Scopus

# THE DIRECTION OF THE UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY UNDER THE SECOND TERM OF TRUMP ADMINISTRATION: FROM LIBERAL HEGEMONY TO AMERICA UNBOUND?

**Umar Suryadi Bakry**
Jayabaya University, Indonesia.
usbakry@pascajayabaya.ac.id

**Abstract**: *This article analyzes the direction of United States foreign policy under the second administration of Donald Trump, conceptualized as a shift from America First toward what can be termed America Unbound. While Trump's first term emphasized nationalist retrenchment within existing international structures, his second term demonstrates a more radical orientation characterized by intensified unilateralism, transactional diplomacy, and systematic disengagement from multilateral institutions and global governance regimes. This shift reflects not merely a change in policy style, but a deeper transformation in the role of the United States within the international system. Using a qualitative descriptive method and a foreign policy analysis framework, this study examines three core dimensions: alliance politics, great power competition, and U.S. engagement with the Global South. Through document analysis and thematic interpretation, the article shows how strategic partnerships are increasingly treated as conditional and transactional arrangements, how competition with China and Russia is pursued through bilateral pressure rather than coalition-building, and how engagement with developing regions becomes selective and instrumental. The findings suggest that Trump's second-term foreign policy accelerates the erosion of the liberal international order, weakens institutionalized alliances, and replaces rule-based leadership with power-based bargaining. The article contributes to International Relations scholarship by offering a conceptual distinction between nationalist retrenchment and post-liberal hegemonic behavior, thereby providing a new analytical lens for understanding contemporary transformations in global order.*


**Keywords**: *United States Foreign Policy, America Unbound, Transactional Diplomacy, Liberal International Order, Alliance Politics, Great Power Competition, Post-Liberal Hegemony*

COMMON GROUND

## INTRODUCTION

Donald Trump's leadership in United States foreign policy has been one of the most controversial phenomena in contemporary international relations studies. Since his first term (2017–2021), Trump has implemented a foreign policy style that differs significantly from the tradition of liberal internationalism that has for decades been the foundation of the United States' global role. His America First rhetoric, withdrawal from various international agreements, and skepticism toward multilateralism indicate a paradigm shift from hegemonic leadership to strategic nationalism that emphasizes domestic interests and narrow state sovereignty (Ikenberry, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019). However, his second term has seen a far more radical intensification, not simply a repetition of previous patterns but rather a structural transformation in the United States' global orientation.

Unlike his first term, which was constrained by bureaucratic resistance, domestic opposition, and institutional pressures, Trump's second term was marked by a greater consolidation of political power and a weakening of checks and balances. This allowed the president to pursue foreign policy in a more personal, discretionary manner, and less tied to the traditions of professional diplomacy. In this context, foreign policy was no longer formulated as the result of a deliberative inter-agency process, but rather as a direct expression of the president's own preferences (Nye, 2020; Howell & Moe, 2021). As a result, US foreign policy increasingly resembled a personalized foreign policy style, in which relations between states were framed as relationships between individuals, rather than between institutions.

This phenomenon is evident in the various controversial policies that emerged during Trump's second term, such as the planned annexation of Greenland from Denmark, high tariff policies against more than 60 countries, visa restrictions on immigrants from approximately 75 countries, and aggressive approaches toward Venezuela and Iran. These policies not only reflect unilateral preferences but also demonstrate the United States' active disengagement from basic norms of global governance, including the principles of state sovereignty, multilateralism, and international law (Bakry, 2025). In this perspective, the United States is no longer acting as a rule-maker, but increasingly acting as a rule-breaker in the international system.

In international relations literature, Trump's foreign policy is generally analyzed through the lens of realism, particularly offensive realism and neo-mercantilism. Offensive realism views great powers as rational actors seeking to maximize power in an anarchic international system (Mearsheimer, 2001). Meanwhile, neo-mercantilism emphasizes that economic power is the primary instrument of geopolitical dominance, making trade, tariffs, and investment arenas of strategic competition (Gilpin, 2001). Trump's policies toward China, the European Union, and countries in the Global South demonstrate strong consistency with both approaches, particularly in terms of the use of economic instruments as a means of political pressure.

However, the classical realist approach is not fully able to explain the radical nature of Trump's second foreign policy. While traditional realism still recognizes the importance of systemic stability and the balance of power, Trump's policies tend to undermine the very foundations of the system itself. In this context, a number of scholars have begun to use the terms

Scopus

post-liberal order or illiberal hegemony to describe conditions where a hegemonic state remains materially dominant but is no longer committed to liberal norms such as multilateralism, democracy, and the rule of international law (Cooley & Nexon, 2020; Acharya, 2017).

This article argues that Trump's second term in foreign policy can no longer be understood simply as a continuation of the America First doctrine, but rather as a new phase that can be called America Unbound. This term refers to a condition in which the United States actively breaks away from the institutional constraints, strategic alliances, and international norms that have historically legitimized its hegemonic power. While America First still positions America in the international system as a dominant actor unwilling to share its burdens, America Unbound marks an attempt to free itself from that system itself.

This paradigm shift has major implications for the structure of the international order. In hegemonic stability theory, the hegemon serves as the provider of global public goods, including security, monetary stability, and trade rules (Kindleberger, 1973; Keohane, 1984). When the hegemon withdraws from this role, the international system tends to experience fragmentation, increased uncertainty, and weakened global institutions. Thus, Trump's second term foreign policy will impact not only the United States' position but also the stability of the international system as a whole.

