

Trump's Second Term and the Return of 'America First': Continuity, Institutions, and Global Impact in 2025

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the continuity and transformation of United States foreign policy under Donald Trump's second administration in 2025, focusing on three dimensions—policy continuity, institutional response, and global impact. Using a qualitative, library-based approach and applying neorealist, liberal, and constructivist frameworks, the research analyzes decisions such as the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord, disengagement from the World Health Organization, and the “Liberation Day” tariff initiative. Findings reveal that Trump's policies demonstrate ideological persistence rather than strategic innovation, reaffirming the primacy of sovereignty and unilateralism in American foreign policy. While domestic and international institutions voiced opposition, their material constraints limited any effective resistance, confirming the neorealist logic of state dominance. However, partial liberal and constructivist resilience remains evident in adaptive institutional behaviors and evolving global norms. The study concludes that Trump's 2025 foreign policy contributes to the transition from a liberal international order toward a pluralist, ideologically contested system, where cooperation endures amid renewed great-power competition.

Keywords: *foreign policy, Trump, America First, United State*

Penelitian ini menganalisis kesinambungan dan transformasi kebijakan luar negeri Amerika Serikat di bawah pemerintahan kedua Donald Trump pada tahun 2025 dengan menyoroti tiga dimensi utama: kontinuitas kebijakan, respon kelembagaan, dan dampak global. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis kepustakaan serta menggunakan kerangka teori neorealisme, liberalisme, dan konstruktivisme, penelitian ini menelaah kebijakan seperti penarikan AS dari Perjanjian Paris, keluarnya dari Organisasi Kesehatan Dunia (WHO), dan inisiatif tarif “Liberation Day”. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kebijakan Trump mencerminkan kesinambungan ideologis dibandingkan inovasi strategis, menegaskan kembali dominasi kedaulatan nasional dan unilateralisme dalam kebijakan luar negeri AS. Meskipun lembaga domestik dan internasional menunjukkan perlawanan, keterbatasan struktural membatasi efektivitasnya, sejalan dengan logika neorealis mengenai dominasi negara. Namun, ketahanan liberal dan konstruktivis tetap tampak melalui adaptasi kelembagaan dan perubahan norma global. Kesimpulannya, kebijakan luar negeri Trump pada 2025 mempercepat transisi dari tatanan internasional liberal menuju sistem yang lebih plural dan dipenuhi kontestasi ideologis, di mana kerja sama tetap bertahan di tengah meningkatnya kompetisi kekuatan besar.

Kata Kunci: *kebijakan luar negeri, Trump, America First, Amerika Serikat*

Introduction

The foreign policy of the United States has long shaped the global political order, influencing trade systems, security alliances, and international institutions. As the world's largest economy and military power, U.S. strategic behavior often sets the tone for global governance. The re-election of Donald Trump in 2025 marks a critical moment in contemporary international relations. Trump's first term (2017–2021) disrupted established multilateral norms through the "America First" doctrine, characterized by economic nationalism, skepticism toward international organizations, and a transactional view of diplomacy (McIntosh, 2020). His policies—such as withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accord, imposing tariffs on major trading partners, and questioning long-standing security alliances—reshaped the perception of U.S. leadership in world politics (Bongso, 2022; Aggarwal & Reddie, 2020).

The continuity of these tendencies in his second term signals a renewed phase of U.S. exceptionalism. Early 2025 decisions, including the second withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the U.S. exit from the World Health Organization, illustrate Trump's persistent disregard for collective international problem-solving (Wong, 2020). These actions not only weaken institutional trust but also increase uncertainty in multilateral governance mechanisms, already strained by challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate crises, and the war in Ukraine. The United States' behavior thus reopens questions about the resilience of liberal international order and the adaptability of global governance structures in the face of unilateralism (Ikenberry, 2020; Nye, 2021).

