The Recurring Logic of U.S. Foreign Policy since 2025: National Interest as the Ostinato of International Relations

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Abstract

This study examines the underlying logic of United States foreign policy under Donald J. Trump since 2025, advancing ◎ostinato◎ as a conceptual metaphor to explain the persistent recurrence of national interest as the core driver of state behavior. Employing a qualitative methodology based on secondary sources, including scholarly works, policy analyses, and official communications, the research analyzes key thematic areas: U.S.◎Iran relations and deterrence politics; transatlantic alliance restructuring and burden-sharing; strategic uncertainty in the Middle East; and domestic-political influences through the two-level game framework, including its application to Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) in Africa. Integrating realism, neoclassical realism, and game theory, the study argues that Trump◎s foreign policy reflects a rationalist and strategic orientation marked by transactionalism, calculated signaling, and adaptive tactics. Despite variations in approach across contexts, a consistent pattern emerges: the prioritization and projection of U.S. national interest. The study concludes that coherence in this foreign policy is defined not by tactical consistency but by purposive continuity. National interest operates as the ◎ostinato◎ of international relations◎an enduring motif shaping state conduct, thereby reaffirming the explanatory power of realist theory over ethical or normative frameworks.

Introduction

Recent scholarship on Donald J. Trump◎s second administration since 2025 increasingly emphasizes that U.S. foreign policy reflects a robust reassertion of national interest within an international system marked by fragmentation, uncertainty, and emergent multipolarity. This evolving global landscape, characterized by the diffusion of power among rising and resurgent actors, has

renewed attention to the explanatory power of realist frameworks. While some analysts interpret the administration◎s approach as a revival of classical and structural realism, others adopt a neoclassical realist perspective, in which systemic pressures are mediated through domestic politics, elite perceptions, and leadership idiosyncrasies (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979; Rose, 1998; Schweller, 2006; Ripsman et al., 2016).

At the core of this debate lies the proposition that national interest remains the enduring organizing principle, the ostinato of international relations (Nwaoha, 2013). Rather than representing a rupture, the Trump administration◎s policies reflect a stylized intensification of this recurring logic. As Nwaoha (2013) metaphorically observes, beneath the apparent volatility of diplomatic gestures, rhetorical escalation, and abrupt strategic shifts lies a consistent commitment to preserving and projecting relative power.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the administration◎s hybrid strategy, which combines traditional power politics with coercive and performative instruments of statecraft. Unilateralism, the strategic use of economic tools such as tariffs and sanctions, and the recalibration of alliances illustrate a doctrine emphasizing autonomy, leverage, and strategic unpredictability. Manifestations of ◎commando diplomacy◎◎rapid, forceful, and often unilateral pressure, are particularly evident in engagements with adversarial states and non-state actors (Nwaoha, 2013).

Game-theoretic approaches further illuminate this logic, with concepts such as credible commitment, signaling, brinkmanship, and strategic uncertainty explaining patterns of policy inconsistency and escalation across trade, alliances, and Middle East crises (Schelling, 1960; Fearon, 1995; Powell, 2006; Lake, 2010).

This study critically engages five key domains: trade policy restructuring; Iran-related strategic escalation; transatlantic relations; Middle East conflicts and strategic confrontation; and domestic-political drivers of foreign policy, including the Two-Level Game and Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) in Africa. By situating these issues within realism, neoclassical realism, and game-theoretic frameworks, the paper argues that, despite apparent discontinuities,

contemporary U.S. foreign policy remains firmly grounded in the enduring logic of national interest, adapted to the constraints and opportunities of a transforming global order.

