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Abstract

Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan, translated into an "America First" foreign policy, has restructured US engagement with the world by underlining national sovereignty, economic nationalism and transactional relations with allies and adversaries (Kupchan, 2025; Zhao, 2018). This paper extensively analyses the historical roots and contemporary implications of this doctrine, arguing that it draws on currents US isolationism and nationalism while marking a sharper break with post-1945 liberal internationalism (History of the foreign policy of the US, 2009; Norwich University, 2014). Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, desk-based strategy that synthesizes academic analyses, policy reports and key foreign-policy events from Trump's Second administrations across issue areas such as alliances, trade, global governance and international development. The analysis finds that, although "America First" secured some short-term gains in burden-sharing and renegotiation of treaties, it simultaneously weakened multilateral institutions, strained alliances, created openings for rival powers and eroded parts of US soft power. Overall, the paper concludes that Trump's foreign policy has made America more unilateral rather than unambiguously "great", casting reservation on its long-term benefits for US leadership and the stability of the international order.

Keywords: Policy; Foreign Policy; Founding Fathers; American Revolution; Make America Great Again

1.0 Introduction

Donald Trump's rise to the presidency was built around the campaign slogan "Make America Great Again", which he operationalized internationally through an "America First" foreign policy principle that promised to re-center US interests and correct perceived external burdens (Zhao, 2018; Kupchan, 2025). Rather than treating foreign policy as a long-term project of sustaining liberal order, Trump presented it as a series of deals aimed at bringing immediate benefits in trade, security and prestige to US citizens (Brookings, 2022; State Department, 2025). This reorientation caused intense debate about whether "America First" represented a return to historical patterns of US nationalism or a new departure that risks weakening the international system the US itself helped build after 1945. The central problem this paper addresses is the tension between Trump's promise to restore American greatness and the prospect that his foreign policy undercuts the multilateral commitments and alliance networks on which US power has long hinge on. Other supporters on the one hand, argue that demanding greater burden-sharing, revising trade arrangements and fighting "globalism" can correct imbalances that have disadvantaged American workforce and taxpayers (Baker Institute, 2025; State Department, 2025). While other critics contend that sudden withdrawals from agreements, public criticism of allies and transactional approaches to global governance damage trust, reduce US influence and create openings for rising powers such as China and revisionist actors like Russia (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017; Focus 2030, 2025; Impact of Trump 2.0 on Sub-Saharan Africa, 2025).

1.1 The aim of this paper is to critically analyze the historical and contemporary implications of Trump’s “Make America Great” foreign policy doctrine, understood primarily through the “America First” frame. Specifically, the paper objectives are:

- a. To trace the historical antecedents of “America First” and nationalist in US foreign policy.
- b. To identify the core features of Trump’s foreign policy practice.
- c. To analyze the doctrine’s implications for allies, adversaries and global governance.
- d. To evaluate whether it has in fact “made America great” in terms of power, influence and legitimacy.

By addressing these objectives, the seminar contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on nationalism, populism and the future of US leadership in a contested international order.

2.0 Literature Review

Academic works on US foreign policy identifies several enduring traditions, including isolationism, liberal internationalism, realist balance-of-power strategies and episodic unilateralism (History of the foreign policy of the US, 2009; Norwich University, 2014). In the interwar period, “America First” was associated with isolationist movements that opposed deeper entanglement in European conflicts, emphasizing national sovereignty and domestic priorities (Norwich University, 2014). After 1945, US leaders mostly abandoned explicit isolationism in favor of liberal internationalism, creating a solid web of alliances, economic regimes and international organizations that entrenched American power in multilateral structures (History of the foreign policy of the US, 2009; OUP Blog, 2017). More recent scholarship links Trump’s “America First” agenda to global waves of populist nationalism, arguing that it replicates both domestic grievances and skepticism about the benefits of globalization (Brookings, 2022; Kupchan, 2025). Analysts note that Trump’s rhetoric frames foreigners, multilateral institutions and trade agreements as sources of unfairness to the US, while promising to reinstate sovereignty and economic advantage through renegotiation and control of borders (Zhao, 2018; Brookings, 2022). At the same time, some authors caution against treating Trump as an anomaly, pointing to earlier unilateral actions such as the 2003 Iraq War or selective treaty withdrawals as indication that US foreign policy has long oscillated between multilateralism and declaration of national prerogatives (OUP Blog, 2017; Kupchan, 2025).

2.1 A rich collection of policy literature examines the specific application of “America First” across a range of issue areas including alliances, trade and global governance. Scholars have noted Trump’s overt pressure on NATO allies to increase their defense spending, as well as his imposition of tariffs on both partners and rivals, withdrawal or renegotiation from international agreements and a hostile approach to multilateral institutions (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017; Al Jazeera, 2021; Baker Institute, 2025). Think-tanks also comment on the implications for international development, humanitarian aid and global health cooperation, stating that cuts to foreign aid programs and a reversal of policy approaches have created a distressing effect on US leadership in these areas (Focus2030, 2025; ScienceDirect, 2025; Impact of Trump 2.0 on Sub Saharan Africa, 2025). However, existing work is largely fragmented, focusing on specific regions or sectors rather than systematically connecting historical roots, theoretical explanations and cross cutting global consequences, which is the gap this paper addresses.

