

Trump's New Foreign Policy: Strategic Repositioning in a Multipolar World?

Ivo Ganchev, PhD
Founding Director, Centre for Regional Integration

Abstract: In this paper, Dr. Ivo Ganchev builds on a lecture delivered in Mexico City to examine the strategic repositioning of U.S. foreign policy during the first 50 days of Donald Trump's second term within the context of a shifting global order. While the U.S. remains the world's most powerful actor, its role is evolving in response to China's rise, the growing influence of middle powers, and structural changes in international politics. This paper explores how Trump's approach prioritizes selective engagement, with a renewed focus on the Western hemisphere, alongside a relative shift away from Europe. It also contrasts U.S. and Chinese foreign policy strategies, highlighting China's non-interventionist appeal to the Global South and its relatively predictable and stable foreign policy and international engagement strategy. The analysis considers whether Trump's foreign policy represents a deliberate strategic shift or a reaction to global trends, ultimately arguing that the U.S. is adapting to multipolarity through a mix of economic, military, and diplomatic recalibrations.

Keywords: U.S. foreign policy, strategic repositioning, Trump, China, Global South, multipolarity, economic realignment, security, diplomacy, international relations.



Author Bio: Dr. Ivo Ganchev is the Founding Director of the Centre for Regional Integration. He has taught at Beijing Foreign Studies University and Queen Mary University of London, served as a Fortune 500 consultant and as Vice-chairman of the Bulgaria China Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Ivo has edited several books and published articles in journals such as *Strategic Analysis*, *World Affairs* and *International Studies*. He holds a PhD from Peking University and speaks fluent Chinese.

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Table of Contents

Preface	2
1. Introduction	3
I. General Frameworks for Understanding U.S. Foreign Policy	6
2. National Interest and the Foundations of U.S. Foreign Policy	6
3. The Four Traditions of U.S. Foreign Policy: A Framework for Analysis	8
4. The Influence of the Foreign Policy Community	12
II. Ongoing Shifts in Global Order and Their Structural Constraints	14
5. The Rise of BRICS and the Changing Global Order	14
6. Demographics and Technology	17
7. Blind Spots in Mainstream U.S. Discourse	19
8. Structural Implications of the Changing Global Order	21
9. Implications of the Structural Transition	24
10. Convergence of Political-Economic Models: Beyond the Democracy vs. Autocracy Divide	28
11. Role Specialization in the Global System: The 19th Century Model	30
III. Foreign Policy under Trump 2.0: U.S. Strategic Repositioning?	36
12. Strategic Options for the United States in the New Global Order	36
13. Which Strategy Makes the Most Sense for Trump?	40
14. Case Study 1: U.S. Pressure on Colombia Under Trump’s Strategic Repositioning	43
16. Case Study 3: Greenland and Trump’s Arctic Strategy	46
17. Case Study 4: U.S. Approach to North America (Canada, Mexico) and Trump’s Use of Economic Tariffs as a Political Tool	49
IV. Global Responses and Challenges to Trump’s New Foreign Policy	53
18. Consequences of Coercive Diplomacy in the Western Hemisphere	53
19. Chinese Responses to Trump’s Foreign Policy	55
20. Security Dimensions of Trump’s Foreign Policy	59
21. Perceptions, Misperceptions, and the Deepseek Episode	61
22. U.S.-China Competition in the Global South	63
23. Conclusion	66
References	67

Preface

This paper is based on a lecture delivered by Dr. Ivo Ganchev at the South Campus of Anáhuac University's in Mexico City on 10 February 2025, at the kind invitation of Dr. Alina Gamboa Combs. The arguments and structure of the talk are adapted to provide a systematic analysis of the themes discussed. A video recording of the original lecture is available online on [YouTube \(URL\)](#). While papers in this journal typically do not contain a table of contents, an exception has been made for this piece due to its complexity and importance.



Screenshot from a recording of Dr. Ivo Ganchev delivering the original lecture upon which this paper is based at Anáhuac University (Mexico City).



Dr. Ivo Ganchev (center) and Dr. Alina Gamboa Combs (far right) with a group of students who interviewed him on Radio Anáhuac.

1. Introduction

Donald Trump’s return to the White House on January 20, 2025, has set in motion a recalibration of U.S. foreign policy. While the contours of this shift are becoming increasingly evident, it remains unclear whether these adjustments are guided by a coherent strategic vision or if they are largely reactive to evolving global conditions. Moreover, broader debates persist regarding the nature of the current international system—whether it is trending toward bipolarity, tripolarity, or a fully multipolar order. This uncertainty is reflected in the question mark at the end of this paper’s title: *Trump’s Foreign Policy: Strategic Repositioning in a Multipolar World?*

The paper seeks to address three key questions: (1) What are the observable manifestations of U.S. repositioning in terms of foreign policy during the first 50 days of Trump’s second term? (2) To what extent can strategic considerations explain shifts in U.S. foreign policy? (3) How do these shifts align with broader structural changes in international politics? Instead of speculating on the long-term trajectory of U.S. foreign policy, the analysis uses a structured approach to understand its current direction. The importance of the analysis in this paper stems from the centrality of the United States in global affairs since any change in its foreign policy has wide-ranging implications, not only for American allies and competitors but also for the international system at large.

One of the greatest challenges in analyzing foreign policy lies in distinguishing short-term political maneuvering from longer-term strategic realignment. The rapid pace of the news cycle often obscures underlying trends, making it difficult to separate momentary rhetoric from substantive policy shifts. Unlike media-driven narratives that focus on daily developments, an academic approach requires grounding analysis in theoretical frameworks and historical precedents. In this regard, a well-known joke in Beijing illustrates the difference between surface-level commentary and structured analysis: *What distinguishes a professor from a taxi driver? Both closely follow current events, but the professor seeks patterns, while the driver reacts to headlines.*

Foreign policy is shaped not only by leadership decisions but also by structural constraints. In his insightful book, *Geopolitical Alpha: An Investment Framework for Predicting the Future*, strategist Marko Papić (2020) rightly argues that state behavior is often dictated less by ideological convictions than by external limitations, such as economic pressures and power balances. Despite its global reach, the United States is not immune to such constraints. It must navigate the realities of a changing global order, where new centers of power—particularly China and key regional actors—are asserting greater influence. This reality underscores why the concept of multipolarity is critical in assessing U.S. foreign policy under Trump.

This paper argues that the United States is undergoing a fundamental foreign policy repositioning. Whether driven by a strategic blueprint or by ad hoc decision-making, this shift will likely result in a more selective approach to international engagement. As a consequence, Washington may find itself strengthening ties in certain regions while facing heightened resistance elsewhere. Rather than maintaining a uniform global presence, the U.S. appears poised to consolidate influence in select areas, notably in the Western hemisphere as well as potentially in the Indo-Pacific where economic and security interests are particularly pronounced.

While the paper is structured into 23 sections, its central arguments are organized around four broad themes, which are demarcated with Roman numerals. These themes are:

I. General Frameworks for Understanding U.S. Foreign Policy (Sections 2-4)

The sections under this theme introduce widely used frameworks and considerations that many analysts of international politics employ for interpreting shifts in American strategy.

II. Ongoing Shifts in Global Order and Their Structural Constraints (Sections 5-11)

The sections under this theme seek to explain the context in which evolving adjustments to U.S. foreign policy are taking place. As new geopolitical alignments emerge, the strategic environment within which the United States operates is shifting, redefining the constraints and opportunities that shape foreign policy choices. Here, the analysis focuses on the implications of ongoing transformations and their implications for Washington's strategic calculus.

III. Foreign Policy under Trump 2.0: U.S. Strategic Repositioning? (Sections 12-17)

The sections under this theme analyze the nature of Trump's approach to international affairs. His previous tenure was marked by a willingness to disrupt traditional alliances, renegotiate trade agreements, and recalibrate U.S. commitments abroad. The current trajectory raises key questions: Does this repositioning reflect a coherent strategic vision, or does it remain largely transactional and opportunistic? Is Trump's foreign policy best understood as a calculated response to multipolarity, or is it shaped by domestic political imperatives and short-term economic considerations?

IV. Global Responses and Challenges to Trump’s New Foreign Policy (Sections 18-22)

The sections under this theme consider the reactions of international actors to Washington’s shifting priorities. While some allies have sought to align with U.S. objectives, others have responded with skepticism or resistance. This section also evaluates the challenges that Trump’s approach poses for the United States itself, particularly in terms of long-term diplomatic credibility and the sustainability of its foreign policy shifts.

The conclusion (Section 23) briefly reiterates the main argument of the paper and reflects on its broader implications.



A newspaper stand in London following Donald Trump’s election in November 2024. Right to use purchased by the Centre for Regional Integration.

I. General Frameworks for Understanding U.S. Foreign Policy

2. National Interest and the Foundations of U.S. Foreign Policy

A fundamental approach to analyzing U.S. foreign policy—under Trump or other any administration—is through the lens of national interest (Trubowitz, 1998; Morgenthau, 1982). The central question in this regard is: *What objectives does the United States seek to achieve, and how does this overarching concept shape its engagement with the world?* This question is particularly pertinent in light of recent statements made by key political figures, which provide insight into the evolving contours of U.S. strategic thinking.

Shortly before the original lecture upon which this paper is based, U.S. Senator Marco Rubio articulated a position that encapsulates a key aspect of contemporary American foreign policy discourse. Speaking on LiveNOW from Fox News (2025), Rubio addressed the role of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and, more broadly, the principle that should guide U.S. international engagement:

Why would we fund things that are against our national interest or don't further our national interest, whether China is there or not? If China wants to waste their money on something that's against their national interest, go ahead and do it. We're not going to do it. It makes no sense for us to be involved in things that undermine what is important to America or that don't further what is important to America, and irrespective of what China decides to do, this is taxpayer money. We shouldn't be spending it on programs that have nothing to do with the United States and nothing to do with making America stronger, safer, and more prosperous. We have a foreign policy, and everything we do, including spending money, has to be aligned with that—has to further our national interest.

Rubio's remarks reflect a recurrent theme in U.S. foreign policy rhetoric—the prioritization of national interest above all else. This naturally raises the question: *What constitutes the national interest of the United States?*

The definition of the U.S. national interest is neither static nor universally agreed upon. Historically, its interpretation has evolved in response to shifting geopolitical realities, economic imperatives, and domestic political considerations. While certain priorities—such as ensuring national security, maintaining economic prosperity, and preserving global influence—remain relatively consistent, the means by which these objectives are pursued fluctuate over time. The malleability of national interest underscores a key principle in foreign policy analysis (see, e.g., Weldes, 1999): a country’s national interest is not an objective reality but a construct shaped by leadership, ideological trends, and structural constraints.



Screenshot of United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio being interviewed on LiveNOW from Fox News on 4 February 2025.

Understanding how national interest is framed at different moments in history is crucial to interpreting U.S. foreign policy decisions. This aligns with broader discussions within international relations theory regarding the extent to which state behavior is driven by material realities as opposed to ideological commitments. Realist scholars, such as Steven Walt (2019) and John Mearsheimer (2018), emphasize that nationalism remains the dominant force in contemporary global politics, suggesting that foreign policy decisions—irrespective of their rhetorical justifications—are ultimately dictated by structural imperatives, resource constraints, and strategic incentives.

The realist perspective offers a useful lens for analyzing U.S. foreign policy under Trump. In democratic systems, policy legitimacy is derived primarily from domestic political dynamics—public opinion, political coalitions, and institutional support. No state operates in isolation; rather, foreign policy is the product of an ongoing negotiation between international imperatives and domestic constraints. Decision-makers must align their strategies with available resources, the geopolitical context, and the level of domestic support required to sustain long-term commitments. This dynamic is particularly evident in the U.S., where electoral cycles and shifting political coalitions exert significant influence on foreign policy priorities.

Thus, to make sense the trajectory of U.S. foreign policy under Trump, one must first examine how the United States perceives itself and its role in the world at this juncture. This self-perception is shaped not only by historical legacies but also by present-day domestic and international trends. The following section explores how these factors interact with the changing structure of the global order, delineating the constraints within which U.S. foreign policy operates.

3. The Four Traditions of U.S. Foreign Policy: A Framework for Analysis

One effective framework for analyzing U.S. foreign policy—both historically and in the contemporary context—can be found in Walter Russell Mead’s (2001) typology of American strategic traditions. In *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*, Mead identifies four distinct schools of thought that have shaped the United States’ approach to international engagement: the Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian, Jacksonian, and Wilsonian traditions. Three of these traditions are named after U.S. presidents, and one Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton.

These four traditions do not operate in isolation; rather, they coexist and often compete for dominance in shaping foreign policy choices. Presidents and policymakers frequently draw upon multiple traditions, blending different strategic perspectives depending on political circumstances, public sentiment, and geopolitical realities. This framework provides a valuable analytical tool for understanding the approach of different administrations, including that of Donald Trump, whose foreign policy exhibits a strong Jacksonian influence with notable Jeffersonian elements.

A. The Hamiltonian Tradition: Commerce and Global Trade

The Hamiltonian tradition, which can be traced back to Founding Father and first U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, prioritizes economic power as the foundation of national strength. It emphasizes the role of trade, industrial development, and financial institutions in ensuring U.S. prosperity and influence abroad. Hamiltonians advocate for a foreign policy that promotes open markets, protects commercial interests, and fosters strategic economic alliances. Historically, this approach has aligned with the priorities of major corporations, banking institutions, and proponents of globalization.

According to Mead (2001, p. 87), a “partial list of prominent Hamiltonians in American history would include Henry Clay; Daniel Webster; John Hay; Theodore Roosevelt; Henry Cabot Lodge Sr., who opposed Woodrow Wilson over the Treaty of Versailles; Dean Acheson; and the senior George Bush.” Among recent presidents, I would argue that Bill Clinton strongly embraced Hamiltonian ideals. Policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and U.S. support for international economic institutions reflected the belief that economic integration and free trade would advance American interests while consolidating its global leadership. However, I concede that there were also certain Wilsonian aspects to Clinton’s approach.

B. The Jeffersonian Tradition: Limited Foreign Entanglements

In contrast to the Hamiltonian vision, the Jeffersonian tradition—rooted in the foreign policy philosophy of Thomas Jefferson—emphasizes a cautious approach to international engagement. Jeffersonians prioritize the preservation of democracy and republican values at home, advocating for minimal foreign intervention and a restrained global footprint. While Jefferson himself oversaw major territorial expansion, his broader political philosophy centered on avoiding entangling alliances and ensuring that foreign engagements did not undermine domestic governance.

Historically, the Jeffersonian perspective has resonated with isolationist movements, libertarian factions, and political groups skeptical of extensive U.S. involvement in global conflicts. In earlier history, examples of presidents who epitomize this tradition include John Quincy Adams and James Monroe. But far more relevant to this paper, one can trace the influence of Jeffersonianism in Donald Trump’s “America First” approach, particularly in its emphasis on avoiding military interventions that do not directly serve core U.S. interests. The administration’s critique of longstanding alliances, withdrawal from certain multilateral agreements, and insistence on redefining burden-sharing arrangements within NATO illustrate the enduring influence of Jeffersonian thinking.

