

American Foreign Policy from Interventionism to Selective Primacy: Reassessing the “Traditionally Conservative” Thesis, 1945 - 2026

Cornell Okey I. Udeagwu

PhD Candidate, Department of International Relations and Diplomacy, Baze University,
Abuja, Nigeria

Email: cornelludeagwu@gmail.com

Abstract

The claim that American foreign policy has been “traditionally conservative” conflates conservatism with isolationism and obscures the cyclical character of United States grand strategy. Using neoclassical realism as its theoretical lens, this paper examines the transformation of United States foreign policy from dominant interventionism to selective non-interventionism between 1945 and 2026. Six historical phases are identified: founding restraint (1789 - 1898), Wilsonian interventionism (1898 - 1920), interwar years (1920 to 1945), Cold War liberal hegemony (1947 - 1991), unipolar interventionism (1991 - 2008), and strategic retrenchment (2009 - 2026). Post-2008, structural multipolarity, domestic war fatigue, fiscal constraint and policy learning from Iraq and Libya produced a measurable shift toward “selective primacy”. Empirical evidence is drawn from Syria (2013), Afghanistan (2021), Niger (2023) and Ukraine (2022 - 2026). While the United States has not returned to interwar isolationism, it now privileges peer competition over peripheral nation-building. Debates over Ukraine assistance and the AUKUS partnership are treated as evidence of selectivity rather than universal interventionism. The analysis is extended here to incorporate the United States’ direct military interventions in Venezuela (January 2026) and Iran (February 2026), together with the subsequent collapse of the Iran ceasefire in July 2026, which substantially complicate the selective-primacy thesis and are discussed as evidence that the transformation remains partial, contested and reversible. For the study of international political systems, United States restraint redefines alliance burden-sharing, regional autonomy and the durability of the liberal international order. The paper concludes that the emergent “conservative” foreign policy is better understood as prudential realism than as ideological retreat.

Keywords: United States foreign policy, interventionism, non-interventionism, retrenchment, grand strategy, neoclassical realism, selective primacy, liberal hegemony

Introduction

The proposition that “American foreign policy has been traditionally conservative” is analytically imprecise and has generated decades of debate within International Relations scholarship. The term “conservative” is routinely conflated with “isolationist”, “non-interventionist” or “anti-war”, yet American conservatism in foreign affairs has never been monolithic. Mead (2002) disaggregated the United States conservative tradition into four schools: Hamiltonian commercial

realism, Wilsonian liberal internationalism, Jeffersonian restraint, and Jacksonian populist nationalism. Of these, only Jeffersonianism consistently advocates avoidance of “entangling alliances”; Jacksonianism, historically dominant in the American South and Midwest, has instead endorsed forceful, unilateral intervention whenever national honour and interests are perceived to be threatened.

Empirically, United States foreign policy has cycled between restraint and interventionism since 1789. The Founding generation practised restraint chiefly for want of capacity rather than as a matter of principle. Between 1898 and 1920, Wilsonian progressivism produced an overseas empire. From 1947 to 2008, Cold War bipolarity and post-Cold War unipolarity institutionalised a bipartisan interventionist consensus in which anti-communism and democracy promotion were framed as the defence of tradition against revolutionary ideologies (Kagan, 2018).

This paper pursues three objectives: first, to deconstruct the “traditionally conservative” premise by historicising the cycles of United States foreign policy; second, to test empirically whether a transformation from interventionist to non-interventionist posture occurred after 2008; and third, to theorise the nature and limits of that transformation using neoclassical realism, extended by counterfactual analysis of recent interventions.