1.Trade Policy Restructuring and Tariffs: Economic Statecraft and Strategic Interaction

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar order following the Fall of the Soviet Union temporarily attenuated great power rivalry, giving rise to a liberal economic order premised on interdependence, institutionalism, and the expansion of global trade. However, the rapid ascent of China as a central node in global production networks and a formidable economic competitor has reintroduced dynamics of strategic rivalry into the economic domain. For the second administration of Donald J. Trump, this transformation constitutes not merely a commercial challenge but a systemic threat to U.S. relative power. Within this context, the ◎America First◎ doctrine is best understood as a deliberate effort to restructure the terms of global economic engagement in ways that restore U.S. leverage, recalibrate asymmetrical dependencies, and counterbalance China◎s expanding influence in international trade and industrial capacity.

A dominant theme in contemporary literature is thus the reconfiguration of U.S. trade policy through the strategic deployment of tariffs and other coercive economic instruments. Rather than viewing trade as a mutually beneficial domain governed by comparative advantage, scholars increasingly interpret Trump◎s tariff regime as a form of economic statecraft embedded in realist logic, where economic relations are subordinated to broader national security and geopolitical objectives (Blackwill & Harris, 2016; Drezner, 2019; Baldwin, 2016). Tariffs, in this sense, function not simply as protective measures but as instruments of power projection◎tools designed to compel behavioral change, signal resolve, and restructure competitive hierarchies within the global economy.

From a structural realist perspective, the resort to tariffs reflects the enduring imperative of states to preserve relative gains in an anarchic international system. As theorized by Waltz (1979) and further elaborated by Gilpin (1981) and Grieco (1988), states remain acutely sensitive not only to their own economic welfare but to the distribution of gains vis-à-vis potential rivals. The integration of China into

the global trading system◎while generating aggregate wealth◎has simultaneously altered the balance of economic power in ways perceived as disadvantageous to the United States. Consequently, tariffs emerge as a rational response aimed at limiting dependency, protecting strategic industries, and preventing further erosion of relative advantage (Powell, 1991; Mastanduno, 1998). In this framework, economic interdependence is reinterpreted not as a source of stability but as a potential vector of vulnerability.

Neoclassical realist approaches deepen this analysis by highlighting the role of domestic political mediation in shaping trade policy outcomes. While systemic pressures provide the overarching context, the specific form and intensity of tariff escalation are filtered through internal dynamics, including electoral incentives, bureaucratic competition, and interest group mobilization (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016; Lobell et al., 2009). The Trump administration◎s trade policies, particularly those targeting sectors such as steel, agriculture, and manufacturing, reveal a clear alignment with politically salient constituencies. Empirical studies reinforce this interpretation, demonstrating that trade restrictions are often disproportionately directed toward industries with significant electoral relevance or lobbying capacity (Putnam, 1988; Milner, 1997; Lake, 2009). Thus, tariff policy operates simultaneously at two levels: as an. external instrument of geopolitical competition and a mechanism of political consolidation.

Game-theoretic perspectives provide an additional layer of analytical clarity by conceptualizing trade conflicts as strategic interactions characterized by interdependence, uncertainty, and iterative decision-making. Trade wars are frequently modeled as iterated prisoner◎s dilemmas, wherein mutual cooperation yields optimal outcomes, yet incentives to defect, driven by short-term gains or mistrust, lead to suboptimal equilibria (Axelrod, 1984; Oye, 1986). Within this framework, the Trump administration◎s tariff strategies can be interpreted as forms of brinkmanship and strategic signaling, designed to alter the payoff structure of negotiations and extract concessions through credible threats of escalation (Schelling, 1960; Fearon, 1997; Powell, 2006). The deliberate cultivation of unpredictability further enhances this strategy by increasing the perceived costs of non-compliance for adversaries.

However, this approach is not without significant risks. As highlighted in the literature, coercive trade strategies can generate inefficient equilibria, including retaliatory tariff spirals, supply chain disruptions, and the fragmentation of the global trading system into competing blocs (Dixit & Nalebuff, 1991; Brander & Spencer, 1985). Such outcomes may ultimately undermine the very objectives they are intended to achieve, eroding global welfare while failing to secure decisive strategic advantage. In this sense, the Trump administration◎s trade policy encapsulates a central tension within realist statecraft: the pursuit of relative gains in a deeply interconnected system where the costs of conflict are diffuse, cumulative, and often unpredictable.