C. The Jacksonian Tradition: National Honor and Military Strength

The Jacksonian tradition, named after President Andrew Jackson, is distinguished by its emphasis on national sovereignty, military strength, and the protection of American honor. This tradition views foreign policy primarily through the lens of national defense and self-interest, advocating for decisive military action when U.S. security or prestige is at stake. Jacksonian thinking is often associated with a strong belief in unilateralism, skepticism toward international institutions, and a preference for direct and forceful responses to perceived threats.

The best aligned early president with this tradition is William Henry Harrison. Until recently, it was difficult to identify many recent presidents who exemplify it clearly. However, even then its lasting legacy could still be traced in the thinking of contemporary senators and presidential candidates such as John McCain.

However, far more importantly in today's politics, Donald Trump also aligns rather closely with Jacksonianism. His alignment with the long-standing Republican idea of "peace through strength" (The White House, 2025), along with emphasis on military readiness, withdrawal from multilateral agreements deemed disadvantageous, and prioritization of sovereignty over institutional diplomacy all reflect Jacksonian principles.

Trump's rhetoric on strengthening the U.S. military, confronting adversaries through displays of power, and renegotiating economic and security arrangements to ensure a more favorable position for the United States exemplify this tradition. Additionally, Jacksonianism resonates with segments of the American electorate that favor assertive foreign policies and view international relations as a competitive, zero-sum arena (Chinoy et al., 2024).

While some critics have openly (and for good, albeit debatable reasons) pointed out that "Trump falls far short of the greatness and nobility of Jacksonianism" (White, 2020), it is hard to deny the empirically observable influence of this tradition on his approach. Plus, as *Politico* has reported, former Chief Strategist of the White House during Trump's first term, Steve Bannon reportedly contacted Mead (presumably seeking an ideological ally), assuming he is a Jacksonian and was surprised to learn otherwise (Glasser, 2018). Although anecdotal, this episode gives direct proof that the influence of the long-standing traditions sometimes directly influence sitting presidents or their senior staff members.

D. The Wilsonian Tradition: Moral Responsibility and International Institutions

The Wilsonian tradition, rooted in the vision of President Woodrow Wilson, posits that the United States has a moral obligation to promote democracy, human rights, and global stability. Wilsonians advocate for active engagement in international institutions, believing that multilateral cooperation and global governance structures—such as the United Nations, NATO, and various diplomatic initiatives—are essential for maintaining world order.

Although it is difficult to identify presidents whose primary considerations stem mainly from Wilsonianism, the impact of this tradition can be seen across numerous administrations. For instance, post-World War II U.S. foreign policy, particularly under Franklin D. Roosevelt, reflected strong Wilsonian elements, as seen in the establishment of the Bretton Woods system and the United Nations. Jimmy Carter’s embrace of moralism and his embrace of human rights policies also falls in this tradition. More recently, to some extent the Obama administration’s emphasis on diplomatic engagement, coalition-building, and institutional solutions to global challenges also illustrated elements of Wilsonianism. Trump’s foreign policy de facto rejects this tradition, favoring bilateralism over multilateralism and national interests over global governance.

While from an intellectual perspective these four foreign policy traditions can be viewed as distinct perspectives, in practice they do not function in isolation. U.S. foreign policy is always shaped by a dynamic interplay between them, with policymakers often invoking multiple traditions to justify their decisions. For example, a leader advocating for military intervention might frame the decision in Jacksonian terms—emphasizing national security and deterrence—while simultaneously appealing to Wilsonian principles of democracy promotion. Similarly, a foreign policy that prioritizes economic diplomacy could be justified through both Hamiltonian arguments for trade expansion and Jeffersonian concerns for national economic self-sufficiency.

Trump’s foreign policy exhibits a clear mix of Jacksonian and Jeffersonian principles. The former include a strong emphasis on national strength, unilateral decision-making, and a transactional approach to international relations. The latter shape his skepticism toward long-term military commitments and alliances, particularly in his critiques of NATO, withdrawal from Afghanistan, and prioritization of economic over ideological considerations in foreign affairs.

Introducing this framework has broader value, as it offers readers a useful lens for analyzing both Trump’s foreign policy and the wider evolution of U.S. strategic thinking over time. The next section introduces another equally essential and broadly applicable framework.

4. The Influence of the Foreign Policy Community

Beyond the ideological traditions that inform U.S. foreign policy, it is also important to examine the key actors responsible for shaping it. While the executive branch, particularly the president, plays a decisive role in setting the overall direction of U.S. foreign policy, a broader network of policymakers, advisors, and institutional actors exerts significant influence over strategic decision-making. This network, often referred to as the *foreign policy community*, consists of individuals operating within government, academia, think tanks, and policy institutions. The composition and influence of this community contribute to both the continuity and constraints of U.S. foreign policy (Walt, 2018).

A defining feature of the U.S. policymaking system is the *revolving door*—a practice by which individuals transition between government positions, academic institutions, and private sector roles within the policy sphere (Spar et al., 1991; Van Apeldoorn and De Graaff, 2014). This dynamic fosters a high degree of continuity in U.S. foreign policy, as key decision-makers frequently remain within the same institutional ecosystem despite changes in political leadership. Similar practices exist in certain Latin American countries, where policymakers likewise move between government service and advisory roles in research institutions.

However, the close-knit nature of the foreign policy community also imposes pressures to conform. Graham Allison, in his seminal work *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (1971), highlights a dynamic summarized by Steven Walt in his public lectures as “getting along to go along,” whereby individuals operating within a tightly integrated policy network often face implicit incentives to align with prevailing strategic paradigms. As a result, major shifts in U.S. foreign policy thinking tend to be gradual rather than abrupt, as alternative perspectives must first gain traction within elite policymaking circles before being institutionalized into mainstream discourse.

Despite this institutional inertia, recent years have witnessed the emergence of challenges to the previously dominant paradigm within the foreign policy establishment. A more conservative, Republican-aligned faction appears to be coalescing, advocating for a recalibration of U.S. global engagement. Whether this shift represents a lasting transformation or a temporary realignment remains uncertain. The traditional divide between *neoconservatives* and *liberal internationalists* continues to define much of the foreign policy debate, yet from an external perspective, the practical differences between these camps are often less pronounced than their rhetorical distinctions suggest. While neoconservatives frequently frame U.S. leadership in terms of *American exceptionalism* (Lipset, 1996; Walt, 2011), liberal internationalists emphasize the country’s role as an *indispensable nation* (Zenko, 2014; Lieber, 2022).

Although these conceptual frameworks differ theoretically, the actual conduct of U.S. foreign policy has often followed a similar trajectory, with both schools of thought advocating for proactive international engagement (Tyrell, 2022).



*A black pawn with a golden crown on the white square of a chessboard.
Copyright-free image from Pixabay.*

More broadly, the foreign policy community has historically maintained a strong consensus that the United States should play an active role in shaping global affairs rather than retreating into a status quo posture. This reflects deep-rooted structural imperatives rather than merely the ideological preferences of specific administrations. Regardless of partisan shifts in leadership, U.S. foreign policy has been consistently defined by a commitment to international engagement, military presence abroad, and economic leadership.

However, the global order is undergoing profound transformations, raising questions about whether U.S. policymakers have fully acknowledged or adapted to these shifts. As the next sections will explore, the evolving international system presents new constraints and opportunities that may challenge the entrenched assumptions of the foreign policy community, necessitating a reassessment of U.S. strategic priorities.

II. Ongoing Shifts in Global Order and Their Structural Constraints

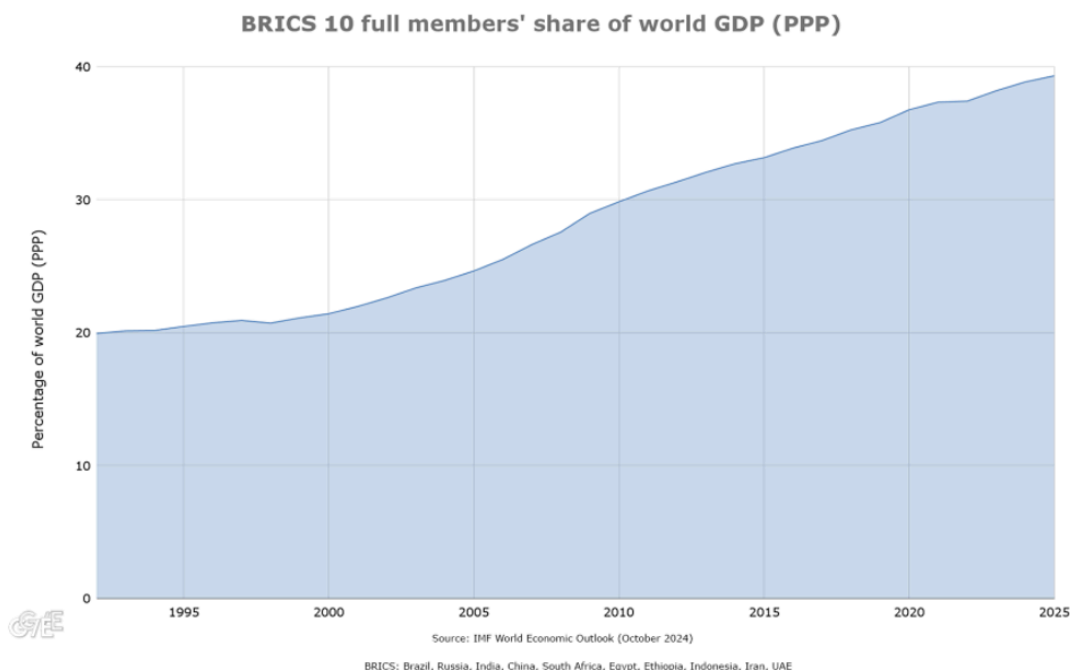
5. The Rise of BRICS and the Changing Global Order

One of the most consequential developments in contemporary international relations is the rise of alternative power blocs, particularly BRICS¹ (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). The expansion of this bloc reflects an ongoing redistribution of global influence, challenging the long-standing economic and geopolitical dominance of the G7 (Mooradian, 2024). While the United States and its Western allies continue to exert considerable influence over global institutions, the increasing economic weight and political assertiveness of BRICS countries highlight a broader shift toward a more multipolar global order.

A key indicator of this shift is the growing economic clout of BRICS economies relative to the G7. Measured in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, BRICS countries' share of global GDP has risen steadily over the past three decades (Norton, 2025). Comparative studies suggest that economic influence is becoming more evenly distributed between traditional Western powers and emerging economies, a development that has significant implications for international trade, financial governance, and diplomatic alignments. The increasing importance of BRICS-led initiatives—such as the New Development Bank (NDB) and efforts to promote alternative trade mechanisms outside the dollar-based financial system—further illustrates the group's evolving role in global affairs.

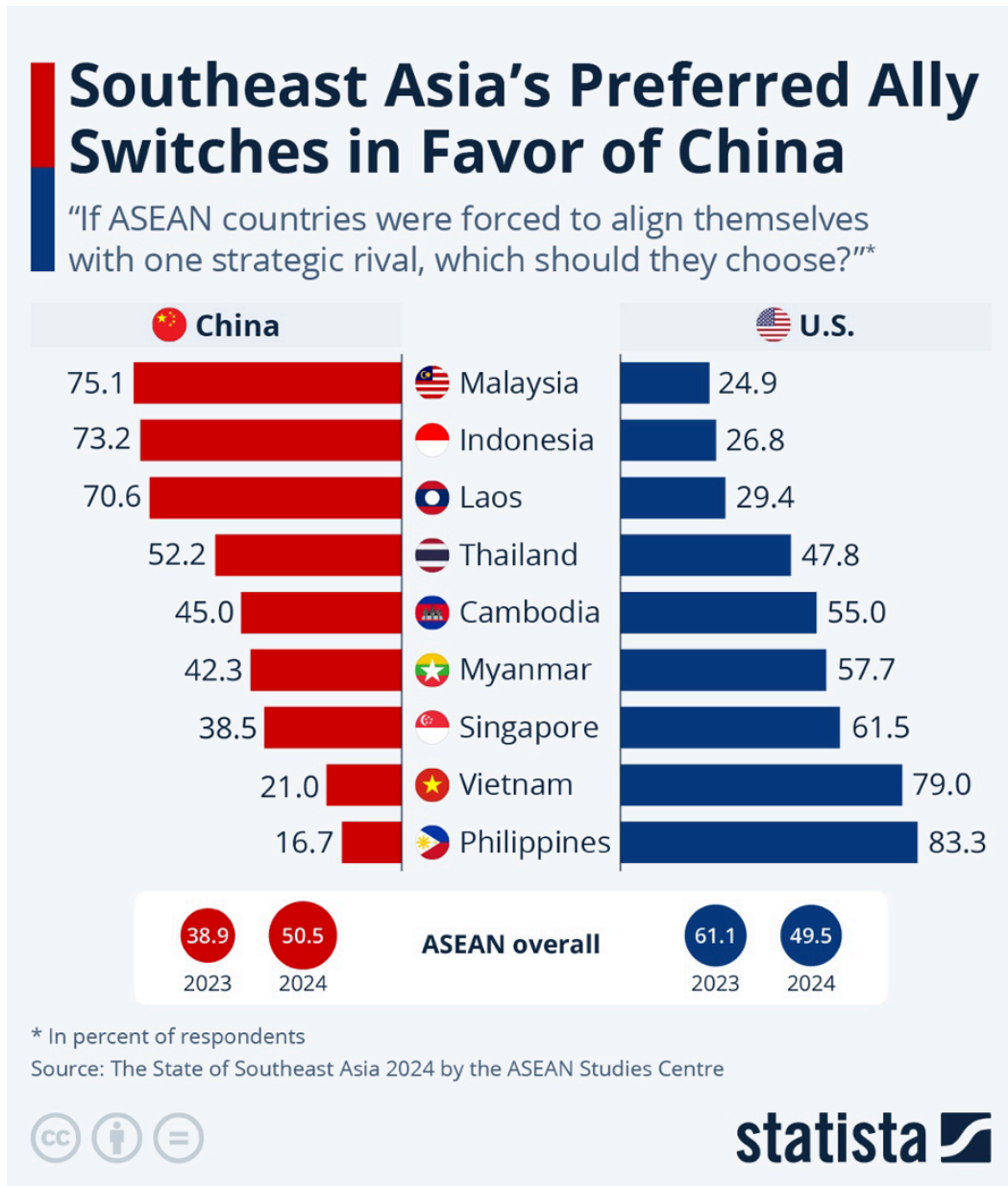
Beyond economic realignments, shifting geopolitical preferences underscore the changing nature of global influence. In key regions such as Southeast Asia, public opinion surveys reveal a near-even divide when respondents are asked whether they prefer closer alignment with the United States or China. Such findings suggest a growing ambivalence toward U.S. leadership in certain parts of the world, challenging long-standing assumptions about American primacy. The extent to which U.S. policymakers fully acknowledge these shifts remains a subject of debate.

¹ The term BRIC was first coined in 2001 by Jim O'Neill, an economist at Goldman Sachs, in a research paper titled "Building Better Global Economic BRICs". Although initially just a financial concept, the four countries formalized their interactions with a meeting of their foreign ministers on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in 2006. In 2010, South Africa was invited to join the group, transforming BRIC into BRICS.



Graph showing the rise of the BRICS members’ share of world GDP measured by PPP from 1990 to 2025. Image from Geopolitical Economy Report.

