of presidential proclamations, such as the 2020 suspension of certain foreign work visas during the COVID 19 economic downturn (Miroff, 2020), has provided a legal and strategic framework for new executive actions aimed at curbing both temporary and permanent immigration amid ongoing debates about labour market stability and national self-reliance.

Trump's current immigration agenda also places heightened emphasis on border enforcement and deterrence, including efforts to resume and expand construction of physical barriers at the southern border, increase funding for immigration enforcement agencies and pursue aggressive deportation policies. These initiatives are coupled with renewed rhetorical campaigns portraying immigration as a threat to American cultural identity, economic security and internal cohesion messaging that has galvanised support among core constituencies. In summary, Trump's present-day immigration policy is not only a continuation of his earlier 'restrictionist' vision, but a reinforcement of it, reframed to address post-pandemic labour dynamics, national security concerns and political pressures from his conservative base. By leaning on precedents established in his first term, Trump has laid the groundwork for a more assertive and unilateral approach to immigration in his second administration.

In Donald Trump's current administration, the principles of the 'Buy American, Hire American' executive order remain central to immigration policy, reinforcing the broader strategy of economic nationalism. Trump continues to draw a direct connection between immigration restrictions and the protection of American jobs, wages and industries. His renewed policy framework builds upon the foundation laid during his first term, particularly in regard to border security and the symbolic power of enforcement measures. Trump's message continues to resonate strongly with voters concerned about illegal border crossings, drug trafficking and perceived national security threats. The partial construction of a border wall during his first term of approximately 452 miles of new and replacement barriers by January 2021 (US Customs and Border Protection, 2021) remains a defining achievement and campaign promise that he has recommitted to expanding. In his second term, efforts to resume and accelerate wall construction have been framed not only as border control, but also as a statement of national sovereignty and immigration deterrence.

The policy requiring asylum seekers to remain in Mexico while their claims are processed in US immigration courts, a central component of the earlier 'Migrant Protection Protocols', has been reinstated and reinforced under Trump's renewed leadership. The goal is to minimise catch-and-release practices, reduce immigration court backlogs, and deter what Trump terms 'frivolous asylum claims' (ACLU, 2020: 3). This aligns with the administration's broader objective of discouraging irregular migration by making the process more difficult and less appealing. Perhaps most controversially, Trump has defended and signalled a willingness to revive 'zero tolerance' policies similar to those implemented in 2018, which mandated the prosecution of all unauthorised border crossers (ACLU, 2020: 4–5). This policy, while resulting in significant backlash due to family separations, was positioned as part of a broader deterrence-based strategy rather than a labour market intervention (ACLU, 2020: 5). In his current term, Trump has reaffirmed his belief in strong punitive measures as necessary to uphold immigration laws and maintain border discipline.

Overall, Trump's present immigration and border policies reflect a continuation and, in many areas, an intensification of his earlier efforts. By doubling down on enforcement, limiting asylum access and reinforcing physical and legal barriers to entry, Trump's administration remains committed to reducing unauthorised immigration and reasserting control over US borders in line with his nationalist policy ethos. While Trump's current immigration policies have continued to emphasise restriction and enforcement, they remain deeply controversial for their humanitarian consequences and economic impact on key US industries. Although these measures have contributed to a reduction in certain categories of immigration, particularly irregular border crossings, they have also reignited criticism from business leaders, advocacy groups and labour-dependent sectors. Industries such as agriculture, hospitality, construction and healthcare, all of which have long relied on immigrant labour, have reported growing labour shortages, especially in low-wage positions that US citizens are often unwilling to fill.

Under Donald Trump's current administration, the continuation and intensification of stricter immigration policies, including visa restrictions, stepped-up deportations and heightened border enforcement, have further exacerbated labour shortages in essential sectors such as agriculture, construction and hospitality. These industries, long dependent on a reliable supply of both documented and undocumented migrant labour for low-wage and seasonal work, have struggled to maintain productivity as the immigrant workforce has continued to decline.