Taken together, the restructuring of U.S. trade policy under Trump reflects a broader transformation in the role of economic instruments within international politics. Trade is no longer treated as a domain insulated from high politics but is instead fully integrated into the strategic calculus of power competition. Tariffs, therefore, are not merely economic tools◎they are manifestations of a deeper logic in which national interest, security imperatives, and geopolitical rivalry converge to shape the contours of global economic order.

2 Iran, Strategic Confrontation, and the Politics of Deterrence: Rationality, Escalation, and Uncertainty

Iran has long occupied a central position in the geopolitical economy of energy and regional security. Prior to the 1979 revolution, U.S.◎Iran relations were deeply institutionalized, with Iran serving as a key pillar of American strategy in the Middle East. The transformed this relationship, recasting Iran as an ideologically driven and strategically autonomous actor resistant to Western influence, thereby embedding durable antagonism into bilateral relations.

Since then, U.S. policy has oscillated between engagement and containment, a tension that intensified under Donald J. Trump (2025◎) into a more explicitly coercive posture. Iran◎s alignment with actors such as Russia and its reliance on asymmetric tools◎particularly proxy networks like Hezbollah◎enable indirect power projection and ◎deniable deterrence,◎ complicating conventional interstate conflict dynamics.

From a realist perspective, U.S.◎Iran relations exemplify the security dilemma, where defensive measures are interpreted as offensive threats, generating recursive escalation (Jervis, 1978; Herz, 1950; Walt, 1987). Sanctions, military deployments, and alliances aimed at deterrence are perceived by Iran as regime-threatening, reinforcing countermeasures and sustaining a cycle of strategic entrapment.

Deterrence theory further clarifies this dynamic. The Trump administration◎s ◎maximum pressure◎ strategy reflects compellence rather than deterrence, seeking to alter Iranian behavior through escalating costs (Schelling, 1966; George & Smoke, 1974; Huth, 1999). However, as scholarship shows, coercion is less effective when targets perceive core interests◎such as regime survival and ideological identity◎as non-negotiable (Pape, 1996; Byman & Waxman, 2002). In Iran◎s case, resistance to external pressure reinforces regime legitimacy, limiting responsiveness to coercion.

Game theory, particularly the bargaining theory of war, explains the persistence of confrontation despite incentives for settlement. Conflict arises from information asymmetries, commitment problems, and misperception (Fearon, 1995; Powell, 2006; Wagner, 2000). In the U.S.◎Iran case, uncertainty about intentions and the absence of credible commitment mechanisms◎exacerbated by failed agreements◎undermine cooperation, encouraging brinkmanship and costly signaling. The use of proxies further obscures attribution and complicates escalation control.

Neoclassical realism adds a domestic dimension, emphasizing how leadership perceptions and political constraints mediate strategy (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016). Under Trump, decision-making reflects bounded rationality, shaped by heuristics, reputational concerns, and domestic incentives (Jervis, 1976; Snyder et al., 2002; Taliaferro, 2006). This helps explain the coexistence of escalation and negotiation within a strategy aimed at maximizing leverage.

The U.S.◎Iran confrontation also reveals a paradox of modern coercion: the expansion of economic, military, and informational tools increases complexity and unpredictability. Sanctions may weaken economies but strengthen nationalism,

while military signaling may deter direct conflict yet provoke asymmetric retaliation. This multidimensionality limits the effectiveness of linear coercive strategies.

In sum, U.S.◎Iran relations illustrate the interaction of deterrence, escalation, and bounded rationality under conditions of uncertainty. Persistent confrontation is not simply a product of miscalculation but a structurally embedded outcome of strategic interaction within an anarchic system. Consistent with this study◎s broader argument, national interest remains the underlying ostinato shaping behavior, even amid volatility and escalation.