This mindset was evident during a recent panel discussion I attended in Singapore, where a U.S. government official asserted to his Singaporean counterpart before a large audience, “*I know you guys prefer us, the Americans. I know you can’t say that.*” The U.S. official’s assumption—namely that alignment with the United States remains the default preference when facing a choice where China is the other option—raises important questions about how American policymakers perceive their global standing. Rather than assuming inherent preference for U.S. leadership, it is necessary to consider the growing appeal of alternative partnerships, particularly with China and other BRICS members. As the widely cited graph below indicates (Buchholz, 2024), on average the split between China and the U.S. is quite even across Southeast Asia.



Graph showing a relatively even split between preferences for China and the U.S. among Southeast Asian states, if forced to form an alliance with one strategic rival. Data from the ASEAN Studies Centre. Image from Statista.

This perspective reflects a broader challenge facing U.S. foreign policy: the persistence of outdated assumptions regarding global engagement. In the post-Cold War era, the United States operated within a largely unipolar framework, in which its economic, military, and institutional dominance was widely accepted as the foundation of the international system. However, as power distributions continue to evolve, such assumptions may no longer hold. A recalibration of U.S. strategic thinking will be necessary to adapt to the realities of a more contested international order. The following section will examine how these global shifts are constraining U.S. foreign policy and creating new challenges in an increasingly multipolar world.

6. Demographics and Technology

One of the most fundamental factors shaping global power shifts is the narrowing technological gap between the major players in the international system. Historically, technological superiority has been a decisive enabler of geopolitical dominance, allowing relatively small, technologically advanced powers to exert control over much larger populations (Innis, 1950; Postman, 1993; Diamond, 1999). During the colonial period and China's *Century of Humiliation*, for example, European powers leveraged military, logistical, and industrial advantages to maintain influence over vast territories with relatively few personnel. However, this dynamic has changed considerably in the contemporary world, as access to advanced technology has become more widespread across multiple global actors.

While debates persist over whether the United States retains a technological edge over China in artificial intelligence (AI) and other frontier technologies, these discussions often obscure a more significant development: the gap between the two countries has narrowed so significantly that it no longer represents a decisive asymmetry in global power. Even if one state maintains a short-term advantage in a particular technological domain—such as a temporary lead in AI development—such marginal differences are unlikely to fundamentally alter the balance of power. Instead, long-term strategic influence is increasingly shaped by demographic and economic factors, particularly the size of populations that have access to comparable levels of technology.

A demographic analysis of global power shifts reveals clear structural trends:

- Asia accounts for approximately 60% of the world's population (UNFPA, 2025), reinforcing its central role in global economic and geopolitical affairs.
- The BRICS bloc now represents nearly half of the world's population, positioning it as a formidable counterweight to the traditional Western-led economic order.
- The United States and the European Union combined account for less than 10% of the world's population. Even when including the entire Americas (North and South), the total still represents only around 22% of the global population.

These demographic realities have profound implications for the future distribution of economic and strategic influence. Markets, capital flows, and innovation potential are becoming increasingly concentrated in Asia, reinforcing its emergence as the global economic center of gravity. As economic and technological capabilities continue to diffuse beyond the West, traditional sources of U.S. dominance are being challenged by a more balanced and competitive international system.

China's industrial and technological expansion exemplifies this demographic-driven shift in global power. In key sectors, Chinese firms are increasingly outperforming their American counterparts, illustrating the broader economic realignment underway.

One case in point is the EV industry, where China is poised to outperform the U.S. in the coming years. While Tesla remains a dominant player in the sector, its long-term stability is closely tied to the strategic priorities of its owner, Elon Musk, whose business interests span industries as diverse as space exploration (*SpaceX*), satellite communications (*Starlink*), and AI (*xAI*). Musk's potential shifts in focus introduce uncertainties into Tesla's future trajectory. In contrast, Chinese automakers such as BYD operate within a more stable and strategically coordinated industrial ecosystem (Bloomberg, 2025). Supported by comprehensive supply chains, a dedicated labor force, and national industrial policies that reinforce competitiveness, Chinese EV manufacturers are positioned for sustained long-term growth.

Beyond the EV sector, China's industrial ecosystem has outpaced many Western economies in terms of scale, efficiency, and technological integration. The country's commitment to industrial development, supported by government policies prioritizing advanced manufacturing, has enabled Chinese firms to surpass many of their Western counterparts in production capacity, supply chain resilience, and cost efficiency. Unlike many U.S. corporations that outsource significant portions of their manufacturing to third-party contractors (Collins, 2021), Chinese firms have maintained control over extensive production networks, reducing vulnerability to external supply chain disruptions (Baldwin, 2024). This convergence of demographic mass and technological capacity—currently in China but over time in Asia and other developing regions at large—signals a reconfiguration of structural power in the international system. The next section examines the strategic blind spots that may result from underestimating these shifts.

7. Blind Spots in Mainstream U.S. Discourse

Despite significant structural shifts in the global order, U.S. policymakers have yet to fully internalize the broader implications of these changes. Discussions about China in American political and media circles often focus on specific technological competitions—such as advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and semiconductor supply chains (e.g., Murgla et al., 2025; King and Wu, 2025). While these issues are relevant, they fail to capture the depth and breadth of China's industrial transformation or the demographic and economic forces that are reshaping global power distributions.

A key risk for U.S. foreign policy lies in its tendency to frame global competition through a narrow technological lens rather than recognizing the fundamental realignment occurring across multiple domains, including industrial capacity, infrastructure investment, and trade influence. While Washington remains preoccupied with sector-specific rivalries, emerging economies continue to strengthen their strategic positions, shifting the balance of power across multiple domains, not limited to any single technological contest. Adapting U.S. strategic thinking to acknowledge these broader transformations will be crucial for maintaining influence in an increasingly multipolar world.

One of the most significant challenges in contemporary U.S. foreign policy is a reluctance to fully acknowledge the changing world order. In my view, mainstream media narratives in the United States often present China and other rising economies through a selective or overly simplistic lens (e.g., Gan, 2024), indirectly feeding outdated assumptions about American global primacy. Rather than engaging with the complexity of economic and political transformations taking place in the Global South, U.S. discussions frequently focus on issues that fit into pre-existing geopolitical frameworks, such as military tensions in the South China Sea or concerns about technological competition.

This selective framing has produced significant blind spots in U.S. foreign policy discourse. For example, despite having a population comparable to that of the United States, growing rapidly and recently entering BRICS, Indonesia has been largely absent from U.S. strategic discourse. As this country, and many like it, continue to rise, their influence in global markets and regional diplomacy will grow substantially (Koenen and Simpfendorfer, 2024). This trend reflects a broader pattern in which emerging economies are asserting themselves on the world stage in ways that are not always adequately reflected in U.S. policymaking circles.

Similar patterns can be observed in Latin America and Africa, where governments are increasingly adopting flexible and pragmatic foreign policy approaches. Rather than aligning with any single global power, states in these

regions are engaging with multiple partners—including China—based on economic and strategic interests rather than ideological loyalty (Kalout and de Sá Guimarães, 2022; Sun, 2025; Ferchen, 2022). This represents a fundamental shift from Cold War-era alignment dynamics and suggests that U.S. policymakers must move beyond assumptions of default alignment with the West.

Beyond economic and strategic shifts, another long-term transformation that remains insufficiently recognized in U.S. policy circles is the gradual decline of American cultural dominance. While the United States remains a key player in global media and entertainment, cultural globalization is increasingly reducing its once-unrivaled influence. The rise of non-Western entertainment industries—exemplified by the growing popularity of K-pop (Adams, 2022), J-pop (Stassen, 2024), and Indian cinema (Jones, 2014)—illustrates a diversification of global cultural preferences. Streaming platforms such as Netflix, which once primarily showcased U.S. productions, now feature a far more international selection of content, reflecting broader shifts in global cultural consumption.

This dispersion of cultural influence is likely to accelerate as AI-driven real-time translation technologies continue to break down language barriers. Future generations of political leaders and global decision-makers are growing up in a world where cultural influences are no longer unidirectionally shaped by American media. Since they grew up in a world shaped largely by American media dominance, previous generations generally respected the global reach and innovation of U.S. culture—even if they did not always admire it. In contrast, the next generation is emerging in a more culturally decentralized world. This shift may erode the implicit normative preference for engagement with the United States that previous generations of global elites often held.

While cultural transformations do not have the same immediate geopolitical impact as industrial or technological shifts (Anandakumar, 2024), they contribute to the broader diffusion of influence that characterizes an emerging multipolar world. The assumption that American culture remains uniquely aspirational in global politics may become increasingly outdated, reinforcing the need for U.S. policymakers to reassess how the country positions itself within the evolving international order.

These shifts—technological, demographic, and industrial—suggest that the United States can no longer assume uncontested global leadership. While it remains an influential power, the structure of global politics is increasingly multipolar, with rising powers playing a more decisive role in shaping international economic and strategic landscapes.

For U.S. foreign policy to remain effective, it must move beyond outdated assumptions and engage with these changing realities in a more nuanced manner. Rather than relying on selective media narratives that reinforce pre-existing strategic outlooks, policymakers must adopt a broader perspective that takes into account demographic trends, industrial realignments, and the evolving geopolitical preferences of emerging economies. Failing to do so risks leaving the United States strategically unprepared for a global order where power and influence are more evenly distributed than in the past.

8. Structural Implications of the Changing Global Order

The ongoing shifts in global power dynamics carry profound structural implications for the international system. Scholars of international relations have long debated the nature of international order, exploring concepts such as *anarchy*, *hierarchy*, and the distribution of power within the system (Lake, 1996; Nedal and Nexon, 2019; Ganchev, 2022). Today, the central question is: *What kind of international system is emerging?*

The answer remains contested. Competing perspectives suggest that the world is evolving toward bipolarity, tripolarity, multipolarity (for a comparison of these systems, see Waltz, 1979, pp. 129-138), or as I contend—a hybrid structure that incorporates elements of all three, which may persist for the foreseeable future. No matter where one stands in this debate, understanding these structural possibilities is essential for analyzing the strategic realignments taking place in global affairs and for assessing how U.S. foreign policy should adapt to these changing realities. This structural analysis draws from neorealist interpretations, which emphasize the distribution of material capabilities, it also leaves room for constructivist insights on how ideas, identities, and perceptions shape how states respond to these shifts.

A. Bipolarity: The U.S.-China Rivalry

One of the most prevalent arguments among scholars and policymakers is that the international system is moving toward a new bipolar order, with the United States and China as the two dominant poles (Kupchan, 2021; Maher, 2018). This perspective draws historical parallels to the Cold War but acknowledges key differences. Unlike the U.S.-Soviet competition, where the two blocs were largely isolated from each other, the U.S. and China remain deeply integrated into the global economy. The extensive economic interdependence between the two powers makes outright decoupling unlikely or impractical, limiting the extent to which a strict bipolar system can emerge.

Nevertheless, key characteristics of a bipolar system—such as intensified strategic competition, military build-ups, and the formation of rival economic and security networks—are becoming increasingly visible. U.S. efforts to counter China’s rise, including the Indo-Pacific strategy and semiconductor export restrictions, suggest a containment dynamic reminiscent of Cold War-era strategic thinking. However, the globalized nature of trade, finance, and technological supply chains complicates efforts to establish clear spheres of influence.

B. Tripolarity: The U.S., China, and Russia as Key Actors

An alternative perspective suggests that the world is best understood as *tripolar*, with three primary actors—the United States, China, and Russia—dominating the global security landscape (de la Cal, 2025; Asmolov and Babaev, 2024). This model focuses on military power and energy resources as defining pillars of influence.

- While China and the U.S. dominate the economic domain, Russia’s military and energy resources position it as a global actor despite its economic weaknesses.
- The war in Ukraine has reaffirmed Russia’s disruptive capacity in global security dynamics, even amid sanctions.
- Russia’s energy leverage, particularly in Europe and Asia, reinforces its position as a distinct pole within the system.

While the tripolar model captures important security dynamics, its main limitation lies in Russia’s relative economic decline compared to China and the U.S. Over time, Russia’s global role may increasingly depend on its strategic partnerships, particularly with China, rather than on independent economic or technological prowess.

C. Multipolarity: The Dispersion of Global Influence

A third perspective posits that the international system is shifting toward multipolarity, characterized by a more distributed balance of power (Ashford and Cooper, 2023; Pierini, 2024). Under this model, influence is no longer concentrated in Washington and Beijing but is instead diffused across a range of major and middle powers.

Key actors in a multipolar system include:

- The United States and China as the two dominant global powers.
- Russia as a major military power with significant influence in Eurasian security.
- The European Union as an economic powerhouse, wielding considerable regulatory and financial influence despite lacking a unified defense policy or integrated military capability.
- India as an increasingly assertive strategic player, expanding its global footprint in economic and security affairs.
- Middle powers such as Brazil, Turkey, and South Africa, which exert growing influence in regional affairs and global governance.

This model highlights the growing agency of emerging economies and regional actors, suggesting that future geopolitical competition will not be strictly limited to a U.S.-China rivalry but will involve a more complex array of strategic interactions among multiple global players.

D. Hybrid Models: Bipolarity Within a Multipolar Framework

Some scholars propose a hybrid structure, blending elements of both bipolarity and multipolarity. For instance, Kishore Mahbubani (2024) describes the current system as a “*bipolar world in a multipolar sea*”, arguing that while the U.S. and China dominate global geopolitics, numerous other actors exert significant influence in shaping the international system (Asia Society, 2024).

I have previously articulated a similar view to my colleagues in Beijing, playfully using terminology familiar in Chinese political discourse—“*bipolarity with multipolar characteristics*”². This phrasing reflects the reality that while the U.S.-China rivalry remains the defining feature of global affairs, the agency of secondary powers cannot be ignored.

Regardless of the exact terminology one uses, the core insight remains the same: while two dominant superpowers are engaged in strategic competition, the broader international system is shaped by a diverse range of actors whose influence cannot be dismissed. The key challenge for U.S. foreign policy, therefore, is to recognize and engage effectively with this complex and evolving

² I use this phrase as a form of word play on the phrase “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, often used by the Chinese government to describe its “path”, “system” or “culture” to explain the model of adapting Marxist ideas to Chinese circumstances.

geopolitical landscape, rather than viewing the world solely through the binary lens of great-power competition.

E. Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

The structural shifts outlined above present significant challenges for U.S. policymakers. If the world is indeed becoming more multipolar, Washington can no longer rely on traditional Cold War-style strategies of containment and bloc-based competition. Instead, the United States must develop a more flexible, nuanced approach to diplomacy, economic engagement, and security cooperation.

Key strategic imperatives for U.S. foreign policy in this evolving order include:

- Recognizing the importance of middle powers: Countries such as India, Brazil, and Turkey will play increasingly independent roles in global affairs, and U.S. policy must account for their strategic autonomy.
- Adapting to economic multipolarity: The rise of BRICS and other economic coalitions suggests that Washington must engage proactively with a broader set of actors beyond its traditional transatlantic alliances
- Balancing competition with cooperation: While rivalry with China will remain a key feature of U.S. foreign policy, areas of mutual interest—such as climate change, global health, and financial stability—require engagement beyond zero-sum competition.
- Avoiding outdated assumptions: U.S. policymakers must move beyond Cold War-era frameworks and acknowledge the strategic complexity of a world where power is increasingly distributed

As the next section will explore, the constraints imposed by this evolving structural order will shape the effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy and ultimately determine the degree to which it can sustain its global leadership in the coming decades.