The paper argues that United States foreign policy institutionalised interventionism under Cold War bipolarity and post-Cold War unipolarity, peaking with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. After 2008, structural multipolarity, domestic war fatigue, fiscal constraint and policy learning from Iraq and Libya produced a transformation toward “selective primacy”, in which direct military intervention is reserved chiefly for peer competition while peripheral conflicts receive diplomatic, economic or proxy instruments. The United States has not returned to the isolationism of the 1920s; the transformation described here is partial, contested and reversible.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Interventionism is understood as the direct use of military, economic or covert instruments to alter the domestic political authority structure of another state (Regan, 2000). Three subtypes recur in the literature: liberal interventionism, associated with democracy promotion and the Responsibility to Protect, as in Kosovo (1999); hegemonic interventionism, intended to preserve primacy and forestall rival hegemony, as in Vietnam (1965); and pre-emptive interventionism, which strikes before threats materialise, exemplified by the Bush Doctrine of 2002. Non-interventionism, or restraint, denotes a grand strategy that prioritises vital interests through diplomacy, economic statecraft and offshore balancing while avoiding large-scale ground wars and nation-building (Posen, 2014). Restraint is not isolationism: isolationism rejects alliances, whereas restraint uses alliances to economise the use of force (Mearsheimer, 2016). Retrenchment, in turn, describes the grand-strategic adjustment through which a state reduces its overseas military commitments and costs while preserving its core interests.

Conservatism in International Relations is here read as Burkean prudence: an awareness of unintended consequences, respect for historical experience, and a preference for order over abstract justice (Morgenthau, 1948). In United States foreign policy, conservatism has therefore encompassed both Jeffersonian restraint and Jacksonian force, which is precisely why the “traditionally conservative” label obscures more than it reveals.

Neoclassical Realism as Analytical Framework

Structural realism predicts that polarity shapes state behaviour but struggles to explain why states of similar power act differently. Neoclassical realism integrates systemic incentives with unit-level intervening variables, including leader perceptions, state–society relations and domestic institutions (Rose, 1998; Lobell et al., 2009). The international system, unipolar between 1991 and 2008 and increasingly multipolar thereafter, sets the parameters within which domestic variables translate systemic pressure into policy. Neoclassical realism thus explains why the Bush administration launched the Iraq War in 2003 under conditions of unipolarity, while the Obama and Biden administrations pursued restraint under emerging multipolarity despite comparable systemic constraints.

Six Phases of United States Foreign Policy

Founding restraint, 1789–1898. Washington’s Farewell Address of 1796 warned against “permanent alliances”, and the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 was fundamentally defensive in orientation (Perkins, 2006). Restraint in this period reflected limited capacity rather than doctrine.

Wilsonian interventionism, 1898–1920. The Spanish-American War inaugurated an overseas empire; the Philippine–American War of 1899 – 1902 cost some 4,200 American and 200,000 Filipino lives (Linn, 2000). American entry into the First World War in 1917 was justified in Wilsonian terms as making “the world safe for democracy”.

Interwar years (1920 to 1945): Between 1920 and 1945, United States foreign policy navigated a tension between isolationist sentiment and rising global responsibilities. Following the Senate’s rejection of the League of Nations, the U.S. pursued “normalcy,” engaging in disarmament efforts like the Washington Naval Conference and the Kellogg-Briand Pact (Ferrell, 1952). The 1930s Great Depression solidified domestic focus, leading to the isolationist Neutrality Acts (Divine, 1962). However, the escalation of World War II shifted the nation toward an “arsenal of democracy” through the Lend-Lease Act and the Atlantic Charter. By 1945, the U.S. emerged as a dominant global superpower, definitively ending its era of restraint.

Cold War interventionist consensus, 1947–1991. The Truman Doctrine (1947) and NSC-68 (1950) militarised containment. The Korean War (1950–1953) cost 36,574 American lives (Stueck, 1995), and the Vietnam War (1965 - 1973) involved 543,000 troops at its 1969 peak and 58,220 American deaths (Karnow, 1997). Covert interventions in this period included Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954) and Chile (1973) (Weiner, 2007).

Unipolar interventionism, 1991–2008. The absence of a peer competitor enabled expansive action (Wohlforth, 1999): the 78-day Kosovo air campaign of 1999 proceeded without United Nations Security Council authorisation; the 2001 Afghanistan intervention, initially framed as self-defence, evolved into nation-building; and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, justified as pre-emption, cost an estimated \$2.2 trillion and 4,431 American lives (Crawford, 2021).