This impact is most evident in the United States' relations with traditional alliances such as NATO, Japan, and South Korea. Alliances previously based on strategic trust and shared values are now increasingly treated as cost-benefit-based transactional contracts. Security guarantees are linked to financial contributions, trade concessions, and political alignment. This pattern reflects a shift from a security community to a security marketplace, where security becomes a negotiable commodity (Lake, 2009; Ikenberry, 2018).

For the Global South, including Southeast Asia and Indonesia, these changes present a strategic dilemma. On the one hand, the United States remains a major power, economically and militarily relevant. However, on the other hand, its transactional approach and declining normative commitments have made US engagement increasingly unpredictable. ASEAN is no longer positioned as a strategic institutional partner, but rather as an arena for pragmatic competition with China (Acharya, 2014; Bakry, 2025). This situation strengthens the argument that Trump's second term in foreign policy has the potential to accelerate the transition to a more multipolar, unstable international order with minimal normative leadership.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of United States foreign policy is one of the most established fields within the discipline of International Relations. Since the end of World War II, the United States has been positioned as a hegemonic power, playing a central role in the formation and maintenance of the liberal international order. In classical literature, this role is explained through hegemonic stability theory, which states that the international system tends to be stable when there is a single dominant state willing to provide global public goods such as security, economic openness, and international rules of the game (Kindleberger, 1973; Keohane, 1984). In this context, the United States is

understood not simply as an ordinary state actor, but as a system manager that maintains global institutions such as the UN, IMF, World Bank, and WTO.

From a liberal-institutionalist perspective, the power of the United States stems not only from its material capacity (military and economic), but also from the normative legitimacy inherent in its leadership. Ikenberry (2011) calls the post-1945 order the liberal international order, a system underpinned by multilateralism, the rule of international law, democracy, and free markets. In this system, the United States benefits not only from its dominance of power, but also from its ability to build consensus and create rules widely accepted by other nations. In other words, American hegemony is consensual, not merely coercive.

However, since the beginning of the 21st century, a number of scholars have begun to question the sustainability of this liberal order. Mearsheimer (2018) argues that the liberal international order contains internal contradictions because it contradicts the basic logic of the anarchic international system. According to offensive realism, great powers are never satisfied with the status quo and always seek to maximize their relative power. In this context, the United States' commitment to multilateralism and democracy is not a reflection of universal values, but rather a strategic instrument for maintaining global dominance. As the costs of maintaining this order increase, hegemonic powers tend to withdraw or change strategies.

This debate became even more relevant when Donald Trump was elected President of the United States in 2016. Trump's foreign policy was immediately viewed as an anomaly in the tradition of American internationalism. His America First rhetoric reflected an explicit rejection of multilateralism, globalization, and normative commitments to international institutions (Ikenberry, 2018). Trump withdrew the US from the Paris Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and weakened its commitment to the WHO and the WTO. In the literature, this phenomenon is often categorized as a form of retrenchment or hegemonic withdrawal, namely the reduction of the global role of a hegemon due to domestic pressures and changes in the international structure (Nye, 2017; Lake, 2018).

However, some scholars argue that Trump's policies are not merely retrenchment, but rather represent a deeper ideological shift. Cooley and Nexon (2020) introduced the concept of exit from hegemony to explain the United States' tendency to abandon its traditional role as the leader of the liberal order. In their view, America is not merely shedding its weight but is actively undermining the institutions and norms it previously built. This marks a shift from liberal hegemony to a new form that can be called illiberal hegemony or even post-hegemonic order.

In the context of foreign policy theory, this shift can also be analyzed through a foreign policy analysis (FPA) approach, which emphasizes the role of individuals, ideology, and domestic structures in foreign policy formulation (Hudson, 2014). Unlike systemic theory, which views states as unitary rational actors, FPA highlights that foreign policy is heavily influenced by the leader's character, domestic political dynamics, and subjective perceptions of threats and opportunities. In Trump's case, numerous studies have shown that personalistic, narcissistic, and anti-elite leadership styles play a significant role in shaping foreign policy orientation (McAdams, 2020; Howell & Moe, 2021).

Scopus

Trump consistently displays a personalized foreign policy style, prioritizing leader-to-leader diplomacy over bureaucratic and institutional mechanisms. He views international relations as an arena for personal bargaining, rather than interactions between state institutions. This approach aligns with the concept of strongman diplomacy, the tendency of populist leaders to forge direct relationships with fellow authoritarian or populist leaders, bypassing formal diplomatic processes (Colgan & Keohane, 2017). This is evident in Trump's relationships with Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong-un, and Mohammed bin Salman.

From a realist perspective, Trump's foreign policy is often associated with the rise of neo-mercantilism. Gilpin (2001) defines neo-mercantilism as the view that the international economy is a zero-sum competitive arena, where states should protect domestic industries, control trade, and maximize economic surpluses to strengthen national power. Trump's tariff policies against China, the European Union, and countries in the Global South reflect this logic. Trade is no longer understood as a mutually beneficial mechanism (a positive-sum game), but rather as an instrument of geopolitical domination.

However, Trump's neo-mercantilism differs from classical realism. While traditional realism still recognizes the importance of international system stability, Trump's policies actually demonstrate a destructive tendency towards the system itself. In this regard, some scholars use the term disruptive hegemony to describe the role of the United States under Trump (Mastanduno, 2019). America remains a dominant power, but acts as a disruptive, rather than stabilizing, actor in the international order.