2.2 This paper draws primarily on realist and liberal-institutionalist perspectives, complemented by insights from constructivist approaches to nationalism and identity.

- a. From a realist viewpoint, states pursue survival and relative gains in an anarchic international system, prioritizing power, autonomy and security over institutional constraints (Kupchan, 2025; Baker Institute, 2025). Trump's emphasis on sovereignty, burden-sharing and transactional bargains aligns with a realist suspicion of multilateral commitments that limit flexibility or appear to shift costs onto the US (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017; State Department, 2025). "America First" can therefore be understood as an attempt to revise US foreign policy toward more explicit pursuit of self-interest and to demand visible reciprocity from allies and partners.
- b. Liberal institutionalism, by contrast, argues that international organizations, regimes and rules can mitigate anarchy, foster cooperation and generate long-term absolute gains that outweigh short-term distributional concerns (History of the foreign policy of the US, 2009; OUP Blog, 2017). From this angle, US leadership within multilateral institutions has historically allowed Washington to shape rules and agendas, converting material power into institutional and normative influence. Trump's skepticism toward institutions such as NATO, WTO and various UN-linked bodies thus appears self-defeating, as it potentially erodes platforms through which the US has magnified its reach (Brookings, 2022; Kupchan, 2025).
- c. Constructivist and nationalism-focused work adds a layer of analysis by highlighting how identities, narratives and symbols shape foreign-policy choices. "Make America Great Again" articulates a story of national decline and betrayal by elites and foreigners, promising restoration through reassertion of borders, economic control and military strength (Zhao, 2018; Brookings, 2022). These narrative influences both domestic support for foreign-policy moves and how foreign audiences interpret US actions, affecting soft power and legitimacy (OUP Blog, 2017; Focus2030, 2025). Combining these theoretical lenses allows the paper to evaluate "America First" not only in terms of material outcomes but also in terms of institutional influence and reputational capital.

4.0 Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design centered on desk-based research and document analysis. It relies on secondary academic sources, think-tank reports, government statements and reputable media accounts to reconstruct the evolution and impact of Trump's foreign policy across selected issue areas (Scribbr, 2023; Study Group, 2024). This approach is appropriate because the research questions concern the interpretation of political discourse, policy choices and systemic consequences rather than the measurement of individual attitudes or micro-level actions. By triangulating scholarly analyses with official documents and timelines, the paper seeks to minimize bias and capture both supportive and critical perspectives on "America First".

4.1 Case selection focuses on fields where Trump's foreign policy has been particularly visible and consequential. These includes:

- a. Relations with traditional allies and security organizations, particularly NATO and key partners in Asia and Europe; economic and trade nationalism in relation to both allies and adversaries.
- b. US engagement with global governance mechanisms.
- c. Effects on international development and regional partners such as those in Sub-Saharan Africa.

For each case, the study identifies historical precedents, outlines key decisions under Trump and evaluates observable consequences for US influence and international order, interpreted

through the theoretical framework described above (History of the foreign policy of the US, 2009; OUP Blog, 2017; Kupchan, 2025).

5.0 Discourse on the Objectives

This section addresses the key objectives of the paper by tracing historical links, analyze policy implementations, evaluate outcomes and project contemporary implications.

5.1 Historical Roots of “America First”

Historically, the US has deviated wildly between engagement and withdrawal and “America First” sentiment appeared most strongly in the interwar period as a response against perceived over involvement in European conflicts (Norwich University, 2014). That movement stressed national sovereignty, non-entanglement and priority for domestic concerns. At the same time, US policymakers after-1945 largely left explicit “America First” branding to the side, constructing a liberal international order that fused national interest with a global responsibility in institutions like the UN, NATO and the Bretton Woods system (OUP Blog, 2017). Trump’s appropriation of “America First”, thus, revives older nationalist currents but does so in a deeply institutionalized and globalized context in which the US is the core architect, rather than an outsider.

5.2 Core Features of Trump’s Foreign Policy

Trump’s foreign policy manifest by several distinctive features that together define the “America First” approach. First, relations with allies became more obviously transactional, with recurrent complaints that allies were “free-riding” on US security assurances and demands for higher defense spending, particularly within NATO. Secondly, economic patriotism ruled the day. Tariffs, renegotiated trade agreements and the characterization of trade deficits as signs of foreign exploitation at the hands of others including allies, continued throughout his administration. Thirdly, there was a deep uncertainty towards multilateralism as Trump administration withdrew from or took steps to scale back involvement in a number of multilateral agreements, even challenging long standing US pledges in arms control and climate cooperation. Lastly, Trump relished personal diplomacy, engaging directly with foreign leaders, often leaving bureaucracy and multilateralism behind in the process.