In response, many firms have accelerated investments in automation and robotics as a strategic solution to mitigate ongoing workforce shortages. This trend began during Trump's first term, but has gained new momentum under his renewed enforcement agenda. For instance, the US agricultural sector, especially fruit and vegetable production, remains particularly vulnerable due to its heavy reliance on migrant labour, primarily from Latin America, for tasks such as planting, harvesting and packing. As Trump's administration enforces stricter limits on temporary agricultural visas (H-2A) and revives policies that heighten deportation fears, farmers have faced intensified hiring challenges. The California Farm Bureau Federation noted that by 2019, over 56 per cent of farmers were already experiencing labour shortages, with some leaving crops unharvested due to a lack of available hands (Davis, 2019), a situation that persists, and in some cases worsens under the current administration.

To adapt, many large-scale farms have accelerated the adoption of labour-saving technologies, including automated harvesters for crops such as strawberries and lettuce; drone surveillance systems for monitoring field conditions and crop health; precision irrigation and AI-powered planning tools to enhance productivity with fewer human workers (Shah and Johnson, 2020). Although these technologies had been in development for years, the Trump administration's continued labour restrictions have acted as a catalyst, especially for large agribusinesses. However, small- and medium-sized farms often lack the capital to invest in expensive automation, creating an uneven technological adoption landscape that may widen the gap between large and small producers.

Similarly, the construction sector remains significantly affected by the tightened immigration policy. The National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) reported that over 70 per cent of firms faced skilled labour shortages as early as 2020; a trend that has continued under Trump's second term. In response, the industry has increasingly turned to robotics and modular building techniques to reduce reliance on manual labour. These include semi-automated bricklaying machines like the SAM100; 3D printing of housing components; prefabricated panels and modular units that reduce on-site labour requirements and project timelines. While automation has helped some sectors adapt to labour constraints, it also presents long-term socioeconomic challenges. Critics warn that the rapid expansion of robotic technologies could displace American workers, particularly in rural or economically vulnerable communities already struggling with job scarcity. Economists such as Acemoglu and Restrepo (2020) have cautioned that this shift may outpace retraining efforts, potentially exacerbating inequality in the labour market. Moreover, the post-pandemic context has further validated investments in automation, as concerns over worker safety in close-contact environments reinforce the appeal of machine-based solutions. Trump's immigration and labour policies, grounded in economic nationalism and protectionism, have therefore not only reshaped the composition of the labour force but also accelerated a structural transformation of the entire industry towards a more automated future.

Under Donald Trump's current administration, the US has reinforced the inward-looking and transactional foreign policy stance that characterised Trump's first term, commonly framed as 'America First'. This renewed approach has led to the continued retrenchment from traditional global leadership roles, as the administration prioritises bilateralism, national interest and economic sovereignty over multilateral cooperation. Trump has once again signalled scepticism toward global institutions and agreements, echoing his earlier withdrawals from the Paris Climate Accord, the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA), and the WHO during the height of the COVID 19 pandemic.

This sustained disengagement has deepened the strategic vacuum in global governance that was initially created during Trump's first term, which is a void that emerging powers like China and Russia have continued to exploit with increasing effectiveness (Stokes, 2020). Under Trump's renewed isolationist posture, China has expanded its influence through humanitarian diplomacy and infrastructure investment, further consolidating its global footprint. For example, during and after the COVID 19 pandemic, Beijing provided masks, ventilators and vaccines to countries in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia, often through bilateral deals and global platforms like COVAX (ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021). China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) continues to gain traction in regions left under-engaged by the US, with billions of US dollars in infrastructure funding flowing into Pakistan, Kenya and Serbia (Hillman, 2020). Meanwhile, Trump's persistent rejection of multilateral trade frameworks, including the Trans–Pacific Partnership (TPP), has allowed China to position itself as a leader in trade diplomacy. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which became the world's largest trade bloc in 2020, excludes the US entirely, reflecting a shift in global economic leadership (Petri and Plummer, 2020).

Russia has also capitalised on Washington's retreat from global commitments, expanding its role in military and energy diplomacy. In the Middle East, particularly Syria, Russia has entrenched its influence by backing Bashar al-Assad, while also aligning with Iran and Turkey, filling a strategic vacuum previously shaped by US involvement (Trenin, 2018). In Africa, Moscow has pursued an aggressive outreach strategy, signing defence and security agreements with over twenty African countries, and deepening its involvement in mining, arms deals and counterterrorism cooperation (Shaban, 2020). This sustained shift away from US-led global engagement under Trump has contributed to a world that is increasingly multipolar, where power is diffused among multiple centres, rather than concentrated in a unipolar American-led order. For many developing countries, this realignment presents new opportunities to diversify foreign partnerships, negotiate better terms and reduce reliance on Western aid and diplomacy. For example, African nations are turning to China, India, Turkey and Russia for trade, technology and military support, while countries in Latin America, such as Venezuela, Argentina and Bolivia, have deepened strategic ties with Beijing and Moscow (Ellis, 2021).