9. Implications of the Structural Transition

The transition toward a new global order carries profound consequences across security, economic, financial, governance, and ideological dimensions. These changes are not occurring in isolation but are deeply interconnected, shaping how states engage with one another and recalibrating global power structures.

A. Security Implications

As global alignments shift, traditional alliances are being redefined to reflect the evolving geopolitical landscape. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—comprising the United States, India, Japan, and Australia—has gained increased prominence as a strategic counterweight to China’s influence in the Indo-Pacific (Kersten and Yoon, 2024). Similarly, NATO’s future remains secure, but questions regarding burden-sharing and strategic priorities persist as European members reassess financial contributions and defense commitments.

Military competition is also entering a new phase, driven by technological advancements that are redefining warfare. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has underscored the role of drone warfare, cybersecurity, space-based defense systems, and AI-driven military capabilities in shaping modern conflict dynamics (Williams and Brawley, 2025). These developments suggest that future security challenges will not be dictated solely by conventional military power but by technological superiority and adaptability.

B. Economic and Trade Transformations

Global trade patterns are shifting from an open, integrated system toward a more fragmented order centered around regional economic blocs. Asia, particularly China, has become the primary driver of this transformation, while Africa and Latin America are also consolidating stronger economic identities. The African Union’s increasing influence in global governance (Hadj Arab, 2024) reflects this shift, as African nations assert greater autonomy in economic and political decision-making.

Although it has become less central recently, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its effect on global trade is also a critical element, representing one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects in modern history. With extensive investments in connectivity and supply chains, the BRI has reconfigured economic alignments, particularly in the Global South. While its long-term impact remains debated, its role in shaping the global economy is undeniable.

There has been a shift from BRI “1.0” to “2.0” in terms of introducing more stringent monitoring when it comes to providing funding for projects and focusing on more sustainable ventures (Stanhope, 2023). This will have qualitative implications for the initiative’s effect, but will not undo its foundational impact on global trade and infrastructure. Besides, China’s recently introduced Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), are evidence that the country will continue to engage and provide new contributions to the global community, in line with its evolving vision for global engagement (Ganchev, 2024).

C. Financial System and Currency Shifts

The long-standing dominance of the U.S. dollar in global finance is being gradually challenged by alternative financial systems. While the dollar remains the world's primary reserve currency, rising use of Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs), particularly China's digital yuan, signals an attempt to diversify international transactions away from U.S. financial mechanisms (Orcutt, 2023; Bai et al., 2025). In parallel, an increasing number of cross-border transactions are now conducted in yuan, rubles, and other non-dollar currencies, suggesting a slow but steady shift toward a more multipolar financial system. This does not imply an imminent displacement of the dollar, but it does indicate an ongoing erosion of its unrivaled hegemony. As emerging economies develop their own financial frameworks, the traditional U.S.-centric monetary order will likely face new pressures and constraints.

D. Governance and Institutional Challenges

Multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization (WTO), and International Monetary Fund (IMF) are facing growing challenges to their authority (Torres, 2022). Countries in the Global South have increasingly pushed for a more equitable governance structure, questioning the legitimacy of institutions that remain largely shaped by Western priorities. As decision-making within these bodies becomes more contested, the ability of traditional global governance mechanisms to enforce policies may weaken, necessitating reforms to accommodate a more diverse set of international stakeholders.

E. Ideological and Normative Shifts

The post-Cold War assumption that Western democratic models would continue expanding globally has weakened, as many countries have adopted governance structures that prioritize state sovereignty, economic development, and political stability over liberal democratic norms. While the U.S. and its allies continue to advocate for democratic values, this narrative is increasingly being challenged by alternative governance models that emphasize state-led development and non-interventionist policies (Barnes-Dacey and Shapiro, 2023; BBC, 2021).

Beyond formal governance structures, a more subtle transformation is taking place in the realm of cultural and ideological influence. As mentioned before, the relative dominance of U.S. cultural power is diminishing as globalization fosters a more pluralistic exchange of cultural narratives. This reflects a broader trend in which American soft power is no longer unchallenged, particularly among younger generations worldwide.

The structural transformation of the world order is no longer a theoretical projection but an ongoing reality. The traditional U.S.-led global order is giving way to a more complex and decentralized system, whether best described as bipolar, tripolar, or multipolar. This transition carries profound implications:

- Security alliances are being recalibrated as countries reassess their strategic partnerships.
- Trade and economic systems are becoming regionalized, reducing the dominance of a single, unified global framework.
- Financial transactions are diversifying, gradually eroding U.S. dollar hegemony.
- Governance institutions are facing strain, as emerging powers demand greater representation.
- Normative debates over governance are intensifying, with no single ideological model dominating the international sphere.

Adapting to this shifting landscape requires U.S. policymakers to move beyond outdated assumptions of uncontested global leadership. The rise of new economic and political power centers demands a more adaptable, inclusive, and strategically nuanced approach to international engagement. The extent to which the United States successfully navigates this transition will determine its ability to retain influence in an increasingly complex and competitive world.



*Multiple inter-connected pieces on a world map.
Copyright-free image by Karyme França from Pexels.*

10. Convergence of Political-Economic Models: Beyond the Democracy vs. Autocracy Divide

One of the dominant narratives in Western discourse on global politics is the binary competition between democracy and autocracy, often framed as a contest between liberal and authoritarian governance models. This perspective, while influential, oversimplifies the evolving nature of political and economic systems in the 21st century. Rather than adhering to a strict dichotomy, many states are adopting hybrid approaches that blend elements of both market-driven capitalism and strategic state intervention.

This emerging convergence aligns with the concept of a “third way,” a notion that Zbigniew Brzezinski and Samuel Huntington (1964), among other scholars, initially introduced. Although Brzezinski remained skeptical of this notion (see, e.g., FreeMediaOnline, 2018), it seems to me that this has been happening for the past two or three decades. The convergence argument challenges the rigid separation between democratic capitalism and authoritarian state control. In practice, governments across various political systems—whether democratic or non-democratic—are playing an increasingly active role in economic development, industrial policy, and foreign policy coordination. This trend raises important questions about the validity of the traditional ideological divide and suggests a more complex and adaptive model of governance.

A common misconception in Western analysis is that China functions as a monolithic, centrally controlled state with little internal variation or debate (Lenz, 2023). In reality, China’s political and economic landscape is shaped by a diverse set of actors, institutional dynamics, and competing interests. Understanding these complexities is crucial for assessing the extent to which China’s governance model differs from—or converges with—Western economic approaches.

While China’s central government sets national priorities, local governments operate with a significant degree of autonomy, often pursuing policies that reflect regional economic conditions rather than strict adherence to national directives (Lin et al., 2006). Fiscal constraints contribute to this decentralization; many local governments are at times underfunded relative to their policy responsibilities, leading to varied economic strategies across different provinces. These dynamics highlight the limitations of viewing China as a purely top-down, centrally planned system.

Contrary to simplistic depictions of the Chinese system as one where the Communist Party fully directs state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to serve political purposes, many of them spend the bulk of their time and effort chasing financial targets to maintain good levels of profitability.

This pattern has persisted for nearly two decades, but has only recently gained recognition in academic literature (Hawes, 2023). Besides, it is well-known that the Chinese private sector plays a crucial role in global supply chains. Many of the world’s leading consumer and technology products—from smartphones to high-tech manufacturing components—are produced by private Chinese firms which are forced to work at thin margins since they operate in a highly competitive environment. In other words, China’s model is driven by economic pragmatism where efficiency is a central concern.

Moreover, while China is often characterized as an interventionist economy, many Western economies have continuously adopted state-driven policies in key sectors, challenging the notion that free-market capitalism operates without government intervention.

- In the United States, the CHIPS and Science Act (2022) represents a major industrial policy initiative aimed at bolstering domestic semiconductor production—an explicit state effort to reshape global supply chains.
- The European Union’s agricultural subsidies, which direct significant public funds to sustain domestic agriculture (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022), illustrate another form of state-driven economic intervention.
- Infrastructure spending, technology funding, and direct industry support programs are increasingly shaping Western economic strategies, mirroring practices traditionally associated with state-led economies.

In other words, I argue that the view—favored by many Western analysts—which posits there is a strict competition between opposing “ideal” “democratic”/“capitalist” vs. “authoritarian”/“communist” models (e.g., Beckley and Brands, 2023), is not only highly inaccurate but also misleading as it perpetuates an abstract debate that is fundamentally detached from the political realities of the contemporary world. In my view, a global trend is emerging in which states across different governance systems are adopting targeted economic interventions to enhance industrial growth, national competitiveness, and geopolitical influence. Hence, any meaningful discussion must move beyond the oversimplified dichotomy still prevalent in much of the media and academic discourse.

As these structural transformations unfold, the international system is experiencing heightened instability and competition. However, this does not necessarily imply an inevitable escalation into large-scale conflict. Instead, the emerging world order is likely to be characterized by: a) greater uncertainty regarding which powers will dominate in different regions; and b) a decentralized global structure in which multiple spheres of influence emerge, rather than a single dominant hierarchy.

These developments raise an important, thought-provoking question: *If the traditional models of bipolarity, tripolarity, or multipolarity do not fully capture the complexities of the current system, are there alternative ways to conceptualize the emerging global order?* The section introduces a historically-minded framework for understanding the geopolitical landscape, and then extrapolates it to explain the current realities of international politics.

11. Role Specialization in the Global System: The 19th Century Model

An alternative way to conceptualize world order—beyond the traditional frameworks of bipolarity, tripolarity, or multipolarity—is through the idea of role specialization among states. Rather than focusing solely on rankings of power, this perspective examines how different nations contribute uniquely to global governance, security, and economic development.

In an examination of the 19th-century European international system, Schroeder argued that global stability was not simply maintained by a balance of power but by the distinct functions that major states performed. Instead of competing across all domains, nations assumed specialized roles that shaped the broader system's equilibrium. This historical perspective offers a useful framework for understanding contemporary global politics, where major powers do not necessarily engage in direct competition in all fields but instead carve out strategic niches within the international system.

During the 19th century, European powers played distinct roles that contributed to systemic stability, which are exemplified in this long section quoted from Schroeder (1994, pp. 126-127):

Britain, for example, claimed during this period and others to be the special holder of the European balance, protecting small states, promoting constitutional liberty, encouraging commerce, and preserving peace.

Russia claimed to be the guardian of the monarchical order in Europe, defender of all states against revolution, and protector especially of smaller states against threats or domination by other great powers.

The United Netherlands after 1815 claimed special treatment, and after 1830 Belgium claimed guaranteed neutrality, because the Low Countries served Britain and others as a barrier against French expansion, and served Austria, Prussia, and the lesser German states as a vital economic and political link connecting Britain to the Continent and Central Europe, curbing its drift toward isolation and preoccupation with its empire.

Switzerland had special functions as a neutral state under joint European guarantee, which were both strategic-to keep the passes between Germany

and Italy out of any one great power's control – and broadly political – to make France, Austria, and Germany jointly responsible for a crucial area.

Denmark and Sweden undertook roles as neutrals guarding the entrance to the Baltic, thus serving everyone's commercial interests and preventing the constant struggles over the region from 1558 to 1815 from flaring up again.

The Papal State functioned as the political base for the Pope's independent reign as head of the Catholic church, which was considered vital by many states, including Protestant ones, to prevent international struggles over control of the church and religion.

The Ottoman Empire played roles both strategic-keeping the Turkish Straits and other vital areas out of great-power hands-and political-buffering against possible Austro-Russian clashes over influence in the Balkans, or Anglo-Russian conflict over the routes to India.

The smaller German powers played roles as independent states in forestalling struggles between Austria or Prussia for control of Germany, or attempts by France or Russia to dominate it from the flanks; as well as buffers and decompression zones between the absolutist East and the liberal-constitutionalist West.

Many special international functions were assigned to the German Confederation from 1815 on: regulating and controlling conflicts between individual German states, between estates and princes within individual states, between the Confederation and the individual states, between Protestants and Catholics, and between the great powers Austria and Prussia, former bitter rivals for supremacy in Germany and now required to work together to manage the Confederation.

Any historian knowledgeable in this area could extend this list.

While today's world is no longer Eurocentric (Hobson, 2012), many states continue to differentiate their roles within the global system rather than competing across all dimensions. Instead of viewing international politics as a straightforward power struggle between dominant poles, role specialization suggests that different countries contribute to global stability and competition in distinct ways.

Thus, I propose to the readers to consider this admittedly debatable, but largely empirically observable differentiation of roles as an alternative framework for understanding the international system:

A. The United States: Global Military Power and Hegemon in the Western Hemisphere

Since the end of World War II, the United States has positioned itself as the primary defender of the liberal international order. However, the viability of this role is increasingly under question. While Washington retains its military and financial dominance, its normative influence has declined in many parts of the world.

- The U.S. remains the world's foremost military power, with extensive security commitments through alliances such as NATO, AUKUS, and the Quad.
- The dollar-centered global financial system ensures continued American influence over international trade and financial transactions, even as alternative currencies gain traction.
- The U.S.'s moral authority as a champion of democracy and human rights has weakened, particularly in the Global South, where many states view its foreign policy as increasingly transactional rather than values-driven.
- While U.S. commitments to defending Europe and deploying troops globally have diminished, its focus on consolidating influence over Mexico, Canada, Greenland, and Latin America has intensified (see the case studies analyzed below), which suggests a bid for establishing hegemonic presence across the Western hemisphere.

Thus, rather than serving as a guardian of the liberal order, the U.S. may increasingly be characterized as the dominant military power with an iron regional presence in the Western hemisphere within an evolving, structurally decentralized global system.

B. China: Champion of State-Led Economic Growth and Multipolarity

China's success of sustaining rapid economic growth for four decades is unprecedented in world history. This economic modernization is a prime example of the achievements that can be reached on a large scale when the state actively engages in promoting development, rather than solely relying on neoliberal market principles.

- Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has positioned itself as a leading force in global infrastructure development, particularly in the Global South.

- Beijing actively advocates for multipolarity, promoting a world where power is distributed across multiple actors rather than concentrated in a U.S.-dominated system.

Apart from the strategic aspect of growing Chinese influence in parts of Asia and the Pacific Ocean which concern the U.S. military strategists directly, from a global and systemic perspective, China’s challenge to U.S. leadership is not primarily military but economic and institutional, offering an alternative development model that appeals to many states seeking growth without Western-style political conditionality.

C. Russia: Disrupter and Returning Power

Russia’s current global role is more often disruptive than integrative. While it lacks China’s economic weight or America’s global military reach, it remains geopolitically significant due to:

- Its nuclear arsenal, ensuring its status as a top-tier military power.
- Its energy dominance, particularly as a major supplier of oil and gas to Europe, China, and other regions.
- Its revisionist policies, as seen in its territorial ambitions in Ukraine and efforts to reassert influence over former Soviet states.

Russia’s actions reflect an effort to restore parts of its geopolitical role, which was completely lost in 1989. Moscow is actively working to re-establish its sphere of influence, a process likely to continue—through diplomatic, economic, or military means—in the years ahead. During or after this process, ambitions for an alternative, more constructive, long-term role might begin to become more evident.