3. Transatlantic Rupture with Europe: Alliances, Burden-Sharing, and Institutional Transformation

The United States has long functioned as the principal stabilizing force in Western Europe, a role consolidated after World War II through economic reconstruction (Marshall Plan) and institutionalized security under NATO. This grand strategy embedded Europe within a broader system of deterrence and cooperation, reinforced by arms control regimes such as SALT and START. However, the cumulative costs of this arrangement have increasingly been reframed◎especially under Donald J. Trump since 2025 as an asymmetric burden requiring recalibration.

From a grand strategic perspective, this shift reflects a movement from liberal hegemonic leadership toward a more selective, interest-driven approach. Whereas earlier strategy emphasized deep engagement and systemic stability, Trump◎s posture aligns more closely with offshore balancing and retrenchment, seeking to reduce direct commitments while pressuring European allies to assume greater responsibility. This recalibration reflects changing global priorities and concerns about U.S. overextension.

Realist theory provides the foundation for this transformation. Alliances are viewed as instrumental and contingent, shaped by power distribution and threat perception (Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001). Trump◎s critique of NATO◎particularly regarding burden-sharing and free-riding◎represents a reassessment of alliance utility. From this perspective, U.S. efforts to redistribute

costs and reduce constraints on strategic autonomy are consistent with offensive realist logic (Mearsheimer, 2001; Posen, 2014).

Game theory further clarifies the dynamics at play. The transatlantic alliance can be understood as a repeated burden-sharing game vulnerable to free-riding (Olson, 1965; Snidal, 1985). Trump◎s approach resembles strategic defection or ◎shock bargaining,◎ introducing uncertainty◎through conditional commitments and withdrawal threats◎to alter the payoff structure and compel allied adjustment. Drawing on coercive bargaining theory, such signaling seeks to enhance credibility (Schelling, 1960; Fearon, 1997; Powell, 2006).

However, this strategy carries risks. Cooperation in repeated games depends on trust and expectations of future interaction; increased volatility may weaken these foundations, shifting the equilibrium toward hedging or partial defection. European responses reflect this logic: states pursue mixed strategies, including increased defense spending, institutional diversification, and continued engagement. The push for strategic autonomy thus represents a rational adaptation to uncertainty rather than outright rejection of the alliance (Oye, 1986). Liberal institutionalism highlights the broader consequences. NATO is not merely a transactional arrangement but a dense institutional framework sustaining cooperation (Keohane, 1984; Ikenberry, 2011). Erosion of these norms reduces the ◎shadow of the future,◎ making cooperative outcomes harder to sustain and increasing systemic uncertainty.

Neoclassical realism integrates domestic political dynamics into this analysis. Trump◎s alliance policy is shaped by domestic narratives of sovereignty and economic nationalism (Dueck, 2019; Mead, 2017), which reframe alliances as costly and redistributive. These internal pressures filter external strategy, amplifying volatility and reinforcing uncertainty within the alliance system.

In sum, the transatlantic rupture reflects not a breakdown of alliance logic but its transformation. The shift toward a more transactional, bargaining-oriented approach introduces competitive dynamics within the alliance itself. While mutual security remains the underlying principle, its institutional and strategic foundations are increasingly renegotiated, rendering the transatlantic relationship

a dynamic, evolving strategic game shaped by power, perception, and domestic constraint.

4. American National Interest and Strategic Uncertainty in the Middle East: Power, Intervention, and Regional Complexity

The Middle East remains a central testing ground for U.S. foreign policy under Donald J. Trump since 2025, where the enduring logic of national interest operates as a strategic constant, an ostinato, amid shifting regional dynamics. The region presents a complex ◎tripod◎ structure of alignment and rivalry that simultaneously constrains and compels U.S. action. This tripod consists of: (1) non-Islamic strategic partners, particularly Israel; (2) cooperative Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates; and (3) adversarial powers, most notably Iran. These actors are divided by deep, ideological, and geopolitical cleavages, yet remain interconnected within a volatile regional balance of power.