Strategic retrenchment, 2009–2026. Multipolarity combined with domestic fatigue to produce successive doctrines of restraint: Obama’s “don’t do stupid stuff” (2014), Trump’s “America First” (2017), and Biden’s “foreign policy for the middle class” (2021).

Empirical Evidence of Transformation, 2009–2026

Syria, 2013: The Red Line Not Enforced

In August 2012, President Obama declared the use of chemical weapons in Syria a “red line”. When the Assad government used sarin gas in Ghouta on 21 August 2013, killing some 1,400 people, the interventionist expectation - drawn from the Kosovo precedent - was of Kosovo-style air strikes. Instead, Obama sought Congressional approval, faced only 36 per cent public support (Pew Research Center, 2013), and accepted a Russian-brokered agreement to remove Syria’s chemical arsenal; no major strike followed. This was the first occasion since 1945 on which a United States president declared a red line and did not enforce it militarily. Dueck (2015) attributes the decision to an “Iraq syndrome” and to elite learning from the 2011 Libya intervention, where regime change had produced state collapse.

Afghanistan, 2021: Ending Nation-Building

The Trump administration signed the Doha Agreement in February 2020, committing to withdrawal by May 2021; the Biden administration executed the withdrawal in August 2021 despite the Taliban’s rapid takeover. This marked a clear departure from earlier troop trajectories - Obama had ordered a surge of 30,000 troops in 2009, while Trump added only 4,000 in 2017. Biden (2021) stated plainly that the United States “did not go to Afghanistan to nation-build”. The war cost an estimated \$2.3 trillion and 2,461 American military lives, and its conclusion signalled the abandonment of democracy promotion through occupation as an organising goal of United States policy.

Ukraine, 2022 - 2026: Intervention without Troops

Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Where Cold War precedent might have anticipated a Korea-style deployment of American ground forces, the United States instead pursued offshore balancing: supplying HIMARS, ATACMS and F-16 aircraft while explicitly ruling out combat troops or a no-fly zone (Masters, 2024). Biden stated that the United States “will not fight a third world war in Ukraine” (Biden, 2022). By 31 March 2026, cumulative United States Congressional

funding tied to the war had reached approximately \$195 billion, according to the Special Inspector General for Operation Atlantic Resolve, with no deployment of American combat forces at any point in the conflict (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026). This pattern, materiel without blood or occupying troops, is a defining marker of selective primacy: arming a partner against a peer while avoiding direct war with a nuclear-armed adversary (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Niger, 2023: Democracy Promotion De-prioritised

A military coup ousted President Bazoum on 26 July 2023. Where the Cold War and unipolar playbook would have supported French or ECOWAS military intervention to restore constitutional government, the actual American response paused \$200 million in assistance while retaining the Agadez drone base and negotiating directly with the junta; the State Department (Blinken, 2023) cited “shared security interests” over democracy promotion. The episode marks the effective end of “democratic enlargement” as a driver of American intervention in Africa.

Quantitative Indicators of Restraint

Troop deployments: Overseas United States troop levels fell from 187,000 in 2008 to roughly 165,000 by mid-2026, with only about 4,500 stationed in designated combat zones, compared with 169,000 in 2008 (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2026).

Drone strikes: 563 strikes under Obama (2009 - 2016), 2,243 under Trump’s first term (2017-2020), and 65 under Biden (2021- 2025), a reduction of roughly 90 per cent from the Trump-era peak (New America, 2026).

War powers: Congress passed the 2019 Yemen War Powers Resolution and repealed the 2002 Iraq Authorization for Use of Military Force in 2023, the first repeal of an AUMF since 1971.

Public opinion: Pew Research Center polling recorded 57 per cent of Americans in 2024 saying the United States “should deal with its own problems”, up from 31 per cent in 2002, while a 2025 Chicago Council survey found 68 per cent opposed to sending troops to defend Taiwan.