D. The European Union: Normative / Regulatory Power

The European Union presents a unique case in global politics. Although it has some military capabilities (e.g., nuclear power of Britain and France, as well as limited but still relatively well-prepared standing armies), it is not a global military power at the level of the U.S., China, or even Russia when one considers the latter’s nuclear arsenal. While there are ongoing calls for the rearmament of Europe (European Commission, 2025), at the time of writing this paper a more distinct form of influence from the region can be discerned in the areas of economic regulation and normative leadership.

- The EU has exported its regulatory frameworks to shape global standards, particularly in areas such as privacy laws (GDPR), trade policies, and environmental standards.
- Despite its regulatory power, Europe remains dependent on U.S. military protection through NATO, limiting its ability to act independently in security matters.

While the EU sees itself as a force for global governance, the extent to which regulatory influence constitutes true geopolitical power remains debatable.

E. India: Non-Aligned Regional Power with Strategic Autonomy

India remains one of the most strategically independent actors in global politics. It is a major regional power that does not align fully with any single geopolitical camp.

- India participates in U.S.-led initiatives like the Quad while simultaneously maintaining strong economic ties with Russia and a complex relationship with China.
- Its long-standing policy of non-alignment continues to shape its decision-making, making it an unpredictable yet pivotal player.

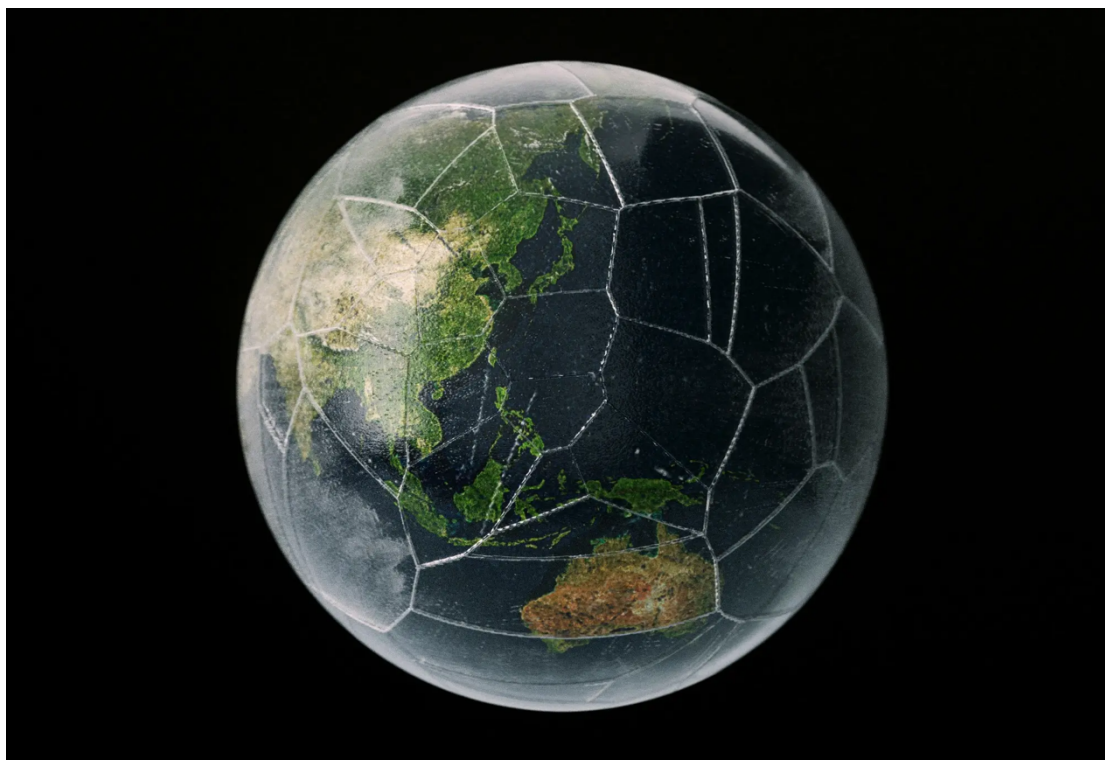
Given its growing economic and military strength, India is likely to emerge as a critical “swing state” in future geopolitical competitions, though its precise long-term role remains uncertain.

F. The Gulf States: Energy Powerhouses and Emerging Diplomatic Brokers

The Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have traditionally derived their influence from control over global energy markets through OPEC. However, in recent years, their geopolitical roles have expanded:

- They have positioned themselves as diplomatic brokers, mediating conflicts in Sudan (Al Jazeera, 2023) and between regional actors, while also hosting talks between U.S. and Russian officials on Ukraine (Beaumont, 2025).
- Their increasing engagement with China, Russia, and BRICS suggests that they are exploring alternatives to traditional security ties with the U.S.

Though not yet full-fledged global mediators, the Gulf States are increasingly leveraging their economic power to shape diplomatic outcomes.



A globe in the process of fragmentation. Copyright-free image from Unsplash.

G. Brazil and South Africa: Spokespersons for the Global South

Brazil and South Africa occupy a unique position as representatives of the Global South, advocating for greater inclusion of developing nations in global governance.

- Both are members of BRICS, which has been expanding its influence as an alternative to Western-led institutions.
- They continue to push for reforms in international organizations like the UN, seeking a stronger voice for emerging economies.
- While neither country is a dominant global power, they play an important role in shaping discourse on multipolarity and development.

This analysis moves beyond traditional narratives of polarity in the international system. Instead, it offers a more nuanced understanding by examining the functional roles that different states and regions play, highlighting both the complexity of the global order and the contributions—as well as the limitations—of today's major powers. One key implication of this arrangement is that, as long as states complement rather than directly challenge one another, a seemingly multipolar order may prove more stable than many realists would predict.

III. Foreign Policy under Trump 2.0: U.S. Strategic Repositioning?

12. Strategic Options for the United States in the New Global Order

However one chooses to describe the nature of the shifts in the international system and their outcomes, there is no doubt that they are taking place and reshaping the global order. In this context, the key question facing the United States is: *What strategic approach should it adopt?* Given the shifts discussed in previous sections, U.S. policymakers must decide whether to maintain global leadership, adapt to multipolarity, or retreat from certain international commitments.

To explore this question, I engage in an intellectual exercise by outlining, and then analyzing five distinct strategic options, drawing inspiration from various schools of IR. Each option a different vision for America's role in the 21st century. This scenario-based approach allows to build and employ an analytical framework in times of continuous change and uncertainty. Beyond the scope of this paper, it could also be dynamically adapted to describe ongoing adjustments to the trajectory of U.S. foreign policy in the coming years.



“The World Turned Upside Down”, a sculpture by Mark Wallinger at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Copyright-free image by Mehmet Ali Eroglu from Unsplash.

Option 1: Reinforcing U.S. Primacy

The most ambitious strategy seeks to restore U.S. global leadership to its post-Cold War heights, ensuring that Washington remains the uncontested hegemon in international affairs. This approach requires:

- Reasserting U.S. dominance across all key regions through sustained military, economic, and diplomatic engagement.
- Containing geopolitical challengers, particularly China and Russia, to prevent them from reshaping global governance structures.
- Leveraging economic tools—such as sanctions and trade restrictions—to weaken rivals and reinforce American hegemony.

However, this strategy faces serious limitations. Maintaining primacy demands enormous resources, and overstretch has long been a recurring concern in American strategic thought. Moreover, the world has changed significantly since 1989, with rising powers and shifting alliances making a unipolar order increasingly unsustainable.

Option 2: Strategic Balancing (Selective Engagement)

A more pragmatic alternative is selective engagement, which seeks to maintain U.S. leadership in key regions while avoiding unnecessary overextension. This strategy would emphasize:

- Prioritizing the Indo-Pacific, with China as the primary geopolitical rival.
- Strengthening regional alliances, such as the Quad (U.S., Japan, India, Australia), to counterbalance Chinese influence.
- Encouraging allies to share the burden, particularly by pressuring NATO members to increase defense spending.
- Focusing on technological leadership, reshoring critical supply chains, and preventing middle powers from aligning too closely with Beijing.

This strategy acknowledges the limits of U.S. power while seeking to allocate resources efficiently. However, it still assumes that the U.S. can contain China and sustain global influence without overstretch—a difficult balance to achieve in practice.

Option 3: Multipolar Realism—Redefining U.S. Leadership

This strategy, which I have eclectically termed Multipolar Realism, stipulates that the U.S. should accept the rise of other powers while redefining its own role in global affairs. Instead of seeking absolute dominance, Washington would position itself as the leading—but not the dominant—power within a more distributed international system.

Key elements of this strategy include:

- Acknowledging that global hegemony is no longer feasible while consolidating leadership where it is most sustainable.
- Maintaining military, technological, and economic advantages without seeking to control global affairs unilaterally.
- Engaging with middle powers through issue-based partnerships, rather than imposing rigid alliance structures.
- Supporting— or at least not obstructing—reforms to global governance institutions, aligning with Global South demands for greater representation.

This approach would likely reduce resistance to U.S. policies, making American leadership more sustainable. However, it requires a fundamental shift in strategic thinking, abandoning post-Cold War assumptions of global dominance—a transition that would certainly face institutional resistance in Washington.

Option 4: Fortress America—Retrenchment and Isolationism

A more radical approach advocates for a dramatic U.S. withdrawal from global affairs, focusing instead on domestic stability and economic self-sufficiency. This strategy would involve:

- Reducing military commitments, scaling back deployments, and withdrawing from key global regions.
- Pursuing economic self-reliance, limiting dependence on international markets.
- Restricting interventionism, avoiding costly military operations in favor of a more passive global posture.
- Reducing financial commitments to international institutions, prioritizing domestic investment over global engagement.

Though often dismissed by policymakers, this strategy is not without precedent. Historically, the U.S. pursued isolationist policies, particularly before World War II. Thanks to its vast natural resources and large domestic market, the U.S. could plausibly sustain itself without deep global engagement.

However, this strategy carries significant risks. A U.S. retreat could destabilize key regions, allowing China and other powers to fill strategic vacuums. Additionally, economic isolation could undermine the dollar’s global dominance, accelerating the transition toward a multipolar financial order.

Option 5: Ideological Crusade—Reviving Democratic Expansionism

This strategy envisions a renewed ideological campaign to expand democracy globally, positioning the U.S. as the leader of a values-based coalition against authoritarianism. Its key features include:

- Building a global democratic alliance, modeled after NATO but expanded to Asia and beyond.
- Strengthening ideological divides, defining foreign policy primarily in terms of the democracy vs. autocracy framework.
- Using economic tools to promote democracy, offering aid and investment while requiring recipient states to adopt democratic governance models.
- Countering China and Russia ideologically, framing global competition as a struggle between liberal and authoritarian models of governance.

While this strategy appeals to traditional foreign policy thinkers, it is becoming increasingly difficult to implement in a world where many nations prefer strategic flexibility over ideological alignment. Countries in the Global South, in particular, are resistant to being forced into a U.S.-led ideological camp. Furthermore, previous interventions justified by democracy promotion—such as Iraq and Afghanistan—have weakened Washington’s credibility in advocating for democratic expansion.

Thus, while this approach may rally Western allies, its global appeal is far more limited than during the Cold War.

At this point, I encourage readers to pause and reflect: which of these strategies would you recommend if advising Trump’s administration, and why? I also invite readers to formulate their own strategic vision by blending elements from the models above, adjusting them, or by proposing entirely new alternatives—constructing a tailored approach to U.S. foreign policy in an evolving global order.

13. Which Strategy Makes the Most Sense for Trump?

In this section, I continue the intellectual exercises from the previous section by putting on the hat of a U.S. strategist to explain what my advice to a current U.S. president would be in this situation.

My belief is that given the structural constraints of the evolving global order, the most rational strategy for the U.S. under Donald Trump—or any future leader operating under similar geopolitical conditions—would be a hybrid approach, combining elements of Strategic Balancing and Multipolar Realism. This approach recognizes the limits of American dominance while still maintaining U.S. leadership in critical sectors such as the economy, military, and technology.

Rather than attempting to restore Cold War-era primacy or retreating into isolationism, this strategy seeks to calibrate U.S. engagement based on realistic assessments of power dynamics and resource constraints.

The key components of this blended approach would include:

- Accepting the limits of U.S. dominance, while ensuring that the U.S. remains the most influential player in strategic sectors.
- Avoiding unnecessary overextension, focusing engagement on selective priorities—particularly in Asia—which is expected to remain the center of global economic and political activity—and in the immediate vicinity of the United States.
- Recognizing the need for institutional reform, allowing rising powers greater representation while ensuring that U.S. leadership remains relevant in shaping global governance.
- Competing with China pragmatically rather than ideologically, aiming to offer a superior economic and strategic alternative to middle powers rather than pressuring them into rigid alliances.

This approach acknowledges the constraints of the modern international system: U.S. hegemony cannot be restored to its 1990s form, but withdrawal from global leadership is not a viable option either. Instead, the U.S. must recalibrate its leadership role, leveraging its strengths without overextending its commitments.

The world order is undergoing profound structural shifts, requiring a realistic reassessment of great power relations. Models based on unipolarity or ideological expansion no longer seem viable—nor do isolationism or strategic retreat.

The U.S. must balance its strategic priorities carefully:

- It cannot afford to be everywhere at once, but it also cannot afford to disengage completely.
- It must acknowledge the changing dynamics of global power, while still working to shape them in a way that preserves its leadership role.
- Competition with rising powers must be conducted in a way that is sustainable, adaptable, and avoids counterproductive overreach.

Ultimately, my argument is that the most pragmatic strategy for the U.S. is one that blends elements of strategic balancing and multipolar realism, attempting to position itself as a leading (but not dominant) power among several competing ones, but not an overextended one.

While my recommendation does not precisely match the approach that the Trump administration has adopted, there are elements of it that do. For instance, he has shown reluctance to get entangled militarily in conflicts that are not considered to be directly related to vital U.S. interests, the narrative of “U.S. democracy” as a superior political model has subsided (albeit possibly for reasons of enabling a path towards greater concentration of power for Trump) and there is no evidence of the U.S. withdrawing its focus from Asia.

Other elements of my recommendation such as engaging in institutional reform are clearly not under consideration or discussion. It is important to recognize that historically, the U.S. has only supported international institutions when doing so aligned with the interests of the incumbent administration, or for practical reasons, for instance, related to obtaining sufficient support domestically to enact policies internationally

However, there are already indications that the selective U.S. focus on prioritizing key geographical regions over others is already in motion, with the Western hemisphere taking priority in Trump’s current strategy. Earlier speculations about a potential revival of the Monroe Doctrine have been explicitly confirmed by Steve Bannon, a central ideologue of Trump’s early foreign policy thinking. Bannon outlined this vision in a recent interview with the Toronto Sun (2025); his comments underscore a comprehensive vision of hemispheric defense rooted in historical strategic logic, reimagined for contemporary geopolitical rivalries in the Arctic and Pacific.

Bannon explains:

What President Trump laid out [...] is kind of Alfred Mahan's naval strategy. He's going to look at Hemispheric Defense, kind of Monroe Doctrine 2.0 and that's going to be from taking back the Panama Canal to make sure the Chinese navy and the Russian navy can never hook up in the Caribbean, all the way up to Greenland. And remember, if you control Greenland, or are in partnership with the free Greenland and have bases there like we've had in World War Two – then, it was to keep the sea lanes open [while now it] is to close the sea lanes against Russian fast attack and ballistic missile submarines coming out of the Arctic, out of both Murmansk and Archangel.