Overall, while this multipolarity offers greater flexibility for emerging economies, it also carries the risk of geopolitical fragmentation, increased strategic competition and the weakening of liberal international norms that the US traditionally championed. Under Trump's current term, the global order appears increasingly defined by competitive nationalism and transactional diplomacy, rather than collective problem-solving and values-based leadership.

Strategic costs of Trump's transactional foreign policy and isolationist posture on the USs' global leadership

Trump's return to power in 2025 would not simply revive his first-term foreign policy, it would accelerate and institutionalise it. The 'America First' doctrine would likely evolve into a systematic retrenchment from alliances, aggressive economic nationalism and deliberate dismantling of multilateral norms. While this might appeal to domestic political bases focused on sovereignty and industrial revival, the international costs could be significant: reduced global stability, weakened Western alliances and a reordering of power that benefits strategic competitors. During his presidency, Donald Trump adopted a transactional approach to foreign policy, where international partnerships were judged primarily on immediate, quantifiable benefits to the US. This posture marked a sharp departure from the traditional US role as a consensus-builder within alliances like NATO, the UN and emerging frameworks like AUKUS (Australia–United Kingdom–United States). Trump's frequent threats to reduce US contributions or even withdraw from longstanding security agreements unsettled allies and weakened perceptions of American reliability. Trump repeatedly criticised NATO members for not spending enough on defence, branding the alliance 'obsolete' in 2017 and threatening to pull out if partners failed to meet their obligations (Erlanger, 2019). While he did succeed in pressuring some countries to increase their military spending, his rhetoric also alarmed European allies who began to question the long-term commitment of the US to transatlantic security.

Present Trump's administration, he promises a return and intensification of these policies under his revived 'America First 2.0' agenda. His public statements, campaign platform, and advisor memos offer clear indications of how past strategies are likely to be amplified in office. Trump's first term saw frequent disparagement of NATO, calling it 'obsolete' and criticising allies for failing to meet spending targets (Erlanger, 2019: 12). Trump has reaffirmed his intention to reduce or eliminate support for NATO countries that do not contribute 2 per cent of their GDP to defence. In a 2024 rally, Trump even stated he would 'encourage Russia to do whatever the hell they want' to delinquent allies (Klein, 2024: 5). A 2025 Trump administration could, therefore, formalise this stance, triggering a security crisis in Europe and encouraging Russia's aggression in places like the Baltics and Moldova (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025).

Similarly, while the AUKUS agreement was launched during the Biden administration, the scepticism sown during the Trump years influenced allied expectations about US consistency. Many international observers pointed out that Trump's 'America First' policy left partners feeling vulnerable to sudden policy shifts (Brands, 2019; US Senate Democratic

Report, 2020). These uncertainties created what political scientists call a credibility gap, a dissonance between US promises and perceived willingness to follow through. France's president Emmanuel Macron, for instance, responded by calling for 'strategic autonomy' for Europe, arguing that Europe could no longer fully rely on US security guarantees (Macron, 2020: 4).

Ironically, even as Trump strained alliance cohesion, his administration's adversarial stance toward China and continued sanctions on Russia helped pivot NATO's focus toward emerging threats. However, many experts argue that NATO unity during and after Trump has relied less on US leadership and more on a shared perception of Russia as a destabilising actor, especially after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Kroenig and Ashford, 2021). The increasing convergence among NATO states on deterring Russian aggression suggests that alliance resilience is now anchored more in shared strategic threats than in diplomatic pressure from Washington. For example, in 2020, Germany and France launched new joint defence projects under the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) framework, reinforcing intra-European collaboration regardless of US signals (Biscop, 2018).