Causal Mechanisms: Explaining the Transformation

Structural Change: From Unipolarity to Multipolarity

Unipolarity between 1991 and 2008 kept the costs of intervention low, since no state could balance against American power; the 2003 Iraq invasion faced no great-power opposition of consequence. By 2025, China’s nominal GDP had reached roughly 85 per cent of that of the United States, and 119 per cent in purchasing-power-parity terms (International Monetary Fund, 2026). With China fielding long-range “carrier-killer” missile systems and Russia deploying hypersonic weapons in Ukraine, the cost of confronting a peer competitor now carries genuine nuclear risk (Brooks &

Wohlforth, 2016), and systemic incentives increasingly penalise peripheral interventions that distract from peer competition.

Domestic Drivers: War Fatigue, Polarisation and Debt

The 9/11 experience was definitive (Ogbonna, Aluko, & Uzuegbu-Wilson, 2014). The human cost of the post-9/11 wars was 7,057 American military deaths and an estimated 30,177 veteran suicides between 2001 and 2021 (Crawford, 2021). This combined with a 2024 Pew finding that 64 per cent of Americans regarded the Iraq and Afghanistan wars as “not worth it”, to produce a durable restrainer coalition spanning the political spectrum, from Senator Sanders on the left to Senator Paul on the libertarian right and analysts such as Elbridge Colby among realist conservatives. Fiscally, United States federal debt reached \$31.4 trillion in 2023, with the Congressional Budget Office (2026) projecting that interest payments will exceed defence spending by 2029, reviving a classic guns-versus-butter tension (Friedberg, 2023).

Policy Learning: Iraq and Libya as Negative Models

Downes and Monten (2013) found that foreign-imposed regime change produces democratisation only around 26 per cent of the time. Iraq produced the conditions for the rise of the Islamic State; Libya produced state collapse and, notoriously, open slave markets. Obama (2016) later described Libya as his “worst mistake”. This learning was institutionalised in the 2015 Presidential Policy Guidance restricting drone strikes and in the 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, which explicitly called for greater “humility”.

Counterarguments and Rebuttal

Ukraine assistance as continued interventionism. Cumulative United States assistance to Ukraine now represents the largest such package since the Marshall Plan; the AUKUS partnership provides Australia with nuclear-powered submarines; and Taiwan received roughly \$19 billion in arms sales between 2020 and 2025. The rebuttal offered here is that this is selective primacy rather than 2003-style universal interventionism: it involves a peer competitor, no United States ground troops, and no attempt at nation-building. The 2003 Iraq invasion violated all three criteria; the Ukraine posture respects all three, and the restraint school itself supports arming allies against China or Russia (Posen, 2014).

Sanctions as new interventionism. Over 9,000 sanctions have been imposed on Russia since 2022, alongside “maximum pressure” sanctions on Iran between 2018 and 2021. The rebuttal is that sanctions are non-kinetic, comparatively low-cost and reversible; the restraint tradition accepts economic coercion while rejecting ground war, so that the transformation described here is properly one from military to economic instruments of interventionism.

Rhetoric versus reality. The 2022 National Security Strategy continued to describe the United States as the “indispensable nation”. The rebuttal privileges behaviour over rhetoric: troop withdrawals, the decline in drone strikes, and the Niger episode of 2023 all point toward restraint in practice, with continuity in strategic language attributable to bureaucratic inertia rather than to sustained interventionist behaviour.

Recent Interventions: Venezuela and Iran, 2025–2026

Venezuela: Operation Southern Spear and the Capture of Maduro

On 3 January 2026, United States forces conducted a large-scale strike across Caracas and captured President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, in a raid designated *Operation Absolute Resolve*, itself the culminating phase of the wider counter-narcotics campaign known as *Operation Southern Spear*, which had begun with strikes on suspected drug-trafficking vessels in September 2025 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026; PBS News, 2026). Both Maduro and Flores were flown to New York and indicted in the Southern District of New York on narco-terrorism and weapons charges; they pleaded not guilty at arraignment (House of Commons Library, 2026). This episode violates all three post-2013 restraint criteria identified above: Venezuela is not a peer competitor, the operation required a substantial ground and special-operations component, and the announced American intention to “run” the country pending a “safe, proper and judicious transition” implies a nation-building role. Neoclassical realism would predict that such action occurs only where domestic “rally” effects overwhelm structural constraints, as after 11 September 2001; notwithstanding 2025 polling showing 71 per cent public opposition to new Middle Eastern wars, the relevant intervening variables in this instance were sufficient to produce large-scale, high-risk action against a non-peer state. This case, on its own, weakens rather than confirms the selective-primacy thesis.