If you control that sea lane between Greenland and Iceland, which the United States will do, and not just have tracking sonobuoys, but actually control, with naval forces, and you control Panama Canal, you've essentially hermetically sealed the United States [...] from attack by the Soviets, by the Russians. [...]

The great game people should know is this strategic contest in the 19th century between the British Empire and the Russian Empire, through Afghanistan and Persia for access to warm water ports and to access to India, which Britain was trying to stop. The new great game of the 21st century is going to be the Arctic. It's already a great power struggle between the Chinese Communist Party and the Russians. Up there, Canada's formerly most secure border, your northern provinces are now your soft underbelly.

And so what President Trump is saying is that if you look at the entire picture, everywhere from the three island chains of the Pacific, that would just guarantee that the Pacific became a natural barrier for Canada, coupled with what's happening in the Arctic, what the United States is going to do, coupled with Greenland and this Hemispheric Defense, there is such a compelling logic both geo-strategically and geo-economically.

Building on the strategic rationale developed above, and drawing from Bannon's vision, the following four sections present case studies that illustrate how U.S. foreign policy is being actively repositioned within the Western hemisphere.

14. Case Study 1: U.S. Pressure on Colombia Under Trump’s Strategic Repositioning

A revealing example of Trump’s foreign policy in practice can be found in U.S.-Colombia relations, especially in how the administration has recently handled issues related to trade, migration, and security cooperation (Seelke, 2024). Colombia has long been one of the United States’ closest partners in Latin America, notably in counter-narcotics efforts. However, recent developments highlight the transactional and coercive nature of Trump’s diplomatic style, raising important questions about the long-term implications for U.S. influence in the region.

Despite the shifts in global power, U.S.-Colombia relations have remained structurally significant, with Washington continuing to support Colombia’s fight against drug trafficking and maintaining strong economic ties. Colombian exports—such as cut flowers, coffee, and agricultural goods—remain closely linked to the U.S. market (USDA, 2025). Even with a leftist government under President Gustavo Petro, Colombia remains one of Washington’s most critical allies in South America. However, this relationship has been increasingly tested by Trump’s approach to migration policy.

The dispute arose when the Trump administration pressured Colombia to accept a larger share of regional migrants, as part of broader U.S. efforts to control migration flows from Latin America. Initially, the issue was handled through negotiated agreements, allowing Colombia to cooperate within certain parameters. However, Trump escalated tensions by briefly instituting “emergency tariffs” of 25%³ on all Colombian exports for as long as the country refused to comply with U.S. demands. Rather than relying on quiet diplomatic channels, Trump used social media to issue direct public ultimatums, effectively forcing President Petro into a defensive position.

Trump’s highly public and confrontational tactics have created a diplomatic dilemma. In Colombian domestic politics, openly conceding to Washington’s demands would be politically damaging, reinforcing perceptions of weakness and subservience. Traditionally, sensitive negotiations occur behind closed doors, allowing leaders to reach agreements without appearing pressured. By making threats in a highly visible way, Trump left Petro with no choice but to respond forcefully—through a Twitter exchange and a very brief threat of imposing retaliatory tariffs (CNN, 2025)—before ultimately reaching a

³ To pressure the Colombian government, Donald Trump also instituted very briefly a travel ban and visa restrictions on its officials as well as visa sanctions on all Party Members of the Colombian government. In a Truth Social post announcing this, he also threatened that “[i]n one week, the tariffs will be raised to 50%”, if Colombia does not comply with U.S. demands.

compromise, after which both sides removed the temporary measures that they instituted (Buschschlüter and Aikman, 2025).

While an agreement was reached, the broader consequences of this episode may linger for years. The U.S. achieved its immediate objectives, but at the cost of damaging trust and reinforcing Colombia's vulnerability in the face of American pressure.

From Washington's perspective, the dispute has already faded from attention. U.S. officials regard it as a minor and resolved issue, having moved on to other priorities. However, from Colombia's perspective, the memory of coercion may last much longer. Public threats, rather than quiet diplomacy, leave a more lasting imprint—reinforcing the perception that Colombia remains perpetually vulnerable to U.S. pressure.

One potential consequence of Trump's diplomatic style is that it may push smaller states like Colombia to diversify their partnerships. In response to U.S. pressure, Colombia may explore closer ties with alternative global powers, such as China or regional organizations. China, in particular, has repeatedly expanded its economic influence in countries that feel alienated by Washington, often offering infrastructure investment and trade partnerships without political conditions. While Colombia has not traditionally been a major focus for Chinese engagement, Trump's actions could create an opening for other global or regional players to increase their footprint in the region.

This case demonstrates the tension at the heart of Trump's transactional diplomacy: while coercive tactics may yield quick results, they risk alienating key partners over time. As smaller states seek to avoid repeated vulnerability, the United States may find its influence gradually eroding in regions where quiet diplomacy once secured enduring alliances.

15. Case Study 2: U.S. Pressure on Panama and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Panama holds immense geostrategic significance in global trade, primarily due to the Panama Canal, one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints. The canal's role in facilitating global commerce has made Panama a key area of interest for both the United States and China, with Washington historically viewing it as a vital pillar of U.S. strategic influence in Latin America. However, under Trump, the U.S. took a more aggressive stance in countering what it perceived as growing Chinese encroachment in the country.

Trump publicly accused Panama of allowing excessive Chinese influence over the Panama Canal, claiming that Beijing was exerting control in ways that undermined U.S. strategic interests. His claim rests primarily on the argument that two of the five ports adjacent to the canal, Balboa and Cristóbal, which sit on the Pacific and Atlantic sides respectively, have been operated by a subsidiary of CK Hutchison Holdings since 1997 (Yuan, 2025). The latter is a publicly listed conglomerate founded by Hong Kong businessman Li Ka-shing; it is not state-owned by China and experts broadly agree that “there is no evidence that the Chinese government controls the canal or of Chinese military activity in Panama” (McCarthy, 2025; Sun and Yang, 2025).

However, as of 19 March 2025, a deal is underway for the sale of the ports of Balboa and Cristóbal to a consortium led by Blackrock, which is also reported to include Terminal Investment Limited—an arm of Swiss shipping giant Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC), which is set to become the largest port operator in the world after this acquisition is finalized (Forbes, 2025).

Trump also previously criticized Panama’s toll policies, arguing that they disadvantage U.S. vessels (Slattery, 2024), suggesting that canal fees were being used as a tool to favor Chinese shipping and investment. These statements were amplified through direct public messaging, mirroring Trump’s broader approach of using public pressure rather than behind-the-scenes diplomacy to shape outcomes. These accusations suggest that Trump is actively seeking to justify what he views as strategically important actions.

Initially, Panamanian officials dismissed Trump’s claims, reaffirming the country’s sovereignty over the canal. They emphasized that there was no evidence of Chinese control over canal operations and that toll policies applied universally, without favoring or disadvantaging any single country (Zhao, 2025).

Yet, just eight days after Trump’s accusations, Panama decided not to renew its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) agreement with China within the coming two years and to “study the possibility of terminating it early” (The Economic Times, 2025), signaling that U.S. pressure had a tangible effect on Panama’s foreign policy.

To Washington, Panama’s decision not to renew the BRI agreement was a clear demonstration that U.S. leverage in the region remains effective in curbing Chinese influence in key regions. However, the extent to which this matters for Beijing in the broader context of international politics is debatable.

My view is that Panama's rejection to renew its participation in the BRI is unlikely to represent a major strategic setback. While the country is important, it does not hold the same level of significance as China's engagements in Africa, Asia, and larger Latin American economies, notably Brazil. Beijing has continued to secure major port and infrastructure deals in other key locations, ensuring that its broader regional strategy remains largely unaffected.

This raises the question of whether Trump's high-pressure tactics are truly effective in weakening China's long-term foothold in Latin America. While Panama adjusted its stance in response to U.S. pressure, the broader structural trends of Chinese economic engagement with the region remain unchanged.

This case reinforces a broader pattern observed in Trump's coercive diplomatic style. While Washington can use economic and political leverage to pressure smaller states into adjusting their foreign policy, this does not necessarily translate into the elimination of Chinese engagement with developing regions at large. Instead, many countries may seek to quietly maintain economic relationships with China while publicly appeasing the U.S., reflecting the pragmatic balancing strategies increasingly pursued by middle and smaller powers.

Trump's aggressive approach to Panama produced a short-term diplomatic win, demonstrating that U.S. influence remains capable of shifting state alignments. However, the broader effectiveness of this approach remains questionable.

While public coercion can lead to immediate compliance, it can also foster caution and remind some smaller allies of the U.S. to prepare for strategic hedging. Other countries are certainly observing the developments in Panama and might be preparing contingency plans to maintain economic ties with China in a manner that avoids provoking Washington, or that might be sustainable even in the case of pressure from the Trump administration. Rather than decisively curbing China's expansion, Trump's tactics may have merely driven regional actors to pursue more discreet, calculated strategies for balancing both powers.

16. Case Study 3: Greenland and Trump's Arctic Strategy

Greenland has long been of geopolitical interest to the United States, but under the Trump administration, this interest became a subject of public debate and controversy. Trump's proposal to purchase Greenland from Denmark was widely dismissed as unrealistic (Treisman, 2025), but the idea itself had historical precedent and strategic logic, despite its poor reception. More importantly, it underscored the growing strategic importance of the Arctic as melting ice opens new trade routes, exposes natural resources, and reshapes global military dynamics.

Greenland’s significance stems from a combination of economic, military, and strategic factors. The territory is rich in natural resources, including rare earth minerals, oil, and gas reserves, all of which are increasingly valuable in an era of technological competition. Additionally, Greenland’s location in the Arctic makes it a critical asset for military strategy and global shipping, particularly as climate change accelerates the opening of northern trade routes (Spence and Hanlon, 2025).

The U.S. has maintained a longstanding military presence in Greenland, most notably through the Pituffik Space Base⁴, a key installation for early-warning missile detection and Arctic defense operations. As geopolitical competition in the Arctic intensifies, Greenland’s strategic value has grown—not only for Washington but also for other global actors, including China and Russia.

The idea of U.S. acquisition of Greenland is not new. Washington has made previous attempts to purchase Greenland, reflecting its longstanding recognition of the island’s strategic utility:

- In 1867/1868, U.S. Secretary of State William Seward explored the possibility of acquiring Greenland but never made a formal offer since his earlier acquisition of Alaska had been branded as a “folly”. At the time, Seward ordered a detailed survey which led to the production of a report portraying Greenland as a land of abundance.
- In 1946, under the leadership of President Harry Truman a State Department envoy to Europe named William Trimble proposed paying Denmark \$100 million in gold in exchange for all of Greenland. The Danish foreign minister responded with, “While we owe much to America, I do not feel that we owe them the whole island of Greenland”.

During the Cold War, Greenland had strategic importance for the U.S. in various aspects, notably as a midpoint between the nuclear powers, where secret experimental projects were built and 10,000 troops were housed at one point (Roos, 2025).

Hence, Trump’s proposal is not entirely unprecedented. However, its timing during an ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine where the former has annexed Crimea and preparing to acquire multiple new territories, as well as Trump’s public framing made his proposal particularly controversial.

⁴ This name was adopted in 2023. Until then, it was called the Thule Air Base and in informal conversations it is still more commonly referred to by this name.

Denmark immediately dismissed it, reaffirming that Greenland is not for sale. More significantly, the island's own population rejected the idea, emphasizing their autonomous status within the Kingdom of Denmark. Greenlandic Inuit leaders made it clear that while they continue to seek greater self-governance, U.S. ownership was not an option they would consider.



*A hand scratching Greenland on a hanging map on the wall.
Copyright-free image by Lara Jameson from Pexels.*

However, while formal U.S. acquisition remains impossible, Trump's intervention may have triggered political ripple effects.

Although Denmark has long pursued policies of cultural and political integration in Greenland, some Greenlandic Indigenous groups have sought greater autonomy or full independence. Though U.S. integration was never a real possibility, Trump's remarks brought global attention to Greenland's political status, potentially fueling new debates on Greenlandic self-determination. In the most recent election in Greenland, held on 11 March 2025, independence was broadly viewed as the most central issue (The Copenhagen Post, 2025). The outcome was a win by the Demokraatit Party (29.9%), which favours a slow approach to independence from Denmark, followed by the opposition Naleraq Party (24.5%), which is often viewed to be in favor of rapid independence and Inuit Ataqtigiit (21.4%), which is also generally pro-independence (High North News, 2025).

By making Greenland a topic of greater discussion, Trump has:

- Increased political pressure on Denmark to justify and defend its governance over Greenland.
- Raised the profile of Greenland’s independence movement, although it is not clear what shape this movement might take and to what extent it might be aligned with U.S. strategic interests.
- Encouraged Greenlandic leaders to leverage international attention to push for greater political and economic autonomy from Denmark.
- Ignored a chance to take concessions for de facto greater control over Greenland that the current Danish government would have likely agreed to, if Trump not publicly raised the idea of U.S. sovereignty over Denmark. This suggests that Trump may be reserving ambitions for future negotiations regarding increased U.S. influence in Greenland.

Trump’s interest in Greenland also reflects a larger shift in global strategic competition over the Arctic. With climate change opening new maritime routes and exposing untapped resources, the Arctic has become an emerging arena of geopolitical rivalry.

China has asserted its interest in the region, controversially referring to itself as a “near-Arctic state” (Dams et al., 2020) and investing in Arctic infrastructure projects. Russia has expanded its military presence in the Arctic, revamping Soviet-era bases and deploying new weapons systems to reinforce its claims over northern waters (Rumer et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the U.S. has also increased its Arctic engagement, particularly through alliances with Canada and Nordic states, while also upgrading its military capabilities in the region (Pechko, 2025).

Though dismissed as unrealistic, Trump’s Greenland proposal signaled growing U.S. concern over Arctic geopolitics and highlighted the region’s rising strategic importance.

17. Case Study 4: U.S. Approach to North America (Canada, Mexico) and Trump’s Use of Economic Tariffs as a Political Tool

The U.S.-Canada relationship has long been defined by deep economic integration and a unique political dynamic. The inherent asymmetry between the two nations is well-captured in a phrase allegedly coined by Robert N. Thompson, former leader of the now-defunct Social Credit Party of Canada, “The Americans are our best friends, whether we like it or not”. While Canada

is highly dependent on the U.S. economy, it often finds itself in the position of having to push back against American pressure to assert its sovereignty.

Trump's approach to Canada has been shaped not only by economic considerations but also by domestic political factors on both sides of the border. With Canada in an election season, political parties—regardless of ideology—have strong incentives to demonstrate toughness against Trump, knowing that anti-Trump sentiment can be a useful political tool. This, in turn, affects the tone of U.S.-Canada relations, creating an environment where public confrontations may take precedence over quiet diplomacy.

One of the more unexpected developments in U.S.-Canada relations under Trump was the report that Justin Trudeau privately confirmed Trump was serious about his suggestion that Canada could become the 51st U.S. state (Yousif, 2025). While such an idea is dismissed outright in Canadian political discourse, the fact that Trump reportedly raised the issue reflects his willingness to challenge diplomatic norms in unconventional ways. Even as a symbolic statement, such remarks fuel nationalist reactions in Canada, reinforcing public skepticism about U.S. intentions and potentially complicating diplomatic cooperation.