The debate over Trump is also inextricably linked to the literature on populism in global politics. Populism, according to Mudde (2004), is a thin ideology that divides society into two antagonistic groups: the "pure people" versus the "corrupt elite." In foreign policy, populism generates skepticism toward professional diplomacy, international institutions, and policy experts. Trump consistently attacks the foreign policy establishment, calling career diplomats part of the "deep state," and claiming that traditional foreign policy has harmed the American people (Moffitt, 2016; Bakry, 2020).

In this context, Trump's foreign policy can be understood as a form of populist foreign policy, that is, a foreign policy framed as an extension of the domestic conflict between the people and the global elite (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). Multilateralism is perceived as a cosmopolitan elite project that sacrifices national interests, while economic nationalism is presented as an effort to restore popular sovereignty. This perspective explains why Trump prefers bilateral agreements to multilateral frameworks, as bilateral agreements allow for symbolic victories that are easily communicated to the domestic political base.

The literature on alliances also shows significant changes under Trump. In classical alliance theory, alliances were understood as mechanisms to enhance collective security and reduce strategic uncertainty (Walt, 1987). NATO, for example, was viewed as a security community based on trust, shared norms, and long-term commitments. However, under Trump, alliances have been reduced to transactional contracts based on financial contributions. Security is
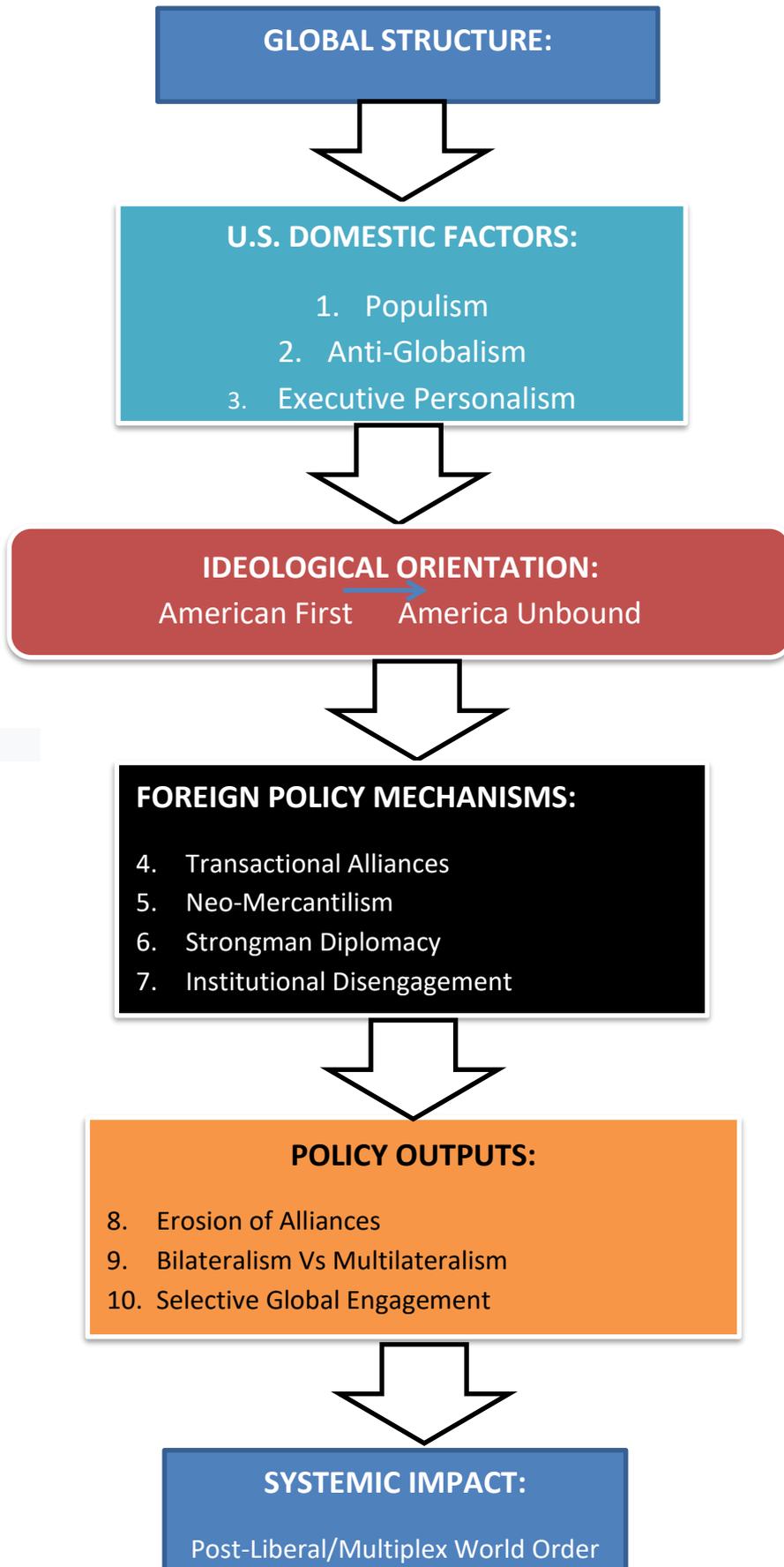
COMMON GROUND

treated as a commodity to be paid for, rather than a shared strategic obligation (Lake, 2009; Ikenberry, 2018).

In critical literature, this shift is seen as a sign of the de-institutionalization of alliances. Trust is replaced by cost-benefit calculations, while normative solidarity is replaced by market logic. This has the potential to weaken alliance deterrence and increase the risk of conflict as allies lose confidence in the hegemon's commitment (Snyder, 2019). In the NATO context, Trump's policies are even considered an existential threat to the integrity of the transatlantic alliance.