From a realist perspective, U.S. engagement in the Middle East reflects a continuous effort to maintain equilibrium among these competing actors while preventing any single power◎especially Iran◎from achieving regional hegemony (Walt, 1987; Gause, 2014). This balancing act is further complicated by proxy warfare, shifting alliances, and the persistence of non-state actors, all of which reinforce the region◎s strategic uncertainty. As Telhami (2013) suggests, U.S. policy is often caught between competing imperatives: reassuring allies, deterring adversaries, and preserving its own credibility.

Under Trump◎s renewed leadership, the ◎America First◎ doctrine rearticulates national interest in more explicit and transactional terms. Rather than pursuing broad multilateral consensus, the administration prioritizes selective engagement, burden-sharing, and visible gains in security and economic terms. However, this approach intensifies a core dilemma: how to disengage from protracted conflicts without creating power vacuums, while simultaneously sustaining U.S. influence and a positive international image.

Strategically, two interrelated policy thrusts appear central to this effort: the pursuit of regional stabilization through negotiated arrangements (e.g., ◎peace-

brokering◎) and the containment◎or potential transformation, of adversarial regimes, particularly Iran. Yet, as Biddle (2004) and Betts (2012) argue, U.S. interventions have frequently suffered from strategic incoherence, where military actions are insufficiently aligned with long-term political objectives. This disconnect risks undermining both operational success and diplomatic credibility. Game theory frameworks help illuminate the complexity of this environment. The Middle East can be understood as a multi-actor strategic game in which outcomes are contingent not only on U.S. decisions but also on the anticipatory responses of regional players (Bueno de Mesquita, 1981; Powell, 2015). In such a setting, even well-calibrated moves can produce unintended consequences, including escalation, alliance fragmentation, or reputational costs. For instance, efforts to address the Gaza question or to exert pressure on Iran must account for the reactions of Arab partners, domestic constituencies, and transnational actors, each with distinct preferences and thresholds for cooperation or resistance.

Neoclassical realism further deepens this analysis by highlighting the role of domestic politics and leadership-level variables in shaping foreign policy behavior (Lobell et al., 2009; Taliaferro et al., 2009). Trump◎s leadership style, characterized by personalization of diplomacy, emphasis on deal-making, and responsiveness to domestic political incentives, introduces an additional layer of variability. Domestic pressures, including electoral considerations and ideological commitments, intersect with external constraints to produce a policy that is at once assertive and, at times, unpredictable.

The role of regional institutions, particularly the Arab League, adds another dimension to this complexity. While formally positioned as a platform for collective Arab action, its influence is often limited by internal divisions and competing national interests. Consequently, U.S. policy cannot rely on a unified regional bloc but must instead navigate a fragmented diplomatic landscape where bilateral relationships often take precedence over multilateral coordination.

At the core of Trump◎s Middle East strategy lies an attempt to reconcile competing objectives: projecting strength while avoiding overextension, advancing peace initiatives while preserving strategic dominance, and maintaining alliances without alienating key partners. The Gaza issue and the question of regime change

in Iran exemplify this tension. Both are framed within a broader doctrine of necessity, where actions are justified in terms of immediate strategic imperatives, yet remain sources of enduring uncertainty due to their long-term implications and high potential for escalation.