Scholarly analyses of Trump's first presidency emphasize his distinctive foreign policy style that merged domestic populism with international disruption (Dueck, 2019; McIntosh, 2020). Yet, most existing studies concentrate on the 2017–2021 period, focusing on his withdrawal from global compacts and trade renegotiations (Aggarwal & Reddie, 2020). Few works have explored how Trump's return to power in a dramatically transformed post-pandemic world may reshape U.S. alliances and influence power dynamics between major actors such as China, Russia, and the European Union. The evolving geopolitical landscape demands renewed analysis grounded in both classical and contemporary international relations theories to capture the nuances of his renewed foreign policy agenda.

This study aims to fill that gap by assessing Trump's second-term foreign policy trajectory using three theoretical lenses: neorealism, liberalism, and constructivism. Neorealism helps explain how systemic power competition and security dilemmas shape U.S. strategic choices (Waltz, 1979). Liberalism provides insight into the erosion of institutional cooperation and economic interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1989), while constructivism reveals the importance of ideology, identity, and discourse in Trump's policy rationalization (Wendt, 1999). By combining these approaches, the study provides a multidimensional understanding of Trump's decision-making style and its broader implications for international relations.

The novelty of this research lies in its forward-looking analytical orientation. While much of the existing literature addresses Trump's first term as a historical phenomenon, this study situates his second-term policies within emerging global contexts of uncertainty, including pandemic recovery, environmental governance, and renewed great-power rivalry. By focusing on the 2025 context, it seeks to explain how Trump's approach reinforces the tension between national sovereignty and global interdependence, and how this tension could reshape the liberal international order. Unlike previous studies that predominantly assess Trump's first presidency retrospectively, this article offers a

real-time analysis of his second administration's unfolding impacts, providing urgent insights into evolving global power dynamics.

Therefore, the objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to analyze the defining features of Trump's foreign policy in his second term; (2) to evaluate its implications for global cooperation and institutional credibility; and (3) to contribute to the broader theoretical discussion about the resilience of multilateralism in an age of populist resurgence. Ultimately, this study offers not only empirical insights into U.S. foreign policy but also theoretical contributions to understanding the evolving dynamics of global governance in the twenty-first century.

This research applies three principal theoretical approaches in International Relations: neorealism; liberalism; and constructivism, to interpret the continuity and transformation of U.S. foreign policy under Donald Trump's second administration in 2025.

From a neorealist perspective, state behavior is driven by the distribution of power and the structural constraints of the international system (Waltz, 1979). Trump's preference for unilateralism and transactional alliances reflects the neorealist assumption that states prioritize relative gains and national survival over cooperative ideals. His focus on economic nationalism and defense self-reliance illustrates the logic of self-help in an anarchic world order.

In contrast, liberalism emphasizes interdependence and the role of international institutions in mitigating conflict and fostering cooperation (Keohane & Nye, 1989). Trump's withdrawal from multilateral agreements, such as the Paris Climate Accord and the World Health Organization, reveals a departure from liberal institutionalist principles. The diminishing influence of global governance mechanisms under his leadership underscores the fragility of cooperation when national interests dominate.

Meanwhile, constructivism highlights the significance of identity, norms, and ideas in shaping foreign policy (Wendt, 1999). Trump's political rhetoric—centered on national sovereignty, cultural exceptionalism, and "America First"—demonstrates how ideational factors influence policy choices beyond material considerations. His worldview frames international relations as a competition of values and prestige rather than shared norms.

Together, these three frameworks provide a multidimensional understanding of Trump's second-term foreign policy. They allow this study to interpret U.S. actions not merely as power calculations, but also as reflections of domestic ideology and institutional disengagement from the liberal international order. The integration of these three frameworks enables the analysis to address strategic behavior alongside ideational and institutional factors that influence contemporary foreign policy.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design using a library-based analytical approach, appropriate for examining complex political and diplomatic phenomena through interpretive reasoning rather than numerical measurement (Creswell, 2014). The research explores the continuity and transformation of U.S. foreign policy under Donald Trump's second administration by analyzing textual data and narratives from multiple credible sources.