This shift has broader implications for global security governance. When the leading power in an alliance is seen as unpredictable, smaller allies may seek hedging strategies by diversifying security ties, enhancing self-reliance, or deepening regional cooperation. Trump's approach, thus, unintentionally accelerated debates over NATO's future, the EU's strategic independence and even Japan and South Korea's moves to expand indigenous defence capabilities. In summary, Trump's aggressive bargaining and threats to withdraw from alliances damaged US global credibility and highlighted the fragility of international cohesion when leadership is volatile. Alliance solidarity now hinges more on geopolitical threats like Russia's aggression than on the consistency of American diplomatic engagement.

One of the major consequences of Donald Trump's protectionist trade policy, particularly the imposition of tariffs on imports from China, the EU and other partners, was the inevitable retaliation by affected nations. While the Trump administration argued that tariffs were necessary to correct trade imbalances and revive American manufacturing (Navarro, 2018), the global trading system responded in kind, significantly affecting US exporters and creating ripple effects across global supply chains. China, in response to US tariffs on US$250 billion worth of its goods, imposed retaliatory tariffs on approximately US$110 billion in US exports. These measures disproportionately targeted politically sensitive sectors such as soybeans, pork, dairy and automobiles, hitting states that had strongly supported Trump in the 2016 election (Bown and Kolb, 2025). For example, US soybean exports to China dropped by nearly 75 per cent in 2018 compared to 2017, forcing many American farmers to rely on emergency federal subsidies.

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched the Market Facilitation Program (MFP), allocating over US$28 billion between 2018 and 2020 to compensate for lost agricultural income (USDA, 2019). This marked the largest farm bailout in US history, drawing criticism from both domestic and international observers for distorting markets and reflecting the deeper costs of the trade war (FAS, 2020). These subsidies revealed a paradox: while the Trump administration advocated for free market principles and reduced government intervention, it was forced to deploy massive state assistance to shield vulnerable sectors from the fallout of its own trade policy. Farmers, especially in the Midwest, became increasingly dependent on federal aid, creating long-term uncertainty about the sustainability of such protectionist strategies.

Moreover, some firms in the automotive and electronics sectors reported falling revenues due to diminished export competitiveness and higher costs for imported components. According to the Peterson Institute for International Economics, retaliatory tariffs led to a decline in US exports of affected goods by up to 26 per cent (Amiti, Redding and Weinstein, 2019). The Trump-era trade wars also destabilised global trade networks. Manufacturers across Asia and Europe began shifting production away from the US and China to Third World Countries like Vietnam, Mexico and Malaysia to avoid tariff burdens (World Bank, 2020). This reconfiguration not only reduced US participation in key value chains but also invited competitors to fill the voids in markets vacated by American firms. In addition, the WTO was weakened by the US blocking appointments to its appellate body, hampering global dispute resolution mechanisms. This fostered a more fragmented and confrontational international trade environment (Evenett and Fritz, 2019).

While former President Donald Trump's tariff policies were aimed at protecting American industries and reducing trade deficits, they had significant unintended consequences for US consumers and global supply chains. These effects were particularly evident in the form of increased consumer prices and widespread supply chain disruptions that rippled through both domestic and international markets. Empirical studies found that the tariffs imposed under the Trump administration especially on Chinese goods under Section 301 of the Trade Act were largely passed on to US consumers. Amiti et al. (2019) found that the full burden of tariffs was borne by US importers and ultimately transferred to consumers in the form of higher prices. According to their analysis, there was virtually no significant price reduction from foreign exporters to offset the tariffs. Trump launched major trade wars, especially with China, using tariffs to pursue strategic economic aims (Fajgelbaum et al., 2020).

Trump's 2024 policy memo proposed a universal 10 per cent tariff on all imports and a 60 per cent tariff on Chinese goods, a dramatic escalation of his earlier trade war (Bown and Kolb, 2025). This would inflame global trade tensions, raise US consumer prices and provoke retaliation from key partners like the EU, Canada and Mexico. Trump targeted China with tariffs, tech restrictions on Huawei and accusations over COVID 19 origins. Trump's administration would likely resume a Cold War-style confrontation, pushing US allies to take sides and fragmenting the global digital economy (Brands, 2018).

The economic cost to consumers was substantial. The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) estimated that the welfare loss from higher prices due to tariffs amounted to about US$1.4 billion per month, with additional deadweight losses from misallocation and reduced variety of imported goods (Fajgelbaum et al., 2020). These effects were especially pronounced in the consumer electronics, home appliances, and clothing sectors, where US producers rely heavily on global inputs. In addition to price effects, Trump's tariffs accelerated a realignment of global supply chains, particularly in sectors like electronics, automotive and machinery.