*A hand sticking a small flag into Canada on a globe.
Copyright-free image by Lara Jameson from Pexels.*

More broadly, the mere mention of deeper U.S.-Canada integration raises speculative concerns: if Trump entertained this idea for Canada, could similar proposals surface for Mexico? Would Trump seek a new North American integration framework on different terms? While such scenarios remain unlikely in practical terms, the symbolic weight of such comments feeds broader debates about U.S. influence in the region.

A defining feature of Trump's trade policy has been his use of tariffs as a bargaining tool, often treating them as instruments of political leverage rather than purely economic measures. This has been particularly evident in his dealings with both Canada and Mexico, where tariffs have been used to pressure negotiating partners while simultaneously serving as a domestic political signal.

Trump's decision to target both Canada and Mexico simultaneously in trade disputes has sparked debate about his underlying strategic objectives. Several explanations have been proposed:

- **Creating a Narrative of Fairness:** By applying tariffs equally to both countries, Trump avoided the appearance of disproportionately targeting Mexico, making his policies appear more like a general rebalancing rather than a selective attack.
- **Reshaping Global Supply Chains:** Some analysts argue that Trump sought to restructure supply chains to shift production away from China and toward North America, using tariffs as a tool to push for a U.S.-centric trade bloc.
- **Catering to Domestic Business Interests:** Certain U.S. industries benefit from tariffs that make foreign competitors less competitive, raising the question of whether Trump's trade policies were driven by broader strategic vision or by sector-specific interests.

While the true rationale remains uncertain, it is clear that Trump sees tariffs not simply as economic measures, but as part of a broader negotiation strategy.

Historically, tariffs have been used for three main purposes:

- 1. Generating Government Revenue**
- 2. Protecting Domestic Industries**
- 3. Achieving Reciprocity and/or Building Leverage in a Negotiation**

In his public statements, Trump seems to make all three arguments but a deeper analysis reveals that many of his claims are likely misleading. First, he claims that the tariffs “make America rich again” (Nitzberg, 2025) but numerous economists have pointed out various problems with this concept. First, the overwhelming number of tariffs are paid by U.S. businesses importing goods, not by external foreign sources, which means their initial effect would likely be to reallocate more resources from consumers to the government.

Second, Trump claims that the tariffs would encourage both U.S. and foreign companies to manufacture more of their products in the country. However, as an excellent article in the NPR points out, “The idea here is to make, say, foreign cars more expensive, meaning Americans would buy fewer foreign cars. This is where a big contradiction comes in: if Americans buy fewer foreign cars, tariff revenue goes down” (Kurtzleben, 2025).

In addition, a structured protectionist strategy to shield domestic industries, such as steel, semiconductors, and advanced manufacturing, from foreign competition while they build up their competitiveness would involve consistent, long-term tariff policies. In contrast, Trump has employed them erratically, announcing and then removing or delaying the implementation of certain measures.

Meanwhile, representing a view widely shared by economists, former Chairman of the Senate Banking Committee Phil Gramm and former Treasury Secretary Larry Summers (2025) published an open letter urging the U.S. government not to adopt or expand tariffs as this would inflict long-term economic harm. Some of their key arguments are that: a) tariffs distort production, misallocating labor and capital; b) tariffs also raise prices, lower productivity and wages, slowing economic growth; c) a trade deficit is not inherently bad and can reflect a strong U.S. economy.

This means that it is most likely Trump sees tariffs as tools that give him short-term bargaining chips. By imposing them, Trump creates leverage in negotiations, a tactic he also previously deployed in the renegotiation of NAFTA, leading to the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA (Chatzky et al., 2020).

In theory, Trump’s administration could repurpose tariffs as part of a broader industrial strategy. However, under Trump 2.0, they appear to function primarily as short-term coercive tools—serving immediate political and symbolic goals, rather than forming part of a long-term strategic economic vision. This reflects the administration’s broader reliance on transactional diplomacy, where political optics and negotiating leverage often outweigh structural economic planning. It

also reflects the Jacksonian strand in Trump’s foreign policy thinking—assertive, unilateral, and grounded in transactional reciprocity.

IV. Global Responses and Challenges to Trump’s New Foreign Policy

18. Consequences of Coercive Diplomacy in the Western Hemisphere

Trump’s foreign policy approach has consistently relied on economic leverage, public pressure, and transactional diplomacy to achieve short-term objectives. The cases of Colombia, Panama, Greenland, and Canada provide distinct examples of how this strategy has played out throughout the Western Hemisphere during his second term so far. While Trump’s approach has brought him closer to achieving some of his goals, it is also potentially creating risks for the sustainability of U.S. influence in the long run.

A. Colombia: Short-Term Gains, Long-Term Diplomatic Erosion

Trump’s approach to Colombia illustrates the short-term effectiveness but long-term risks of coercive diplomacy. By publicly threatening tariffs unless Colombia complied with U.S. migration demands, Washington achieved its immediate goal—Colombia ultimately cooperated. However, the public nature of the threats undermined trust in U.S.-Colombian relations and left the Colombian government with little room to maneuver domestically.

This episode has certainly led to an erosion of long-term U.S. credibility among Colombian political circles. While Washington often assumes that resolved disputes are quickly forgotten, smaller states remember coercion far longer, shaping their future diplomatic decisions in ways that future U.S. administrations may not fully anticipate. This effect might remain long after the current Trump administration.

While there is no doubt that it will remain a close U.S. ally for the foreseeable future, over time Colombian governments may decide to reduce their dependence on Washington by diversifying partnerships, potentially deepening ties with China, regional organizations in Latin America or other rising powers.

B. Panama: Tactical Victory, Strategic Fragility

Trump’s success in pressuring Panama to withdraw from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) demonstrates that the U.S. can still exert direct influence over smaller states, particularly in Latin America. However, this case raises questions about the long-term effectiveness of such tactics.

One of them is whether Panama’s withdrawal from the BRI signals a lasting U.S. victory. Chinese engagement with other Latin American states continues,

and if uncertainty under Trump's administration continues, they will certainly view Beijing as a more reliable partner. In addition, many smaller countries in the region which could be prone to U.S. pressure may quietly establish less overt channels for sustaining relations with both China and other rising powers to avoid attracting attention and finding themselves over-reliant on the U.S in the future.

C. Greenland: Rhetorical Shockwaves and Arctic Ripples

The implications of Trump's suggestion to purchase Greenland go beyond the initial controversy. His rhetoric drew international attention to Greenland's unique status, potentially fueling Greenlandic independence movements. If the territory ever achieves full independence from Denmark (e.g., through a national referendum), it would likely damage U.S.-Danish relations, and certainly reshape Arctic security dynamics, raising new questions about who would influence the region.

Besides, Trump's push intensified global interest in Arctic affairs, reinforcing the strategic importance of the region in international politics. More broadly, this case also shows the long-reaching impact that Trump's statements can have when they are presented in a way that attracts sufficient attention and showcases the strength that these can have in the era of rapid information flow.

D. North America: Tariffs, Nationalism and Unintended Consequences

Trump's use of tariffs and economic leverage against Canada reflects a broader trend of treating trade policies as political bargaining chips. However, his public confrontations, including the unusual "51st State" remark, have reinforced Canadian nationalist sentiment, potentially complicating future relations.

With Canadian elections approaching, there will be overt short-term political posturing: political leaders have a strong incentive to take a tough stance against Trump. This is evident from the recent statements of both liberal candidate and newly appointed PM Mark Carney (2025) and conservative candidate Pierre Poilievre (CBC, 2025). This creates greater friction in the relationship, even though some degree of post-election recalibration is plausible.

There are some theories that Trump's recent disassociation with Poilievre, starting "[t]he Conservative that's running is, stupidly, no friend of mine" (Fox News, 2025), is a purposeful insult intended to make Poilievre appear strong and help him in the election against Carney (Blehar, 2025). However, this only comes after the U.S. administration provided Carney with a chance to position himself as a leading candidate by responding strongly to Trump's tariffs, so it is unclear how much strategic considerations are involved in his statements.

Trump’s tariffs triggered a similar wave of nationalist sentiment in Mexico, though the response from President Claudia Sheinbaum was markedly different from Trudeau’s confrontational tone. Embracing what she called a *cabeza fría* (“cool head”) strategy, Sheinbaum avoided escalating rhetoric and instead pursued a calibrated response that prioritized diplomacy without backing down on national interests (Najjar, 2025). Her strategy paid off: not only did she secure a partial reprieve on U.S. tariffs through direct negotiation with Trump, but she also saw a surge in domestic popularity, with approval ratings reaching as high as 85%. This is not only due to her measured approach, but also to her ability to channel patriotic pride while protecting economic stability (Green et al., 2025).

Despite the severe economic threat posed by the tariffs—potentially costing Mexico up to 4% of its GDP—Sheinbaum’s restraint earned her both popular and market confidence. Unlike Canada, where political posturing intensified amid elections, Sheinbaum’s government capitalized on its broader mandate and a supportive public mood, aided by stabilizing factors like robust remittance flows and increased welfare support. While the economic risks remain, Sheinbaum’s deft handling of Trump’s pressure has, for now, positioned her as a pragmatic leader capable of shielding Mexico’s interests while preserving room for future diplomatic flexibility. Still, Trump’s use of tariffs as a negotiation tool introduced uncertainty into trade relations, which may deter some forms of investment in North America for the time being.

E. The Mixed Legacy: Limits of Coercive Diplomacy

Trump’s economic and diplomatic pressure tactics have demonstrated the short-term effectiveness of U.S. leverage but also revealed the risks of over-reliance on coercion. While Trump’s approach worked in individual cases, its cumulative impact may weaken U.S. influence over time, as more countries adapt by hedging their bets and seeking greater autonomy from Washington. Whether these tactics will translate into a lasting U.S. advantage remains one of the most important questions for the future of American foreign policy. As global actors recalibrate their strategies in response to this new diplomatic reality, the next phase of international politics may well be defined not only by power, but by credibility, resilience, and the ability to adapt in a world no longer shaped by quiet consensus.

19. Chinese Responses to Trump’s Foreign Policy

There is an argument that Trump’s trade policies are not purely economic but also serve security functions. The administration’s focus on reshoring critical industries, such as semiconductors and defense-related manufacturing,

suggests an attempt to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign supply chains, aimed at ensuring long-term strategic resilience and countering China's rising global importance. As widely reported, Trump imposed an additional 10% tariffs on China (Shreman, 2025), which elicited various responses.

Beijing responded with countermeasures, filing complaints with the World Trade Organization and imposing retaliatory tariffs from 10 February 2025 on key American exports, including 15% on coal and liquefied natural gas, and 10% on crude oil, agricultural machinery and some automobiles (Zhu, 2025). These actions have ensured that the trade conflict remains a two-way struggle rather than a one-sided imposition of U.S. economic dominance.

Beyond trade disputes, Chinese companies have continued expanding into global markets, largely out of necessity. As China's domestic economy faces challenges, firms have sought new opportunities in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America (Ouyang, 2024; The Economist, 2024). In my view, this expansion is not solely driven by government directives but is also a natural response to market conditions. While Trump's policies may have created obstacles for Chinese firms in U.S. markets, they have not halted China's global economic engagement – and some even make a strong argument that American tariffs are helping to drive the expansion of Chinese companies overseas by creating an added incentive for them to do so (see, e.g., Bird, 2024).

One of the more unexpected aspects of Trump's presidency has been the way he is perceived by the Chinese public. While there is a tendency in Western discussions to treat China as a monolithic actor, the reality is that Chinese views on Trump's policies vary across different sectors. The public has a wide variety of opinions, ranging from harsh critics to individuals who make the argument that although Trump's policy is not good for China, it appears to align with the desires of the average U.S. citizen, and may even produce benefits for them.

Besides, policymakers, businesses, and academics in China actively debate the effectiveness of Trump's tariffs and broader U.S. strategy. There are many emerging newsletters, some of which are funded by think tanks and some which are developing as businesses with subscription models, which follow closely and translate into English the views primary of Chinese intellectuals, but also sometimes opinion-leaders and policymakers. I list five of the better-known ones (in alphabetical order) here, but there are certainly other smaller ones as well as newsletters in other languages that one could easily find up as well:

1. ChinAffairs: <https://www.chinaffairsplus.com>
2. The East is Read: <https://www.eastisread.com>
3. Pekingology: <https://www.pekingnology.com>
4. Sinification: <https://www.sinification.com>
5. Sinocism: <https://sinocism.com>

Some prominent Chinese scholars have produced notable responses to Trump’s re-election. For instance, Yan Xuetong (2024), best known for his theory of moral realism, makes the following argument in *Foreign Affairs*:

China’s leaders, however, do not look at Trump with fear. They learned a great deal from his first term. His propensity for economic protectionism will lead to further disputes and rising tensions, but Beijing believes that it can navigate such confrontations. Moreover, Trump’s dubious commitment to U.S. allies will encourage other countries to hedge their bets, building ties with Beijing to offset the unpredictability of Washington. The likelihood of military clashes with the United States is also low. Since Trump’s foreign policy has never evinced any deep ideological commitments, it seems unlikely that the competition between the two countries will take on the more destructive dimensions of the Cold War. Trump does not want to get enmeshed in wars and would much rather focus on domestic reforms. He will soon arrive in the White House with the intention of containing China, but Chinese leaders are not dreading his return.



Pan Wei (left) and Yan Xuetong (right), two of China’s leading political scientists. Official portraits from the University of Macau and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, respectively, placed against the background of a Chinese flag. Collage created by the Centre for Regional Integration.

Pan Wei (2011), formerly at Peking University and now at the University of Macau, offers a very different perspective. He has previously argued that China faces several key structural limitations in positioning itself for global leadership, including:

- A. A lack of strong ideological-religious foundation comparable to the West's Christian traditions or the Islamic world's political-religious movements. This secular nature of Chinese political thought makes it difficult for China to project moral authority on a global scale.
- B. China's use of a character-based writing system makes its language difficult to learn. Throughout history, dominant empires—Rome, Spain, France, Britain, and the U.S.—have spread their influence through widely adopted linguistic systems. English has become the global language of diplomacy, business, and academia, reinforcing Anglo-American cultural hegemony.

As for Trump, Pan's (2024) analysis on Trump is that his rise represents a rare moment of alignment between America's political elites and its general population. Historically, elite U.S. foreign policy decisions have often been disconnected from the concerns of ordinary Americans. For instance, during the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" strategy, most Americans were unaware of its significance, did not see China as a direct threat, and were more focused on domestic issues such as healthcare, job security, and infrastructure development.

By contrast, Trump's "America First" approach resonates more directly with the American public, as it prioritizes domestic economic concerns over abstract geopolitical maneuvering. His rejection of technocratic and globalist rhetoric in favor of transactional, nationalist policies makes his foreign policy more comprehensible to ordinary voters. This internal cohesion strengthens the U.S. as a state—national power depends not only on military capabilities and economic influence but also on the domestic legitimacy of its leadership. The bottom line of this argument is that if Trump can solidify elite-public alignment in his second term, it may enhance America's internal stability and prolong the longevity of the MAGA movement (or its future evolutions), even if it disrupts traditional alliances abroad.