The data collection process draws upon secondary materials including academic journal articles, think-tank reports, government policy documents, and reputable media coverage published between 2020 and 2025. These were complemented by peer-reviewed journal articles and institutional analyses retrieved from reputable databases. Source selection followed three criteria: (1) relevance to foreign policy and international relations; (2) credibility and factual reliability; and (3) accessibility for verification. Although relying on secondary sources may limit access to insider perspectives, triangulating multiple credible outlets ensures a balanced and reliable interpretation.

For data analysis, the study adopts thematic content analysis, identifying recurring patterns and interpretive frames across official statements, scholarly discussions, and media narratives. The analysis focuses on three main policy areas observed during early 2025: (1) the renewed U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord; (2) disengagement from the World Health Organization; and (3) the declaration of “Liberation Day” targeting trade partners. Each theme is examined through the lenses of neorealism, liberalism, and constructivism, enabling a triangulated interpretation of Trump’s foreign policy behavior. Analytical rigor is ensured by comparing perspectives from different source categories—academic, institutional, and media—to achieve contextual depth and theoretical consistency (Neuman, 2014).

Results and Discussion

Building upon the methodological framework described above, the findings of this study are derived from a systematic interpretation of the selected academic, institutional, and media sources. The analysis focuses on how Donald Trump’s second-term foreign policy reflects both continuity and evolution in U.S. global behavior. By categorizing the data thematically, three key dimensions emerge—policy continuity, institutional response, and global impact—each providing analytical leverage to interpret the evolution of Trump’s foreign policy within neorealist, liberal, and constructivist frameworks by offering insight into the broader implications of the “America First” agenda in 2025.

Policy Continuity

The early months of Donald Trump’s second administration in 2025 reflect a pronounced continuity with both his first presidential term (2017–2021) and the ideological rhetoric of his 2016 and 2024 campaigns. The central principle of “America First” by prioritizing national sovereignty and economic self-reliance, remains the guiding principle of U.S. foreign policy. Across three major areas—the renewed withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord, disengagement from the World Health Organization (WHO), and the declaration of “Liberation Day” trade measures—the administration has reaffirmed its skepticism toward multilateral institutions and its preference for transactional diplomacy. These patterns collectively demonstrate the persistence of a sovereignty, first worldview that privileges autonomy over interdependence.

Renewed Withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord

Trump’s decision in February 2025 to once again withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord mirrors his earlier exit in 2017, which had been one of his administration’s first major foreign policy moves. From a neorealist perspective, this repetition underscores the state’s prioritization of sovereignty and material interest over global environmental cooperation (Waltz, 1979). The administration’s justification that the accord “unfairly burdens U.S. industries while empowering rivals like China”, reflects the structural

assumption that international agreements constrain relative gains (Aggarwal & Reddie, 2020).

However, viewed through a liberal view, this decision signals a weakening of collective governance mechanisms designed to address shared global challenges. During his first term, Trump's withdrawal destabilized international climate commitments, yet re-engagement under President Biden (2021–2024) briefly restored confidence in U.S. multilateralism. The 2025 withdrawal thus represents a regression in institutional trust and a direct challenge to the liberal ideal of cooperative problem-solving (Keohane & Nye, 1989).

From a constructivist standpoint, this move is also discursive as it symbolically reaffirming America's exceptionalism and its self-image as an independent actor unbound by international norms (Wendt, 1999). During his 2024 campaign, Trump emphasized economic nationalism and proposed tariff reforms including a universal baseline rate, reflecting the continuation of his "America First" approach from his first term. This rhetoric aligns with subsequent policy actions that frame climate and trade issues as expressions of U.S. sovereignty rather than global cooperation

Disengagement from the World Health Organization (WHO)

The U.S. withdrawal from the WHO in January 2025, announced with similar language to Trump's 2020 decision, again demonstrates strategic continuity rooted in unilateral skepticism. Trump framed the WHO as "inefficient and politically compromised,". Trump noted that the WHO continues to demand unfairly onerous payments from the United States, far out of proportion with other countries' assessed payments, such as China (Health Policy Watch, 2020).