The World Bank and WTO reported a decline in US–China trade volumes and a rerouting of intermediate goods through third-party countries such as Vietnam, Mexico and Malaysia (World Bank, 2021). For example, Apple Inc. began diversifying its supply base away from China, moving production of certain iPhone models to India and Vietnam in response to tariff pressures.

Similarly, manufacturers like General Motors and Toyota faced higher costs for imported steel and aluminium, leading to price hikes and, in some cases, reduced output in US plants (Bown, 2020). These supply chain shifts often increased transaction costs and led to longer lead times, as firms were forced to restructure their logistics, renegotiate supplier contracts, and navigate new regulatory environments. The disruptions caused by Trump's tariff policies illustrate how protectionist measures can have far-reaching consequences beyond their intended targets. Not only were consumers affected through direct price increases, but industries also faced higher input costs, delayed deliveries, and weakened competitiveness in global markets. Moreover, the uncertainty surrounding trade policy during Trump's term discouraged investment in sectors heavily reliant on international supply chains.

Under the Trump administration, stringent immigration policies significantly impacted labour-intensive industries such as agriculture and construction. These policies, which included enhanced border security, workplace raids and increased deportations, were primarily aimed at curbing irregular immigration. However, they also had unintended negative effects on critical sectors that rely heavily on undocumented labour. One of the most visible consequences was felt in the agricultural sector. According to a 2016 report by the US Department of Labour, approximately 42 per cent of crop farmworkers in the US were undocumented (US Department of Labour, 2016). Trump's immigration enforcement measures, such as increased ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raids and deportations, instilled widespread fear in immigrant communities, causing many workers to leave the labour force or avoid going to work.

The resulting labour shortages disrupted food production and supply chains, particularly in high-labour crops like fruits and vegetables. For instance, growers in California's Central Valley reported leaving produce unharvested due to a lack of workers. This led to increased production costs as farms had to raise wages to attract the smaller pool of available legal labour or shift to less labour-intensive crops (Martin, 2017). Additionally, a study by the Centre for Global Development found that restricting undocumented labour in agriculture would lead to reduced agricultural output and higher consumer prices, particularly for fresh produce (Clemens, 2018).

The construction industry also suffered from similar pressures. A significant proportion of workers in residential and commercial construction projects are immigrants, many of whom are undocumented. In 2019, the NAHB reported that about 24 per cent of construction workers were foreign-born, with a notable share lacking legal status (NAHB, 2019). Heightened immigration enforcement made it harder for contractors to find reliable labour, causing delays in housing projects and inflating costs. In states with strong construction markets like Texas and Florida, contractors reported turning down projects due to workforce constraints, while wage inflation further raised the cost of construction (Gonzalez-Barrera and Krogstad, 2019). These labour gaps in both agriculture and construction had ripple effects across the US economy. Reduced supply in agriculture contributed to rising food prices, while slower construction growth affected housing availability and infrastructure development. Trump's restrictive immigration policies led to labour shortages in agriculture, hospitality and construction (Martin, 2017). Trump has pledged to launch the largest deportation operation in US history in 2025, using the National Guard if necessary (Fox News, 2024). This could again undermine industries dependent on immigrant labour, increase food prices and destabilise local economies (Clemens, 2018). Moreover, the fear and uncertainty created by aggressive immigration enforcement undermined employer–employee trust and stability in local economies.

One of the defining features of Donald Trump's foreign and environmental policy was the rejection of multilateral climate agreements and the weakening of domestic environmental regulations. The withdrawal from the 2015 Paris Climate Accord in 2017 symbolised a larger retreat from global environmental governance, which had serious diplomatic, environmental and reputational consequences for the US. The US has historically played a central role in shaping global climate cooperation. However, Trump's decision to exit the Paris Agreement, citing economic disadvantages and perceived unfair treatment of the US (White House, 2017), undermined the credibility of US climate diplomacy. The Paris Agreement aimed to limit global warming to below 2°C above pre-industrial levels through nationally determined contributions (NDCs). With the US being the world's second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases, its withdrawal weakened the momentum and moral authority of global climate efforts (Leahy, 2020). The move drew international condemnation, with European leaders such as Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel publicly reaffirming their commitment to the Accord without US participation. This effectively isolated the US diplomatically, as 196 countries continued their commitment, while the US stood alone in its exit until re-entry under President Biden in 2021 (Bodansky, 2017).