5.3 Implications for Allies and Adversaries

For traditional allies such as in Europe and East Asia, “America First” often formed a source of friction where there was supposed to be a foreseeable temperature of mutual interest in security agreements, braced by open access to markets (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). Uncluttered attacks on NATO members, threats of withdrawal, tariff measures believed to denote a direct affront to close allies all seem to show a stir of the preceding world order. And while some countries accepted reassurances in the form of arms spending increases or modification of trade measures to fit “America First,” many simply sought evading strategies against similar risks in the future. Many allies have reduced over reliance on Washington and found alternatives in the international arena with other countries. In these regards “America First” produces short-term outcomes beneficial to its goals, that might be for long-term detrimental to the cohesion of the networks themselves as the globalization of US domination finds equilibrium. Meanwhile, adversaries exploit avenues where “America First” de-prioritized hegemonic actions. China and Russia, understanding the anguish “America First” generated throughout Europe and Asia, played off those tensions. Also, China seized upon a lack of US leadership in multilateral organizations to present itself as a more dependable partner in initiatives oscillating from trade and development to regional platforms and infrastructure projects. Likewise, Russia utilized the temporal divisions in NATO created by

the “America First” presidency to circulate discord and capture the idea of America as plummeting on issues of international importance.

5.4 Implications for Global Governance and Issue Areas

In the global governance realm, Trump’s policies led to diminished international institutions and regimes on trade, security, climate, health and development. It is imperative to note how US withdraws in multilateral avenues created gaps in funding, leadership and agenda setting for important global efforts, especially climate agreements and global health coordination. International development and humanitarian initiatives were also affected by policy reversals and funding vacuums, particularly in vulnerable regions where the US represents a major support pillar. These policy vacuums, may have communicated to partners that US commitments could be rapidly revised to reflect swings in domestic politics, impacting their long hero’s journey of work together (Brookings, 2022; Kupchan, 2025).” On the other hand, “America First” produced mixed effects for global and regional stability. There is contention that “America First” produced more pressure on allies to provide for their own defense and accept new terms to trade. This could have produced some immediate changes and may have balanced some burdens. Others have noted that weird and ambivalent signals about our intentions to adversaries increase uncertainty and raise the stakes for misperception, especially in volatile regions, resulting in “greater unpredictability.

5.5 Assessing whether Trump’s foreign policy has truly “made America great” entails distinguishing between short-term bargaining gains and long-term institutional, structural and reputational outcomes. In terms of immediate outcomes, “America First” did secure some concessions from partners on defense spending and produced renegotiated trade agreements that were presented locally as victories, strengthening Trump’s image among supporters as a tough negotiator. These moves also resonated with segments of the US electorate that felt left behind by globalization and skeptical of international commitments. However, a growing body of evidence indicates that US global standing and soft power declined during Trump’s tenure, with international surveys and expert assessments showing reduced confidence in US leadership and greater willingness among other states to look to alternative centers of power. The weakening of multilateral institutions and strains in alliance relations may have diminished US ability to shape international rules and coordinate responses to transnational challenges such as pandemics, climate change and financial crises. From this perspective, “America First” appears to have made America more unilateral and in some respects, more isolated rather than unequivocally “great” in the sense of secure, respected and structurally influential.

6.0 Conclusion

The analysis undertaken in this paper shows that Trump’s “Make America Great” foreign policy, encapsulated in the “America First” doctrine, is rooted in long-standing strands of US nationalism and skepticism toward entangling commitments, yet departs sharply from the post-1945 liberal internationalist tradition. Historical parallels with interwar isolationism and earlier unilateral episodes illuminate how Trump revived familiar themes while operating in a world where US power is deeply embedded in institutions and alliances. The theoretical framework combining realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivist attention to identity helps explain why prioritizing sovereignty and short-term reciprocity may generate tactical gains but erode institutional and normative foundations of leadership. Evidently, the “America First” approach has had ambivalent consequences. On one side, it recalibrated some burdens within alliances and signaled responsiveness to domestic concerns about globalization and perceived foreign free-riding. On the other hand, it unsettled allies, empowered rivals, weakened multilateral institutions and contributed to a perception of the US as a less reliable and less predictable partner. Also, these findings suggest that while Trump’s foreign policy

may have addressed certain grievances, it has not unambiguously “made America great” in terms of enduring power, legitimate authority and capacity to shape an increasingly contested international order.

7.0 Recommendations

In light of the foregoing, the following are recommended:

- a. Future US administrations should retain a strong focus on protecting domestic economic interests, while re-anchoring that agenda within predictable multilateral frameworks.
- b. The US leaders should rebuild trust with traditional allies by combining firm burden-sharing demands with consistent reassurance of defense commitments.
- c. The US foreign policy should make national security more explicitly to global public goods such as health, climate and development.
- d. Policymakers need to address the domestic roots of support for “America First” by coupling adjustment assistance, industrial strategy and middle-class-oriented trade policies with a clear explanation of how international engagement benefits ordinary Americans.
- e. U.S. diplomacy should invest in broader partnerships beyond its traditional Western allies, especially in the Global South, to prevent a perception that “America First” ignores emerging powers and developing regions and to maintain influence in an increasingly multipolar order.
- f. Scholars and practitioners should deepen research on how nationalist leadership styles shape foreign-policy choices, by combining structural analyses of power with leader-centric and identity-based approaches.

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