The literature on the Global South and Southeast Asia also points to the serious implications of changes in US foreign policy. Acharya (2014) emphasizes that the stability of the Southeast Asian region depends heavily on the balance between great power and ASEAN's institutional role. As the United States reduces its normative commitment to multilateralism, the space for normative leadership is increasingly filled by China. In this context, the Global South faces a strategic dilemma: remain dependent on an increasingly unpredictable US, or adapt to a new regional order more influenced by China (Bakry, 2020; Acharya, 2017).

Thus, the existing literature suggests that Trump's foreign policy cannot be understood simply as a variation on ordinary realist policies, but rather as a symptom of a structural transformation in the United States' role in the world. However, most studies still focus on Trump's first term and have not conceptually distinguished between America First and the more radical phase of his second term. This is where this article's primary contribution lies: offering the conceptual framework of America Unbound to explain the conditions under which the United States not only diminishes its global role but actively breaks away from the institutional and normative constraints that previously underpinned liberal hegemony.

Based on the introduction and literature review above, the author tries to create a conceptual framework as follows:

Scopus

**GLOBAL STRUCTURE:**

**U.S. DOMESTIC FACTORS:**

1. Populism
2. Anti-Globalism
3. Executive Personalism

**IDEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION:**

American First ⟶ America Unbound

**FOREIGN POLICY MECHANISMS:**

4. Transactional Alliances
5. Neo-Mercantilism
6. Strongman Diplomacy
7. Institutional Disengagement

**POLICY OUTPUTS:**

8. Erosion of Alliances
9. Bilateralism Vs Multilateralism
10. Selective Global Engagement

**SYSTEMIC IMPACT:**

Post-Liberal/Multiplex World Order

COMMON GROUND

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical research design to analyze the direction of United States foreign policy under the second term of the Donald Trump administration. The qualitative approach was chosen because the primary objective of this study was not to test quantitative hypotheses, but rather to deeply understand the dynamics of foreign policy ideas, discourses, and practices within a complex global political context. This approach aligns with Creswell's (2015) view that qualitative research is highly relevant for exploring socio-political phenomena that are rich in meaning, context, and actor interpretations. In the study of international relations, a qualitative approach allows researchers to capture normative, ideological, and institutional dimensions that often cannot be reduced to numerical variables alone.

More specifically, this study adopts a descriptive-analytical research design. This design aims not only to systematically describe the phenomenon of Trump's second foreign policy but also to analyze its patterns, trends, and theoretical implications for the international order. Descriptive-analytical research is considered appropriate because its primary focus is process-oriented and not on measuring causal relationships between variables as in quantitative explanatory research (Neuman, 2014). Thus, this study positions foreign policy as an object of interpretation that is historical, contextual, and discursive.

The type of data used in this study consists of secondary data. Secondary data was chosen because the object of study is the foreign policy of a major country, whose information sources are primarily available in the form of official documents, speeches, public statements, policy reports, and academic publications. According to Bowen (2009), secondary data analysis is very common in public policy and international relations research because it allows researchers to access extensive, systematically documented, and academically verifiable information. Furthermore, the use of secondary data also avoids limited access to high-level political actors such as presidents and state officials.

The data in this study are classified into three main categories. First, official policy documents of the United States government, including the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, the president's State of the Union address, White House statements, and executive policies related to trade, alliances, and international security. These documents are used to directly reconstruct the official orientation of Trump's second foreign policy. Second, academic sources, in the form of books, reputable journal articles, and reports from international research institutions that discuss United States foreign policy, global populism, hegemony, and the international order. Third, international media sources and policy analysis, such as Foreign Affairs, The Economist, the Brookings Institution, and the Council on Foreign Relations, are used as contextual sources to understand the actual dynamics of foreign policy.

The data collection process was carried out in three stages. The first stage was source identification, which involved mapping documents and literature relevant to Trump's second foreign policy theme. The second stage was source selection, which involved screening documents based on academic criteria, thematic relevance, and institutional credibility. The third stage was

data categorization, which involved grouping data into key themes such as alliances, great power rivalry, multilateralism, and the Global South. This stage was crucial to ensure that the data used was not random, but structured and systematic (Creswell, 2015).

The data analysis method used in this study is interpretive qualitative analysis using thematic analysis techniques. Thematic analysis aims to identify patterns of meaning in qualitative data sets through coding, categorization, and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, thematic analysis was used to extract key themes emerging from Trump's foreign policy discourse, such as transactionalism, unilateralism, personalism, and disengagement from multilateralism.

Operationally, data analysis was conducted through several stages. First, the researcher conducted a close reading of the collected documents and literature to understand the context and substance of the policies. Second, the researcher conducted a coding process, which involved assigning conceptual labels to sections of text relevant to the research focus, such as "alliances as transactions," "zero-sum worldview," and "post-liberal order." Third, the codes were grouped into broader thematic categories, such as "erosion of the liberal order," "transactional dominance," and "personalization of foreign policy." Fourth, the researcher conducted a theoretical interpretation of these themes by linking them to the conceptual framework used in this article.

In addition to thematic analysis, this study also uses a limited discourse analysis approach to understand how Trump frames foreign policy in his speeches and public statements. Discourse analysis aims to uncover the relationship between language, power, and ideology in political practice (Fairclough, 1995). In this context, discourse analysis is used to demonstrate how the America First and America Unbound narratives are produced through populist language, antagonistic rhetoric, and the dichotomy between the "American people" and the "global elite."