Domestically, the Trump administration rolled back over 100 environmental rules (Popovich, Albeck-Ripka and Pierre-Louis, 2020). This included the repeal of the Clean Power Plan, which was designed under President Obama to reduce carbon emissions from power plants, and the loosening of fuel efficiency standards for automobiles, moves that increased domestic emissions and slowed progress toward a low-carbon economy. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), under the Trump administration, also reduced the scope of the Clean Water Act, limited the use of scientific evidence in policymaking, and opened up public lands for fossil fuel extraction (Plumer and Davenport, 2020). These actions not only had environmental costs, but they also diminished the regulatory predictability needed by green investors and businesses seeking to transition toward sustainable models.

Strategically, the US's retreat from climate leadership created a vacuum that was quickly filled by China and the EU, who positioned themselves as global leaders in clean energy and climate finance (Zhang and Barr, 2019). The EU's Green Deal and China's BRI both emphasised climate sustainability, contrasting sharply with US policy during the Trump era. Economically, the lack of federal support for renewables during this period risked undermining US competitiveness in emerging green technologies. For example, while solar and wind power capacity expanded due to state-level initiatives and market forces, federal subsidies and incentives stagnated, slowing the overall transition.

Trump exited the Paris Climate Agreement and dismantled over 100 environmental regulations, claiming they hurt American industry (Popovich et al., 2020). Trump vows to withdraw the US again from the Paris Agreement and repeal clean energy subsidies under the Inflation Reduction Act. His second-term policies would abandon global climate leadership, giving China and the EU more control in green technology markets and weakening the global push toward net-zero emissions (Zhang and Barr, 2019). Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, the TPP and undermined the WTO appellate system (Evenett and Fritz, 2019). Trump's second term would likely deepen this trajectory, with planned withdrawals from international bodies like the WHO, further paralysing multilateral diplomacy, which risks creating vacuums filled by China, Russia and regional actors, weakening US influence in global governance (Biscop, 2018).

Conclusion

The Trump administration is influenced by both domestic and foreign factors. This study investigated the implications of Donald Trump's transactional foreign policy and isolationist posture on the US global leadership. It is observed that the domestic consequences of President Trump's policies during his second term are closely related to his first term (2017–2021), which focused on issues of tax policy, regulation, trade, healthcare and government spending. President Trump's policies during his second term, especially those affecting the US economy, will have regional consequences both within the US and globally. Regional impacts could vary based on his economic policies, trade strategies and regulatory shifts. The global consequences of President Trump's foreign policy have far-reaching implications, particularly in the areas of international trade, global economic stability, foreign investment and geopolitical relations. Drawing from his first term, Trump's policies and approach to global economic issues would have significant ripple effects worldwide. Overall, the broader consequences of President Trump's foreign policy have continued to be shaped by a combination of policies aimed at reducing government regulation, emphasising American industrial interests, and focusing on economic nationalism, which has several potential broader consequences, including impacts on trade, labour markets, fiscal policy and economic inequality.

Recommendations

The US should recommit itself to multilateral institutions such as the UN, NATO, WHO, WTO and other international organisations. This is because consistent US engagement at the international level through multilateral platforms will strengthen international governance and reestablish the US as a reliable partner. This is equally key in rebuilding confidence in the US and in restoring its leadership and influence in world politics.

Regional continental organisations, such as the EU, African Union, and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), should reduce their over-dependence on the US, rather than compromising their political, economic, and strategic independence. This can be achieved through investment in their defence, regional trade agreements and crisis management frameworks to strengthen regional stability in the face of uncertain US commitment.

The UN should strengthen international rules to prevent any one country's withdrawal or policy shift from destabilising the global system, drawing from the lessons of the US.

States, civil society, academia and international organisations should prioritise promoting norms of responsible leadership, transparency and predictability in foreign policy. This will, among other things, involve advocacy for continuity across administrations and build international norms that discourage abrupt policy reversals driven by domestic politics.

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