Ultimately, the recurring logic of U.S. foreign policy under Trump since is not defined by ideological transformation but by the persistent primacy of national interest. This interest manifests as a flexible yet consistent pursuit of security, influence, and strategic advantage. In the Middle East, however, the complexity of regional politics ensures that even a coherent national interest must operate within an environment of profound uncertainty. Thus, the ostinato of U.S. policy continues to play◎steady in intent, but variable in execution, shaped by the interplay of power, perception, and the enduring constraints of regional complexity

5. Domestic-Political Drivers of Foreign Policy: The Two-Level Game

U.S. foreign policy under Donald J. Trump (2025◎) is best understood as the interaction between domestic political imperatives and international strategic calculations. The two-level game framework (Putnam, 1988) captures this dynamic, conceptualizing policymaking as simultaneous negotiation across domestic and international arenas. Policy effectiveness depends on the leader◎s ability to reconcile internal political constraints with external strategic objectives. Within this framework, ◎America First◎ operationalizes national interest as the central organizing principle,the ostinato, of foreign policy. Consistent with Nwaoha (2013), diplomacy becomes the strategic management of national interests rather than a norm-driven enterprise. Domestic priorities, economic protection, political legitimacy, and electoral advantage. serve as the primary filters through which international engagements are assessed, positioning foreign policy as an instrument of domestically defined goals.

Empirical scholarship underscores this domestic influence. Milner (1997) highlights the role of domestic preferences and institutions in shaping trade policy; Trubowitz (2011) emphasizes geographic and partisan divisions; and Narizny (2007) demonstrates how elite competition shapes grand strategy. Under

Trump, these dynamics intensify, with trade, security, and alliance policies closely aligned to voter expectations, partisan incentives, and intra-elite rivalry.

Neoclassical realism integrates these insights by showing how systemic pressures are mediated through domestic structures and leadership perceptions (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016). Trump◎s personalized and transactional leadership style shapes the interpretation of external constraints, producing a foreign policy that is strategically consistent in its pursuit of national interest but variable in execution. Game theory further clarifies this interaction. Audience cost theory suggests leaders maintain credibility to avoid domestic penalties (Fearon, 1994), while signaling theory explains how intentions are conveyed under uncertainty (Schultz, 2001). Trump◎s strategic use of unpredictability can thus be seen as an effort to enhance bargaining leverage by increasing uncertainty for adversaries.

However, this approach entails trade-offs. While unpredictability may yield short-term gains, it risks miscalculation, weakens alliance confidence, and introduces ambiguity into U.S. commitments, potentially generating unintended strategic consequences.

In sum, U.S. foreign policy under Trump reflects the primacy of national interest as mediated through domestic politics. The two-level game demonstrates that policy outcomes emerge from continuous negotiation between internal and external pressures, with national interest persisting as the enduring ostinato shaping U.S. behavior.

6. The Two-Level Game and Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) in Africa

Within *The Recurring Logic of U.S. Foreign Policy Under Donald J. Trump (2025)*, Africa constitutes a strategically significant arena where domestic imperatives and systemic competition intersect. Extending Putnam◎s (1988) two-level game highlights a dual dynamic: U.S. policymakers negotiate externally with African states while managing internal pressures from constituencies, institutions, and ideological commitments.

At the systemic level, Africa◎s importance derives from its resource wealth, demographic growth, and geopolitical position. Yet its political and socio-

economic diversity introduces complexity that resists uniform policy approaches. From a realist perspective, U.S. engagement seeks to secure access, limit rival influence, and maintain strategic flexibility (Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001). Under ◎America First,◎ this logic becomes more transactional, with partnerships assessed in terms of reciprocity and tangible returns. Within this framework, Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) designations function not only as normative instruments but also as strategic signals◎imposing reputational costs and enabling calibrated pressure.

Neoclassical realism refines this analysis by emphasizing domestic mediation (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016). Congressional activism, advocacy networks, and public discourse◎especially on religious freedom and security, shape U.S. policy outputs. The CPC mechanism thus reflects a dual logic: satisfying domestic normative demands while reinforcing international leverage, consistent with a constrained optimization problem in game-theoretic terms.

The strategic environment is further shaped by competing external actors. China◎s economic expansion (Brautigam, 2009; Alden, 2007), Russia◎s security involvement (Stronski, 2019), and Iran◎s indirect influence create a multipolar, competitive landscape. This can be conceptualized as a multi-actor, non-cooperative game under conditions of uncertainty (Fearon, 1994; Powell, 2015). U.S. tools◎CPC designations, economic incentives, and security partnerships, serve as strategic moves to influence payoffs and shape behavior, though outcomes remain vulnerable to misperception and inefficiency.