The use of discourse analysis is important because Trump's foreign policy is not only material but also discursive. Trump actively shapes public perception of the international world as an arena of conflict and exploitation, thus justifying protectionist policies, withdrawal from international agreements, and a unilateral approach. Thus, discourse analysis complements thematic analysis in explaining the ideological dimensions of foreign policy.

In terms of the validity and reliability of qualitative research, this study employed a source triangulation strategy, which involves comparing various types of data (official documents, academic literature, and policy analysis) to ensure the consistency of the findings (Denzin, 2012). Triangulation is essential for reducing researcher interpretation bias and enhancing the credibility of the analysis. Furthermore, this study applied the principle of reflexivity, which emphasizes the researcher's awareness of the normative positions and theoretical assumptions used in analyzing foreign policy phenomena.

Epistemologically, this research departs from the critical interpretivism paradigm. The interpretivist paradigm emphasizes that socio-political reality is shaped by meaning and discourse, not simply by material structures (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Meanwhile, the critical dimension is reflected in this research's attempt not only to describe Trump's foreign policy but

also to critique its implications for the liberal international order and global stability. Thus, this research is not value-neutral but explicitly places foreign policy within a normative and theoretical framework.

Ultimately, this research method is deemed adequate to achieve the study's primary objective, which is to comprehensively understand the direction of United States foreign policy under Trump II and its implications for global politics. The qualitative approach, use of secondary data, and thematic-discursive analysis enable this research to yield an in-depth understanding of a complex, dynamic, and meaningful phenomenon that is difficult to explain through a purely quantitative approach.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the main findings of this study regarding the direction of United States foreign policy under the second term of the Donald Trump administration, placing them within the theoretical framework of contemporary international relations. The analysis focuses on five main dimensions: (1) the doctrinal transformation from America First to America Unbound; (2) the changing character of international alliances; (3) patterns of great power competition; (4) policies in the Middle East and the Global South; and (5) systemic implications for the liberal international order.

A Paradigm Shift: From America First to America Unbound

The main findings of this study indicate that Trump's second term foreign policy cannot be understood simply as a continuation of the America First doctrine, but rather as a radicalization of strategic nationalism into what this article calls America Unbound. While America First still operates within the framework of the liberal international system —albeit with a skeptical attitude toward multilateralism— America Unbound marks an active effort by the United States to break free from the institutional, normative, and alliance constraints that previously underpinned its hegemony.

From the perspective of hegemonic stability theory, this shift is significant. Hegemonic states generally act as providers of global public goods and safeguards the stability of the international system (Kindleberger, 1973; Keohane, 1984). However, under Trump II, the United States no longer functions as a system manager but as a system disruptor. The US not only reduces its contributions to global institutions but actively undermines their legitimacy and effectiveness through funding withdrawals, normative delegitimization, and unilateral approaches.

Ikenberry (2018) called this condition a sign of a profound crisis in the liberal international order, where the hegemon no longer has any interest in maintaining the system that has benefited him for more than seven decades. Cooley and Nexon (2020) even stated that the United States is entering a phase of exit from hegemony, a condition where the hegemon consciously relinquishes its normative leadership role because it is deemed no longer aligned with domestic political interests. In this context, America Unbound reflects a phase of post-liberal hegemony, in which America's

material power remains dominant, but is no longer accompanied by a commitment to liberal values such as multilateralism, democracy, and the rule of international law (Acharya, 2017).

The Erosion of the Security Community: Alliances as Transactions

One of the most striking findings of this study is a fundamental shift in the character of US alliances. In classical alliance theory, alliances are understood as collective mechanisms for enhancing shared security and reducing strategic uncertainty (Walt, 1987). NATO, Japan, and South Korea have historically been positioned as a security community, a community of states bound by trust, shared norms, and long-term commitments (Deutsch et al., 1957).

However, under Trump II, alliances have been reduced to transactional relationships based on cost-benefit calculations. Security guarantees are no longer viewed as strategic obligations but as economic contracts. Allied nations are required to pay more to "buy" US protection. This approach reflects the logic of neo-mercantilism, where even national security is treated as a market commodity (Gilpin, 2001).

From Lake's perspective (2009), this change marks a shift from a hierarchical security order to market-based security relations. Alliances no longer function as institutions of long-term stability, but rather as short-term bargaining arenas. Consequently, strategic trust has weakened significantly. Allies no longer have certainty about America's commitment, thus diminishing the alliance's deterrent power (Snyder, 2019).

Denmark's planned annexation of Greenland is an extreme illustration of the erosion of alliance solidarity. This policy not only violates the principle of state sovereignty but also demonstrates that the United States no longer views allies as strategic partners to be respected, but rather as objects of geopolitical expansion. In the NATO context, such a policy has the potential to create the most serious legitimacy crisis since the Cold War (Ikenberry, 2018).

China and Russia: Competition Without Coalitions

The following findings indicate that Trump's foreign policy toward China and Russia reflects a pattern of great power competition without the development of strategic coalitions. In the literature of offensive realism, competition between great powers is a natural consequence of an anarchic international system (Mearsheimer, 2001). However, the key difference lies in the strategies employed to confront rivals.

Unlike the Biden administration, which prioritizes a coalition-based containment approach, Trump has opted for a bilateral strategy that is coercive and unilateral. In relations with China, Trump's key policies include trade tariffs, technology export controls, investment restrictions, and industrial protectionism. These policies reflect the logic of neo-mercantilism, in which the economy is viewed as the primary arena of geopolitical competition (Gilpin, 2001; Mastanduno, 2019).