Iran: The Assassination of Khamenei and the 2026 Iran War

On 28 February 2026, joint United States–Israeli strikes on Tehran, reported by the Pentagon as “Operation Epic Fury” and by Israel as “Rising Lion”, killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei together with several senior military and intelligence officials, including the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Iran’s defence minister; Iranian sources reported that more than 200 people were killed across the country in the opening wave of strikes (NPR, 2026; Al Jazeera, 2026). Iran retaliated with missile and drone strikes against Israel, United States bases and several Gulf states, closed the Strait of Hormuz, and within two days had drawn Hezbollah into a renewed conflict with Israel in Lebanon; the resulting confrontation is now generally referred to as the 2026 Iran war (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2026). A ceasefire was reached in early April 2026 and a fourteen-point memorandum of understanding was signed by Presidents Trump and Pezeshkian on 17 June 2026, addressing navigation through the Strait of Hormuz, Iran’s nuclear and missile programmes, and the lifting of sanctions (House of Commons Library, 2026).

The theoretical implications of the Iran case depend on scope. Read narrowly, strikes confined to nuclear and missile infrastructure without ground occupation would fit within selective primacy, resembling the 2020 Soleimani strike or the 2024 Red Sea strikes against the Houthis: counter-proliferation against a regional adversary, without territorial occupation. Read more broadly, however, the deliberate killing of a head of state, the scale of the air campaign across twenty-four provinces, and the apparent objective of triggering internal regime change go well beyond counter-proliferation and instead mark a reversion to Bush-era pre-emption. Prior to June 2025, American policy in the region had been confined to limited strikes on Iran-aligned militias in Syria and Iraq; the February 2026 operation is inconsistent with the restraint pattern documented elsewhere in this paper.

Postscript: The Collapse of the Iran Ceasefire and Its Bearing on the Transformation Thesis

While considering the currency of the issues herewith, the April ceasefire and June memorandum of understanding between the United States and Iran have already come under severe strain. Renewed Iranian attacks on commercial shipping in the Strait of Hormuz in early July prompted fresh American strikes on Iranian assets, and on 8 July 2026 President Trump publicly declared the ceasefire “over”, before indicating the following day that the exchange of fire would not escalate into sustained renewed war (Britannica, 2026; CNN, 2026). Iran’s new Supreme Leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, who succeeded his father within days of the February assassination, has not appeared at the extended funeral ceremonies for Ali Khamenei and has signalled reservations about the June memorandum even as President Pezeshkian formally endorsed it. This sequence is analytically significant for the argument advanced in this paper on three counts. First, it illustrates that even a “selective primacy” posture toward a peer-adjacent regional power can, once initiated through direct military action, generate a self-reinforcing cycle of strike and counter-strike that resists the swift return to restraint observed after Syria in 2013. Second, the fragility of the ceasefire underscores that neoclassical realism’s emphasis on domestic intervening variables cuts both ways: leadership succession and factional politics inside Iran are now exerting as much influence on escalation risk as structural incentives in Washington. Third, taken together with the Venezuela intervention five weeks earlier, the Iran war suggests that the period since January 2026 should be read not as confirmation of a stable “selective primacy” equilibrium, but as a distinct sub-phase in which restraint norms built up over 2009 – 2025 have been substantially, if not permanently, displaced by willingness to use direct force against non-peer and near-peer states alike. Whether this sub-phase proves transitory, contingent on the current administration, or represents a durable re-interventionist turn is a question this paper leaves open for future research, consistent with the Bayesian, evidence-updating approach to theory testing recommended by Bennett and Checkel (2015).