From a neorealist perspective, this reflects the primacy of domestic control over health security, illustrating the realist principle that states rely on self-help in times of uncertainty. Yet, under liberal theory, this move represents a breakdown of interdependence and trust within the global health regime. The WHO's reliance on U.S. funding and technical leadership means that such withdrawal weakens collective capacity to address transnational crises (Ikenberry, 2020).

Through a constructivist lens, Trump's decision reiterates an identity narrative by portraying the United States as a victim of global bureaucracy. By politicizing health cooperation, Trump extends domestic populist narratives into foreign policy, reinforcing cultural exceptionalism and domestic pride (McIntosh, 2020). This identity-driven policy continuity reveals how norms of sovereignty and nationalism have been internalized as the moral rationale for disengagement.

The "Liberation Day" Trade Declaration

The "Liberation Day" policy, announced in April 2025, introduced a 10% baseline tariff on imports from key partners and reciprocal tariff, justified as a measure to "free American workers from globalist exploitation" (CSIS, 2025). This initiative directly echoes Trump's earlier trade war with China (2018–2020) and renegotiation of NAFTA into USMCA, revealing strong structural and ideational consistency.

Under a neorealist interpretation, these policies represent the pursuit of economic security through relative gains. Trump's protectionism embodies state-centric competition, treating trade not as a mutually beneficial exchange but as a zero-sum arena. The liberal perspective, conversely, views this as an erosion of the interdependent trading system that underpins global stability (Nye, 2021). By undermining multilateral

trade norms, the policy exacerbates global uncertainty and may ultimately harm U.S. allies.

From a constructivist viewpoint, "Liberation Day" is symbolic as a performative act translating nationalist rhetoric into economic policy. It operationalizes the ideological continuity of "America First 2.0" by transforming campaign slogans into governance practice. Thus, Trump's 2025 trade strategy is not a departure from past policy but its ideological culmination.

The parallelism between Trump's first and second administrations illustrates not policy innovation but ideological persistence. His 2024 campaign merely rearticulated long-held priorities for sovereignty, protectionism, and institutional skepticism that had defined his earlier presidency. From a neorealist perspective, the pursuit of unilateral control reaffirms the centrality of state power in an anarchic order. From a liberal view, this continuity undermines multilateral norms and weakens collective institutions. From a constructivist lens, it represents the institutionalization of nationalist identity in foreign policy practice. Thus, the 2025 foreign policy trajectory is best understood as a deliberate reaffirmation of Trump's long-standing doctrine rather than a strategic adaptation to new global realities.

Institutional Response

The institutional reactions to Donald Trump's early 2025 foreign policy decisions, particularly the renewed withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the "Liberation Day" trade initiative, demonstrate the enduring tension between state sovereignty and institutional interdependence. Consistent with neorealist expectations, both domestic and international institutions exhibited limited capacity to constrain the United States when national interests were perceived to be at stake. These responses, ranging from congressional criticism to allied diplomatic concern, reaffirm the structural asymmetry that defines global politics and supports the neorealist notion that institutions primarily reflect the distribution of power rather than reshape it (Mearsheimer, 1994; Waltz, 1979).

Within the United States, early 2025 revealed persistent friction between the Trump administration and domestic policy institutions, yet these constraints proved largely symbolic. Congressional oversight mechanisms offered limited resistance: despite public debate over the Paris Accord withdrawal, no statutory barrier prevented the president from acting unilaterally, since international environmental agreements remain subject to executive discretion rather than legislative ratification.

Internationally, responses to the 2025 policy agenda were swift but largely symbolic, illustrating the limited enforcement capacity of multilateral institutions. The European Union issued a joint declaration expressing "regret" over the Paris Accord exit and reaffirmed its commitment to climate cooperation "with or without U.S. leadership. However, beyond diplomatic statements, the EU avoided economic retaliation, reflecting a realist calculation to preserve transatlantic trade stability.