However, the absence of an international coalition to confront China actually weakens the United States' deterrent power. In balance of power theory, great powers typically build alliances to

balance rivals (Waltz, 1979). When the United States acts alone, without multilateral legitimacy, pressure on China becomes less effective and risks escalating conflict.

Toward Russia, Trump's second term policy demonstrates a tendency toward strongman diplomacy. Trump prefers leader-to-leader diplomacy over institutional coordination with NATO and the European Union. Ukraine is treated as a negotiating variable, rather than as a normative commitment to the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. This approach aligns with populist foreign policy, where democratic values and international law are viewed as ideological liabilities (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019).

In the short term, this approach may result in de-escalation or a temporary ceasefire. However, in the long term, the consequences are an erosion of deterrence and increased incentives for revisionist states to challenge the international status quo (Mearsheimer, 2019).

Middle East: Authoritarian Stability and Palestinian Marginalization

In the Middle East, this study's findings indicate that Trump's second term foreign policy is strongly consistent with a preference for order through authoritarian stability. This approach places political stability and energy security above democratization and human rights agendas. Support for Israel is almost unconditional, while relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt are strengthened without regard for the human rights violations committed by these regimes.

The Abraham Accords are positioned as the main foundation of Trump's regional strategy. In the literature, this agreement is viewed as a form of elite-driven diplomacy, whereby the normalization of relations between countries is carried out without addressing the structural roots of conflict, particularly the Palestinian issue (Telhami, 2020). Thus, peace is understood as an agreement between state elites, not as a process of political justice.

The policy toward Iran also reflects a coercive and unilateral approach. Economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and military intimidation are used as primary instruments. Trump rejects multilateral diplomatic approaches like the JCPOA and replaces them with a strategy of maximum pressure. From a realist perspective, this policy aims to maintain the regional dominance of America and Israel. However, from a liberal perspective, this policy actually increases the risk of armed conflict and weakens the global non-proliferation regime (Nye, 2020).

The Global South and Southeast Asia: Relative Neglect

The following findings indicate that the Global South, including Southeast Asia and Indonesia, is experiencing a pattern of selective engagement and strategic neglect. The United States remains present economically and militarily, but has lost its normative and institutional leadership. ASEAN is no longer positioned as a key strategic partner, but rather as an arena for pragmatic competition with China.

Acharya (2014) emphasized that Southeast Asia's stability depends heavily on the institutional role of major powers in underpinning ASEAN centrality. As the United States withdraws from multilateralism, the normative leadership space is filled by China through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative. In this context, countries like Indonesia face a strategic dilemma: maintain an increasingly unpredictable relationship with the United States or adapt to an increasingly Sino-centric regional order (Bakry, 2020).

Trump's second term reinforced this trend. Development aid and democracy promotion were reduced, while defense and trade cooperation focused on narrow American interests. Thus, American engagement in the Global South has become increasingly instrumental, rather than transformational.

Under the second term of the Trump administration, US foreign policy toward Indonesia tended to be pragmatic and transactional, with an emphasis on trade, investment, and security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. Indonesia was positioned not as a primary strategic partner, but as a crucial partner in maintaining regional stability, particularly in the South China Sea, counterterrorism, and strategic supply chains. The renewed America First approach was reflected in demands for greater market access for US products, encouragement of Indonesia's role in balancing China's influence, and a lesser emphasis on democracy and human rights compared to the Democratic administration.

Systemic Implications: The Erosion of the Liberal International Order

Overall, the results of this study indicate that Trump's second foreign policy has accelerated the erosion of the liberal international order, which has been the main foundation of post-World War II global politics. In the theory of the liberal international order, the United States is positioned as a hegemonic stabilizer that not only provides material power but also maintains the norms, institutions, and rules of the international system (Ikenberry, 2011). A hegemon does not simply dominate, but leads through the establishment of international regimes such as the United Nations (UN), the WTO, the IMF, and various multilateral agreements that emphasize cooperation, multilateralism, and the principles of democracy and human rights. When a hegemon begins to withdraw from this leadership role—whether through isolationism, unilateralism, or a transactional approach—the stability of the international system is disrupted.

Trump's America Unbound policy during his second term demonstrated this phenomenon more explicitly than during his first term. While during Trump's first term, the US remained ambiguous between withdrawing from and continuing to utilize international institutions, during his second term, the tendency toward unilateralism became more systemic. The withdrawal or weakening of commitments to multilateral agreements, skepticism of international organizations, and the use of economic policy as an instrument of political pressure reflect a weakening US commitment to the principles of global governance (Nye, 2020). In this context, the US no longer functions as the "architect" of the liberal order, but rather as a state actor pursuing narrow, transactional interests.

Acharya (2017) calls this condition a multiplex world order, a world order without a single central leadership, in which various regional powers—such as China, Russia, the European Union, and countries of the Global South—emerge with differing agendas and norms. Unlike the classical multipolar order, which still has common rules, a multiplex world is characterized by the absence of a global normative consensus. Each actor brings its own vision of world order, so there is no longer a single dominant ideological framework like liberalism in the post-Cold War era. As a result, global politics has become more fragmented, competitive, and less predictable.

In such a situation, multilateralism is experiencing a legitimacy crisis. Countries are increasingly inclined to form ad hoc coalitions, narrow alliances, or cooperation based on short-term interests. This phenomenon aligns with Mearsheimer's (2018) argument that the world is returning to the logic of great power politics, where major powers prioritize the balance of power over adherence to liberal norms. Trump's second term reinforces this trend by placing US foreign policy within a zero-sum framework, across trade, security, and diplomacy.