While these are only two arbitrarily selected views of Chinese scholars and there are many more, they showcase the nuances and differences that emerge among influential thinkers and provide intriguing insights into the lines of thought that may influence some of the ways that Beijing views Trump.

20. Security Dimensions of Trump's Foreign Policy

While trade and economic policy have dominated Trump's foreign policy rhetoric, security concerns also deserve considerable attention. The world is in a period of heightened geopolitical tensions, with the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' (2025) Doomsday Clock set at 89 seconds to midnight, closer than ever before. This reflects growing risks, including nuclear escalation, great power competition, and the deterioration of global arms control agreements.

One of the most pressing security issues facing the U.S. is the future of NATO and European defense. Trump has repeatedly insisted that European allies increase their military spending, arguing that the U.S. should not bear the financial burden of the alliance alone. While this position aligns with long-standing U.S. concerns over NATO burden-sharing, it raises strategic questions about Europe's ability to develop independent military capabilities.

There are strong indications that the European Union member states are moving towards developing in this direction. As of 22 March 2025, France has just announced that it will add an extra 1.7 billion euros to defense expenditure via public-investment vehicles (Kirby, 2025), while the German parliament has approved plans for spending as much as 1 trillion euros in civilian and defense investments (Benoit, 2025). Meanwhile, a joint EU 2030 defense plan is underway (Ruitenbergh, 2025). If the European Union moves toward greater defense autonomy, it will certainly reduce the bloc's reliance on the U.S., leading to a significant shift in transatlantic relations, and enabling Europe to have more autonomy in potentially reshaping its global strategy.

Recent events related to the war in Ukraine reveal a lot about the Trump administration's approach to the conflict. First, allowing a significant diplomatic incident to take place during Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to the White House on 28 February 2025 shows Trump has de facto allowed a cutoff of direct communication to Zelenskyy in the near future (Bennett, 2025). Zelenskyy has subsequently apologized for the incident (Irwin, 2025), but this does not change the rupture in the direct communication channel at the highest level. This means that: a) future communication must be conducted through appointed officials and representatives, as was done during the recent and upcoming rounds of talks in Saudi Arabia (Gambrell, 2025); b) Volodymyr Zelenskyy's political career will most likely end abruptly whenever the war ends, no matter the eventual outcome.

Second, the pressure that Trump's administration put on Zelenskyy during their meeting at the White House and in the subsequent period (e.g., through cutting off access to U.S. intelligence; see Gecsoyler, 2025) reveals a propensity to use direct pressure to push for achieving desired outcomes in the short run. This approach mirrors that he uses toward leaders in the Western hemisphere

such as Gustavo Petro and Justin Trudeau, as explained in the case studies above. In other words, Trump appears to believe that strength matters, reminiscent of an old saying that “might makes right”.

Third, direct talks with Putin, without prior coordination with Ukraine or European allies, confirm this. Furthermore, this is an acknowledgement that Trump believes great power relations are the most essential aspect of international politics, and the fate of small states can be decided as a secondary outcome of this. This is an implicit sign that he is acknowledging an increasingly strong trend towards multipolarity.

Fourth, the partial ceasefire deal that was agreed does not signify substantial progress, but gives the Trump administration an opportunity to declare a small victory and “free their hands” to focus on other priorities further. One issue here lies in the apparent divergences between the readouts of the readouts of the Trump-Putin phone call by Washington and Moscow (Mesa, 2025). Another, more major one lies in that is that Russia has effectively adopted a “package deal” tactic where no lasting piece will be achieved until its core demands are satisfied, at least to some degree. This ‘package deal’ approach—often summarized as ‘nothing is agreed until everything is agreed’—stands in contrast to Trump’s apparent preference for the so-called ‘salami tactic’: breaking negotiations into smaller, manageable components. (Jensen, 2024, p. 111).

Overall, my readout of the strategy adopted by the Trump’s administration is that while important, the issue of achieving peace in Ukraine is not a top priority at this stage. Instead, the ongoing developments are intended to achieve some progress through agreement on “low hanging fruit” such as ceasing strikes on energy facilities, delay discussions of more difficult issues to a later stage and focus his time and energy on more imminent issues, both domestically and in terms of foreign policy. The same appears to be true about the conflict in Gaza as well, where despite initially showing great interest and initiative in taking control of the area, after several months Trump has not continued that momentum and chosen to deal with other issues first.

This is because – beyond his obvious priorities in domestic policy and reform, which are outside of the scope of this paper – his foreign policy focus is not on the EU, Ukraine, or Gaza. Instead, as indicated above he has two areas of focus: first, the Western hemisphere; and second, the Indo-Pacific, most likely seen in this order. As for the latter, it is especially important in relation to conflicts that might emerge in relation to China’s rise.

It is my estimation that trump does not want more conflicts to emerge – even though he appears to be joking when stating his ambitions to receive a Nobel Peace prize and it is unclear if they are real, there is no doubt that he wants to

position himself as a peacemaker in U.S. domestic politics. This is what the American public wants, after decades of interventionist policy abroad which has cost the lives of many Americans as well as trillions of taxpayer money.

Still, U.S.-China relations remain one of the most significant geopolitical flashpoints and any serious analyst should monitor four key areas. They are: the Korean Peninsula; Taiwan; the South China Sea; and the East China Sea. Each of these regions presents unique risks, but together they form a broader pattern of growing tensions between Washington and Beijing. The possibility of miscalculation in any of these areas could lead to direct military confrontation, making strategic management of U.S.-China relations a top priority for the coming years.

The role of emerging technologies in warfare further complicates the security landscape. The increasing reliance on artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, and hypersonic weapons is reshaping military competition, with the U.S., China, and Russia all investing heavily in these areas. While the U.S. retains an advantage in many of these technologies, the gap is narrowing, raising concerns about the future balance of power.

21. Perceptions, Misperceptions, and the Deepseek Episode

One foundational work that relates to the previous section on security policy is Robert Jervis’s *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (1976), which argues that states often act on the basis of how they interpret other actors’ intentions, rather than on concrete facts. This book came at a time when the U.S. and Soviet Union were locked in a nuclear standoff, and there was widespread fear of accidental escalation.

Jervis explains how even rational leaders could stumble into war not because they wanted to, but because of false assumptions about the other side’s intentions. He also identifies several key dynamics—such as the tendency to see the behavior of others as more coordinated and threatening than it is, or to assume others see our actions as we intend them. It is imperative for the Trump administration to seek avoiding misperceptions, which can lead to escalations, missed opportunities for cooperation, or overly aggressive posturing in the realm of security policy.

However, misperceptions can take place in other sectors as well. One of my major concerns is the presence of potential misconceptions, structural misunderstandings, and policy miscalculations in U.S.-China relations.

While much of the U.S. policy discourse fixates on China’s rise as a challenge to American global leadership, the extent to which Washington accurately assesses China’s strategic behavior, technological advances, and internal

policy debates remains debatable. On the other side, China has developed a more nuanced understanding of Trump's leadership style, leading to adjustments in its diplomatic and economic strategies.

One of the most striking patterns in U.S. foreign policy discourse is the tendency to underestimate China's technological progress, leading to repeated moments of shock and overreaction when Beijing achieves significant breakthroughs. This is evident in fields such as artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum computing, and advanced manufacturing, where U.S. policymakers strangely appear to be consistently caught off guard by developments which would be unsurprising to anyone who works with or in China.

One possibility is that the U.S. political class is simply unaware of the state-of-the-art technological progress that is taking place in other parts of the world, which is taking place in China and might soon also pick up in other countries as well. Another possibility is that they are well-briefed but simply refuse to admit the obvious, that China has largely caught up with the U.S. in terms of technological development, and other rising powers may eventually do so to varying degrees.

The recent emergence of the Deepseek-V2 AI model shocked Western markets as well. The model exhibits a performance rivalling large U.S. ones but only allegedly cost around USD 5.6 million to train (Goldman and Egan, 2025); some have criticized the number, explaining that earlier experiments and hardware cost hundreds of millions of dollars (Field, 2025). Others have pointed out that Deepseek employed a low-cost AI distillation technique which was only possible to employ due to the fact that ChatGPT already exists (Wu and Bosa, 2025). However, the development of ChatGPT in its current form certainly cost at least hundreds of millions, and hundreds of Western tech companies generally have expenses that far exceed their Chinese counterparts. In January 2025, Trump also announced a USD 500 billion private investment in AI infrastructure (Holland, 2025) – a staggering number by any measure.

The U.S. continues to produce state-of-the-art innovations in AI and other fields. However, the cost at which this happens is prompting me to question its efficiency. Therefore, I would encourage more debates on this issue, since it appears that both state-backed and fully private Chinese companies are currently able to compete with significantly lower budgets. This is not merely an observation from the news cycle, but also from my experience in business. More specifically, I would suggest further research on the allocation of the staggering U.S. budgets to examine what parts of them are used productively, as opposed to covering bureaucratic overhead, corporate bonuses, and marketing costs rather than actual technological development. This dynamic suggests the U.S. should consider whether the real challenge for its competition with China might be a misallocation of resources.

Ultimately, Washington must decide whether its strategic goal is to contain China, compete with it, or seek pragmatic coexistence. The effectiveness of Trump’s foreign policy will depend not just on his tactics but on how well the U.S. is able to adapt to the structural realities of an evolving global order.

22. U.S.-China Competition in the Global South

Another element of U.S. foreign policy, which will become increasingly important, is its relationship with the Global South. This is shaped by historical legacies, shifting economic and security dynamics, and the evolving balance of power. In many developing states, there are various expressions of pro- and anti-American sentiments captured in the otherwise conceptually ambiguous terms Americanism and anti-Americanism (Friedman, 2012).

My view is that many states in the Global South are generally pragmatic and assess their relationships with Washington based on strategic interests, economic benefits, and historical experiences. This means that their positioning can often be nuanced or align with the U.S. on some issues, but not on others. Opposition to U.S. influence does not always stem from ideological hostility—often, it is a reaction to Washington’s foreign policy inconsistencies, its tendency to attach conditions to economic partnerships, and its historical involvement in regime changes across the developing world. Many states in the Global South, particularly those with colonial histories, remain deeply skeptical of external interference from any country.

China’s growing presence in the Global South offers a compelling alternative to U.S. engagement. Unlike Washington, which often ties aid, trade agreements, and military cooperation to governance reforms or political conditions, Beijing offers economic partnerships without demanding ideological alignment. This distinction is particularly significant for leaders in developing countries who seek investment and infrastructure support without external interference in their domestic politics.

China’s foreign policy presents three key advantages:

- **Predictability** – Unlike U.S. policy, which shifts dramatically with each administration, China’s approach remains largely consistent.
- **Transactional Engagement** – Beijing does not insist on democracy promotion or structural reforms as conditions for cooperation.
- **Economic Prioritization** – China’s initiatives, such as the BRI as well as concrete infrastructure projects, yield tangible benefits for the target countries.

This has led many Global South countries to view China as a pragmatic partner rather than an ideological ally. While some critics warn of potential debt dependency through projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, many governments see China's engagement as less intrusive than Western aid, which often comes with conditions related to governance, transparency, or alignment with democratic norms.

This does not mean that China is universally favored—concerns over sovereignty, debt, and economic dependency persist in regions such as Africa and Latin America. However, Beijing's strategic patience and long-term investment approach contrast sharply with the U.S.'s often unpredictable and interventionist policies. If given a choice between dealing with Trump's transactional unpredictability or Xi Jinping's structured, long-term commitments, many leaders in the Global South would likely choose the latter—not out of ideological preference, but because China's approach is more predictable and easier to navigate.

One potential key miscalculation in U.S. foreign policy is the assumption that states in the Global South share similar strategic logic and institutional priorities as their Western counterparts. This misreading stems from a lack of recognition of the unique historical experiences, economic constraints, and domestic political realities that shape decision-making in the developing world.

For example, Western policymakers expect nations to take clear stances on conflicts like the Russia-Ukraine war, assuming that support for Ukraine is a natural choice. However, many states in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia have refused to take sides, viewing the conflict as a European geopolitical struggle rather than a global security crisis. Their rationale is simple:

- Economic priorities outweigh ideological alignment – These countries rely on trade with both the U.S. and China and seek to preserve economic stability by avoiding hard choices.
- Historical skepticism toward Western interventions – Many Global South nations have firsthand experience with Western-led interventions that resulted in political destabilization (e.g., Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan). This has made them cautious about supporting Western strategic initiatives.
- Shifting political dynamics – Domestic political calculations often take precedence over foreign policy alignment. Leaders in these nations are more concerned with inflation, debt restructuring, and economic growth than aligning with Western strategic narratives.

The same logic applies to the Israel-Gaza conflict, where a significant number of Global South states strongly support Palestinian self-determination due to

their own histories with colonialism and anti-imperialist movements. When Western nations pressure them to take a pro-Israel stance, many respond not with opposition, but with indifference—not asking “why don’t you support Israel?” but rather “why should we?” If the U.S. chooses to disregard the concerns of the Global South states and does not present them options for engagement aligned with their logic and priorities, it could possibly lose ground in terms of global influence.



Official portraits of 47th U.S. President Donald Trump and Vice-President J.D. Vance. Photos released for public use by The White House. Collage created by the Centre for Regional Integration.



A red baseball cap with the slogan “Make America Great Again”, resting on a Bible with a map of the U.S. in the background. Copyright-free image by Natilyn Hicks.

23. Conclusion

This paper has argued that U.S. foreign policy under Trump's second term reflects a broader structural shift in the global order—away from ideological binaries and rigid alliances, and toward a world of strategic pragmatism, transactional diplomacy, and contested multipolarity. Rather than a return to Cold War dynamics, we are witnessing a convergence of economic models, growing regional differentiation of power, and the emergence of role specialization among states. Trump's approach, while controversial and often coercive, is in many ways a reaction to this changing environment—marked by a preference for bilateral deals over multilateralism, public pressure over quiet diplomacy, and economic tools as instruments of power projection.

Yet, this repositioning comes at a cost. While Trump's tactics may yield short-term wins, they often erode trust, trigger nationalist backlashes, and push allies and adversaries alike toward strategic hedging. The cases of Colombia, Panama, Greenland, Canada, and Mexico demonstrate that U.S. pressure can succeed in shifting behavior—but not necessarily in cultivating long-term alignment or goodwill. In parallel, China's steady engagement in the Global South and growing technological parity challenge the notion that the U.S. can remain globally dominant through economic leverage alone.

The deeper question this paper raises is whether the United States is prepared to lead in a world it no longer structurally dominates. If Trump's foreign policy represents a retreat from idealism and an embrace of realism, then its ultimate success may depend not on how forcefully Washington projects power, but how effectively it adapts to a fragmented, pluralistic, and often skeptical international environment. Can the U.S. define a sustainable role for itself that goes beyond dominance and recognizes interdependence? Can it invest in long-term credibility rather than short-term wins?

If the emerging world order is indeed one of overlapping spheres of influence and differentiated roles, then the challenge is no longer how to defeat rivals, but how to coexist with them—without miscalculation, without illusions, and without reverting to nostalgia for a unipolar moment that has passed.

The choices made by Donald Trump and his successors will shape not only the fate of U.S. strategy, but the architecture of global politics for decades to come.

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