In the global health sphere, the WHO's Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has expressed regret about the U.S. withdrawal from the organization. He described the U.S. withdrawal as a "lose-lose" situation, highlighting its impact on partnership and emphasizing that no country should be outside of the WHO (Health Policy Watch, 2025). In a statement issued in January 2025, Tedros urged the U.S. to reconsider its decision, noting the long-standing collaboration between the U.S. and WHO in addressing global health threats and saving lives, but the organization lacked institutional mechanisms to enforce compliance.

The situation mirrors the 2020 experience, where WHO officials relied on soft appeals rather than coercive measures, again demonstrating that institutions depend on the voluntary cooperation of powerful states. As Mearsheimer (1994) argues, international institutions persist not because they constrain power, but because powerful states find them useful instruments for selective engagement. Trump's approach by selective withdrawal combined with bilateral health and trade negotiations exemplifies this instrumental logic

In the economic domain, the "Liberation Day" trade initiative prompted critical reactions from U.S. trade partners. China and Brazil, formally initiated complaints through the World Trade Organization (WTO) dispute settlement mechanism (Embassy of the People's Republic of China, 2025; Tempo, 2025). Yet, the process remained stalled due to the U.S. blockade of new appellate appointments since 2019.

Major economies such as China and the European Union also announced "reciprocal tariff adjustments," but avoided escalating trade conflict to prevent systemic instability. This pragmatic restraint aligns with neorealist predictions: weaker or interdependent states adapt to hegemonic behavior rather than fundamentally contest it.

The institutional responses to Trump's second-term policies reveal three interlinked dynamics consistent with neorealism. First, domestic institutions lack structural independence in foreign policy, where executive decisions dominate when national interest is invoked. Second, international organizations remain normatively influential but materially constrained, functioning as coordination mechanisms rather than binding authorities. Third, power asymmetry continues to define global cooperation: even when collective opposition arises, powerful states like the U.S. can unilaterally disengage with limited material consequence.

However, the persistence of rhetorical reaffirmations of cooperation from actors like the EU and WHO indicates partial liberal and constructivist resilience for a willingness to sustain norms even when enforcement fails. These mixed outcomes underscore a transitional phase in the global system, where institutional adaptation coexists with realist dominance. The limited ability of institutions to constrain the U.S.

Global Impact

The global repercussions of Donald Trump's second-term foreign policy in early 2025 reveal the profound effects of sustained unilateralism on both the structure and norms of international relations. Across economic, environmental, and institutional domains, the 2025 policy trajectory demonstrates how the continuation of the "America First" doctrine reshapes global order—accelerating power fragmentation, weakening cooperative mechanisms, and transforming the discursive foundations of international legitimacy.

From a neorealist perspective, the United States' renewed withdrawals and protectionist policies signify the reassertion of state autonomy in an anarchic system. The exit from the Paris Climate Accord and the WHO, coupled with the "Liberation Day" trade initiative, repositions the U.S. as a self-help actor prioritizing relative gains over collective welfare (Waltz, 1979). This strategic retrenchment creates structural opportunities for rival powers, particularly China and Russia, to expand their influence in global governance arenas.

Through its Health Silk Road initiative, strategic personnel placement, and growing influence among developing nations, Beijing is carving a path to global health leadership that doesn't require huge fund to WHO (Huang, 2025). China could increase its WHO

influence without matching U.S. contributions by leveraging its support from countries part of the Belt and Road Initiative and championing the goal of universal health coverage by 2030. China's recent \$50 billion commitment to African development for 2025 through 2027, which includes establishing joint medical centers, deploying 2,000 medical personnel, and supporting the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, marks a \$10 billion increase from 2021. That funding also makes headway on achieving universal health coverage.

In the other area, a joint declaration between China and Russia pledged to strengthen bilateral investment in low-carbon sectors, including renewable energy and carbon markets showed the presence of the two countries in environmental issue (Asia Times, 2025).