From the perspective of Hegemonic Stability theory, the withdrawal of a hegemon has direct implications for increasing instability in the international system (Kindleberger, 1981). Without a hegemon willing to provide global public goods—such as monetary stability, maritime security, and an open trade regime—the costs of cooperation increase and conflicts of interest become more difficult to manage. In this context, Trump's second term policy not only impacts US bilateral relations with other countries but also produces systemic effects in the form of a weakening of global governance mechanisms.

From a critical perspective, America Unbound marks the end of America's hegemonic phase as a normative power. The United States retains substantial material capacity—military, economic, and technological—but has lost its moral authority and ideological legitimacy as a leader of the liberal world (Cox, 1987). Hegemonic legitimacy is determined not only by hard power but also by the ability to build normative consensus (soft power) through universal values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (Nye, 2004). When the US itself demonstrates an inconsistent stance toward these values, its ideological appeal weakens.

Consequently, the world has become not only more multipolar but also more illiberal. The emergence of forces promoting alternative models—such as Chinese-style state capitalism or Russian-style electoral authoritarianism—has become increasingly legitimate because it is no longer balanced by normative US leadership (Zakaria, 2017). In this new order, the principles of democracy and human rights are no longer universal standards, but merely one ideological option among many others. Thus, the erosion of the liberal international order under Trump II is not only structural but also ideological, as it shifts the value orientation that has long been the primary foundation of global politics.

Scopus

## CONCLUSION

This article aims to analyze the direction of United States foreign policy under Donald Trump's second term by placing it within the theoretical framework of contemporary international relations. Based on an analysis of policy documents, academic literature, and global political discourse, this article concludes that Trump's second term marks a more radical paradigm shift than his first term. While Trump's first term could still be understood as a form of strategic nationalism within the framework of the liberal international system, his second term has seen a transformation toward what this article refers to as America Unbound, a state in which the United States actively breaks away from the institutional, normative, and alliance constraints that have sustained its hegemony.

The main findings of this study indicate that Trump's second term foreign policy is no longer oriented toward consensual hegemony, but rather toward transactional dominance. Within this framework, international relations are understood as an arena for short-term bargaining based on cost-benefit calculations, rather than as a system of long-term cooperation bound by norms and institutions. Strategic alliances such as NATO, Japan, and South Korea are reduced to contractual relationships, where security guarantees are linked to financial contributions and political concessions. This pattern reflects a serious erosion of the alliance's character as a security community and weakens the foundation of strategic trust that has long underpinned global stability.

In the context of great power competition, this article also finds that Trump's approach to China and Russia demonstrates a tendency toward competition without coalitions. Trump relies on bilateral pressure, economic tariffs, and personal diplomacy, while neglecting the importance of multilateral coordination and strategic alliance-building. While this approach may enhance the United States' bargaining power in the short term, the long-term consequences are a weakening of collective deterrence and an increased risk of conflict escalation. In other words, the United States remains materially powerful but is increasingly losing its normative legitimacy and institutional capacity to shape the behavior of other actors in the international system.

In the Middle East, Trump's second term in foreign policy emphasized a preference for stability through alliances with authoritarian regimes. Unconditional support for Israel, the expansion of the Abraham Accords, and a coercive approach toward Iran demonstrate that democracy, human rights, and international law are no longer the central pillars of US foreign policy. Peace is reduced to agreements among state elites, while structural conflicts such as the Palestinian issue are marginalized. This approach may produce short-term stability, but risks strengthening authoritarianism and prolonging latent conflicts in the long term.

For the Global South, particularly Southeast Asia and Indonesia, Trump's second term foreign policy creates an ambivalent situation. On the one hand, the United States remains a crucial economic and security partner. However, on the other, its transactional approach and declining normative commitments have made American engagement increasingly unpredictable. ASEAN is no longer positioned as a strategic institutional partner, but rather as an arena for pragmatic

COMMON GROUND

competition with China. This situation reinforces the trend toward a more multipolar regional order, increasingly dominated by alternative powers with a more consistent institutional presence.

Theoretically, this article contributes to the international relations literature by proposing the concept of America Unbound as a new analytical framework for understanding the post-liberal phase of US hegemony. This concept complements and critiques the literature on America First, hegemonic retrenchment, and exit from hegemony. If America First signifies a rejection of liberal globalism, then America Unbound signifies an active abdication of the hegemonic role itself. The United States not only reduces the burden of global leadership but also rejects the normative responsibilities that have long been the source of its power's legitimacy.

The systemic implications of this phenomenon are significant. In international order theory, the hegemon serves as the guardian of stability and provider of global public goods. When the hegemon withdraws, the international system tends to experience fragmentation, increased uncertainty, and weakened global governance. This study suggests that Trump's second term in foreign policy has accelerated the transition to a more multipolar, transactional, and illiberal world. Global politics is increasingly dominated by the logic of power, rather than norms and institutions.

Ultimately, this article concludes that Trump's second term foreign policy is not simply a personal phenomenon or a temporary anomaly, but rather a reflection of a deeper structural crisis in the liberal international order. The rise of populism, economic nationalism, and domestic dissatisfaction with globalization have transformed the political incentives of hegemonic states. In this context, America Unbound can be understood as a symptom of a historical transformation in world politics, in which norms-based global leadership is increasingly being replaced by power-based, transactional domination. The post-Trump world, then, will not simply return to the old order, but will face the enormous challenge of building a new, more inclusive, and more effective form of global leadership.***

## REFERENCES

1) Acharya, A. (2014). *Constructing a security community in Southeast Asia*. Routledge.
2) Acharya, A. (2017). After liberal hegemony: The advent of a multiplex world order. *Ethics & International Affairs, 31*(3), 271–285. https://doi.org/10.1017/S089267941700020X.
3) Aljazeera. (22 Januari 2026). Greenland and Denmark say sovereignty 'red line' after latest Trump remarks. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/22/trumps-greenland-pact-will-demand-allies-boost-arctic-security-nato-chief?utm_source=chatgpt.com [Diakses 5 Maret 2026].
4) Amaliya, L.R., Basyar, M.H., & Hannase, M. (2025). Abraham Accords: Normalization Agreements Between Arab Countries and Israel. *Intermestic*, 10(1), 13-23. https://doi.org/10.24198.