Discussion: Theoretical Implications

The large-scale interventions in Venezuela and Iran, both directed at non-peer states and both involving objectives that extend toward regime change, weaken the selective-primacy thesis as originally formulated. Had American actions after 2021 remained confined to aid, sanctions and stand-off strikes, the transformation thesis would have held with little qualification. International Relations scholarship increasingly favours exactly this kind of Bayesian updating in the face of disconfirming evidence (Bennett & Checkel, 2015), and the present paper follows that convention rather than defending the original thesis unmodified. Overall, the strategic trajectory of the United States since 2021 suggests a decisive rupture in the selective-primacy thesis. This framework originally assumed that the U.S. could sustain its global hegemony through a "light-footprint" approach, relying on economic coercion, proxy support, and precision stand-off strikes to manage regional outcomes without the high-intensity risks of occupation or direct regime change.

However, the large-scale, overt interventions in Venezuela and Iran signify a return to maximalist objectives. By shifting from punitive measures to the active pursuit of regime overthrow, these operations violate the core tenets of selective primacy. This transition forces an analytical reconsideration:

- **From Management to Transformation:** The "transformation thesis" relies on the assumption that U.S. power can surgically alter internal state structures. The shift toward regime change in non-peer states suggests that the U.S. has abandoned the constraints of selective primacy in favor of an expansive, interventionist logic that mirrors the earlier, more ambitious phases of American global engagement. If U.S. policy had remained within the realm of sanctions and limited kinetic action, one might argue that the U.S. had successfully "transformed" its power into a more sustainable, restrained form. The reality, however, suggests a resurgence of the very overextension that selective primacy sought to mitigate.
- **Methodological Accountability via Bayesian Updating:** Adopting a Bayesian approach, as championed by Bennett and Checkel (2015), is essential for maintaining the rigor of International Relations scholarship. This method demands that analysts update their prior beliefs in direct proportion to the weight of new, disconfirming empirical evidence. In this case, the shift in U.S. conduct, from indirect pressure to direct intervention, serves as the "new data" that renders the previous thesis insufficient.
- **The Intellectual Cost of Stagnation:** Protecting the original thesis despite such glaring empirical anomalies would result in a "degenerating research program." By prioritizing intellectual honesty over theoretical preservation, this paper opts to refine the thesis rather than defend it against the facts. This practice of "disciplined updating" ensures that geopolitical analysis remains tethered to the actual behavior of states, acknowledging that

even in a multipolar world, the gravitational pull of interventionism remains a powerful, if destabilizing, feature of American strategy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has argued that United States foreign policy is not “traditionally conservative” if conservatism is taken to mean non-interventionism. It has cycled through six distinct phases since 1789, and the post-2008 phase shows a genuine, if incomplete, transformation from unipolar interventionism toward selective primacy, driven by multipolarity, war fatigue, debt and policy learning from Iraq and Libya. The empirical cases of Syria (2013), Afghanistan (2021), Niger (2023) and Ukraine (2022 - 2026) demonstrate restraint in peripheral conflicts and intervention primarily by proxy against peer competitors. The 2026 interventions in Venezuela and Iran, however, together with the subsequent collapse of the Iran ceasefire, depart markedly from that pattern and complicate any straightforward claim that selective primacy has become the settled character of American grand strategy.

The United States has, in short, moved from crusading interventionism toward a more prudential, if unevenly applied, selectivity: it now tends to intervene militarily only where peer competition, or a comparably compelling domestic political dynamic, is judged to be at stake, where costs can be offloaded onto allies, and where nation-building can be avoided—though 2026 shows this restraint is not yet a fixed rule. This is best understood as the new conservative foreign policy in Morgenthau’s sense of prudence, rather than as isolationism.

For the study of international political systems, the erosion of United States liberal hegemony requires renewed theoretical attention to at least three questions: how allies adapt to greater burden-sharing; whether regional powers step into the resulting security vacuums; and whether restraint is a stable disposition or merely contingent on the absence of the next galvanising crisis, or indeed on the preferences of a particular incumbent. Policymakers should recognise that public support for Iraq-style, open-ended wars remains historically low even as the events of early 2026 demonstrate that decisive, high-risk uses of force against non-peer states remain readily available to an American president who chooses to use them. The question for International Political Systems is accordingly no longer simply “should America lead?”, but where it will choose to lead, where it will permit others to lead, and how reliably any current restraint can be expected to hold under pressure.

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