Under liberal institutionalism, however, the persistence of cooperation despite U.S. withdrawal underscores the resilience of institutional interdependence. While the American exit weakened collective mechanisms, it also stimulated adaptive institutional innovations. I

International organizations like the World Bank and WTO began exploring alternative frameworks for funding and trade mediation that reduced dependency on U.S. participation (World Bank, 2025; WTO, 2025). This adaptive response affirms the liberal view that institutions, once embedded, can survive hegemonic decline by fostering new networks of cooperation (Keohane & Nye, 1989).

From a constructivist standpoint, the global impact extends beyond material structures to the ideational sphere. Trump's persistent rhetoric of "economic liberation" and "sovereignty restoration" reframed the normative discourse of global politics. These narratives contributed to the rise of a post-liberal international order characterized by competing definitions of legitimacy and identity (Wendt, 1999; McIntosh, 2020). U.S. disengagement inspired nationalist or semi-sovereign policy reorientations in several regions: members of ASEAN began emphasizing "strategic autonomy," while African and Middle-Eastern states strengthened ties with China's Belt and Road Initiative. This diffusion of alternative norms reveals how ideational change, rather than material constraint alone, drives systemic transformation, consistent with constructivist insights into the co-constitution of power and identity.

The analysis demonstrates that Trump's second-term foreign policy consolidates a long-term shift toward fragmented global governance. Structurally, it accelerates great-power competition and reduces the functional capacity of multilateral institutions; normatively, it entrenches sovereignty-based legitimacy at the expense of cooperative identity. Yet, the endurance of institutional initiatives and cooperations signals that liberal and constructivist dynamics still provide partial counterbalances to neorealist dominance.

Thus, the global impact of the "America First 2.0" agenda can be interpreted as a dual phenomenon: a realist return to strategic autonomy and a constructivist redefinition of international norms. The coexistence of institutional adaptation and power asymmetry illustrates that while the liberal order is weakened, it is not dismantled, but it is evolving into a more pluralist, ideologically contested international system.

Conclusion

The findings confirm that Trump's 2025 foreign policy represents a deliberate continuation rather than a transformation of his earlier agenda (2017–2021). From a neorealist perspective, his policies reaffirm the primacy of national interest and the structural logic of self-help in an anarchic international system. Liberal analysis, however, demonstrates that the resilience of international institutions and the adaptive behavior of other states indicate that interdependence endures, even amid hegemonic retreat. From a constructivist viewpoint, the study finds that identity narratives have become institutionalized as both rhetorical and policy foundations, bridging domestic political discourse with foreign policy behavior.

The research also illustrates that institutional resistance to U.S. unilateralism remains normatively vocal but materially limited. Domestic institutions such as Congress, the bureaucracy, and the media express criticism but possess little structural autonomy to constrain executive decisions. International organizations likewise rely on voluntary compliance, demonstrating the endurance of the power asymmetry that defines global governance. These findings affirm the neorealist argument that international cooperation persists primarily at the discretion of powerful states, while liberal and constructivist processes provide partial corrective mechanisms that preserve cooperation in modified forms.

Overall, Trump's second-term foreign policy contributes to the ongoing fragmentation of the liberal international order. It reconfigures global politics into a post-liberal phase, characterized by selective engagement, competitive nationalism, and contested legitimacy. Yet, the simultaneous endurance of cooperative behavior among other actors that the liberal order is not collapsing but transforming into a more plural and ideologically diverse system. This mixed structure underscores the coexistence of realist power competition, liberal adaptation, and constructivist rearticulation of norms in contemporary world politics

However, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and the relatively early stage of Trump's second term at the time of analysis. Further research should incorporate primary materials such as policy speeches, legislative hearings, and elite interviews to capture the evolving nature of the administration's foreign policy rationale. Future studies could engage in comparative analysis of populist foreign policies beyond the United States, particularly among leaders in Brazil, Hungary, or India, to determine whether Trump's approach signals a broader ideological realignment in global governance. Comparative studies involving other populist or nationalist leaders could also provide deeper insight into whether the U.S. trajectory reflects a broader systemic pattern or a context-specific phenomenon.

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