Scopus

5) Baichorov, A. M. (2025). The Foreign Policy of the Second Trump Administration: Intentions and Capabilities. *International Relations*, 1(1), 3-7. https://doi.org/10.33581/2521-6848-2025-1-3-7.

6) Bakry, U. S. (2020). *Politik luar negeri Indonesia di era globalisasi*. Jakarta: Kencana.

7) Bakry, U. S. (2025). *Ada apa dengan Amerika?* Unpublished Manuscript.

8) Bennett, B. & Poplim N, (January 15, 2026). How Trump's Foreign Policy Gambits Are Reshaping the World. https://time.com/collections/davos-2026/7345543/trump-foreign-policy-second-term/ [Accessed, February 7, 2026].

9) Böller, F., Wiedekind, J. (2025). The Declining Reliability of U.S. Foreign Policy and its Domestic Sources Under Trump II. *Z Außen Sicherheitspolit* **18**, 577–587. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12399-025-01075-0.

10) Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal, 9*(2), 27–40. https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027.

11) Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

12) Cooley, A., & Nexon, D. (2020). *Exit from hegemony: The unraveling of the American global order*. Oxford University Press.

13) Colgan, J. D., & Keohane, R. O. (2017). The liberal order is rigged. *Foreign Affairs, 96*(3), 36–44. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/liberal-order-rigged [Accessed, February 5, 2026].

14) Creswell, J. W. (2015). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage.

15) Daalder, I.H. dan Lindsay, J.M. (2005). America Unbound: the Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy. John Wiley & Sons Publishers.

16) Denzin, N. K. (2012). Triangulation 2.0. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 6(2), 80–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689812437186.

17) Destradi, S., & Plagemann, J. (2019). Populism and foreign policy. *Foreign Policy Analysis, 15*(4), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/ory010.

18) Deutsch, K. et al. (1957). *Political community and the North Atlantic area*. Princeton University Press.

19) Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.

20) Gilpin, R. (2001). *Global political economy: Understanding the international economic order*. Princeton University Press.

21) Howell, W. G., & Moe, T. M. (2021). *Presidents, populism, and the crisis of democracy*. University of Chicago Press.

22) Hudson, V. M. (2014). *Foreign policy analysis: Classic and contemporary theory*. Rowman & Littlefield.

23) Ikenberry, G. J. (2011). *Liberal leviathan: The origins, crisis, and transformation of the American world order*. Princeton University Press.

24) Ikenberry, G. J. (2018). The end of liberal international order? *International Affairs, 94*(1), 7–23. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241.

Scopus

25) Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton University Press.

26) Kindleberger, C. P. (1973). *The world in depression 1929–1939*. University of California Press.

27) Lake, D. A. (2009). *Hierarchy in international relations*. Cornell University Press.

28) Lake, D. A. (2018). Economic openness and great power competition. *International Studies Quarterly, 62*(4), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poy010.

29) Luhnow, D. dan Colchester, M. (March 3, 2026). U.S. Strikes on Iran Reflect a Go-It-Alone Approach to the World. The Wall Street Journal. https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/u-s-strikes-on-iran-reflect-a-go-it-alone-approach-to-the-world-bbde11c2?utm_source=chatgpt.com [Diakses, 5 Maret 2026].

30) Mastanduno, M. (2019). System maker and privilege taker. *World Politics, 71*(1), 121–154. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000057.

31) McAdams, D. P. (2020). The strange case of Donald J. Trump. *Psychological Inquiry, 31*(3), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.21827/ejlw.12.41043.

32) Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. Norton.

33) Mearsheimer, J. J. (2019). Bound to fail: The rise and fall of the liberal international order. *International Security, 43*(4), 7–50. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00342.

34) Moffitt, B. (2016). *The global rise of populism*. Stanford University Press.

35) Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition, 39*(4), 541–563. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x.

36) Neuman, W. L. (2014). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (7th ed.). Pearson.

37) Nye, J. S. (2017). Will the liberal order survive? *Foreign Affairs, 96*(1), 10–16. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-12-12/will-liberal-order-survive [Accessed, February 2, 2026].

38) Nye, J. S. (2020). Do morals matter? Presidents and foreign policy from FDR to Trump. Oxford University Press.

39) Reiss, M. (January 20, 2026). Trump's Foreign Policy After Year One: A Look Back, A Look Ahead. https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/trumps-foreign-policy-after-year-one-look-back-look-ahead [Accessed, February 7, 2026].

40) Schwartz-Shea, P., & Yanow, D. (2012). *Interpretive research design: Concepts and processes*. Routledge.

41) Snyder, G. H. (2019). *Alliance politics*. Cornell University Press.

42) Telhami, S. (2020). Normalization and the Palestinian question. *Foreign Affairs, 99*(6), 2–7.

43) Walt, S. M. (1987). *The origins of alliances*. Cornell University Press.

44) Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. McGraw-Hill.