The two-level game is particularly pronounced in Africa due to the interaction between domestic dynamics within African states and external pressures. Governments balance internal legitimacy, ethnic and religious divisions, and development needs while engaging multiple external partners. This produces a nested game structure in which both U.S. and African actors operate under simultaneous domestic and international constraints.

In key cases such as Nigeria, internal security challenges intersect with external strategic concerns, requiring adaptive and calibrated engagement. These interactions resemble repeated games with evolving information, where strategies

must remain flexible. Crucially, African states retain agency: by diversifying partnerships and leveraging great-power competition, they actively shape outcomes rather than passively absorbing external influence.

. Overall, U.S. policy toward Africa under Trump reflects the same global ostinato: the persistent prioritization of national interest. Realism explains the competitive pursuit of influence; neoclassical realism underscores domestic mediation; and game theory illuminates strategic interaction under conditions of uncertainty. Within this framework, CPC designations function not as isolated normative acts but as deliberate instruments of strategy, signaling intent, shaping behavior, and sustaining U.S. leverage in a contested international system. Simultaneously, Trump frames interventions on humanitarian and messianic grounds, portraying the United States as a liberating force◎a framing often welcomed by some vulnerable populations in the countries receiving his attention, such as Iran, Venezuela, and Nigeria. In Nigeria, this dynamic intersects with longstanding sociopolitical and economic grievances and recurring violence, including communal and extremist attacks that have driven calls for a Country of Particular Concern designation and drawn U.S. strategic attention to the humanitarian and security crisis in the country.

7. Synthesis: Realism, Neoclassical Realism, and Game Theory in Trump✙s Foreign Policy

At the level of grand strategy, U.S. foreign policy under Donald J. Trump (2025◎) is best understood through a synthetic framework integrating realism, neoclassical realism, and game theory. Across domains◎trade, alliances, security, and digital diplomacy◎national interest functions as the ostinato: a persistent structuring logic guiding external behavior despite variation in tactics and tone.

This ostinato is operational rather than merely rhetorical. Whether expressed through economic nationalism, alliance burden recalibration, or direct leader-to-audience communication, the core objective remains the preservation of U.S. power and relative advantage. In line with Nwaoha (2013), diplomacy is thus the strategic management of national interest within a competitive system. Trump◎s approach does not depart from this logic but renders it more explicit, narrowing the gap between principle and practice.

Realism provides the foundational architecture, emphasizing power, security, and survival (Walt, 1987). Trump◎s focus on military strength, economic leverage, bilateralism, and relative gains reflects this inheritance. However, his apparent zero-sum rhetoric is better understood as conditional: cooperation is acceptable insofar as it reinforces U.S. primacy or corrects perceived imbalances.

Neoclassical realism refines this account by incorporating domestic variables◎leadership perception, elite contestation, and institutional constraints (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016). Under Trump, electoral incentives, polarization, and centralized decision-making shape how systemic pressures are interpreted. As a result, national interest remains constant, but its articulation becomes selective, personalized, and tactically fluid.

Game theory further illuminates Trump◎s strategic conduct. International politics resembles a multi-actor game defined by signaling, expectations, and strategic interaction (Fearon, 1994; Schultz, 2001). Trump◎s use of calibrated unpredictability◎abrupt shifts, unconventional communication, and high-stakes bargaining, can be seen as an effort to alter opponents◎ payoff structures and extract concessions.

Yet such strategies reveal the limits of rationality. As Bueno de Mesquita (1981) and Powell (2015) show, complex interactions often produce suboptimal outcomes even under rational intent. Trump◎s foreign policy reflects bounded rationality shaped by uncertainty, cognitive constraints, and domestic pressures, generating a pattern of assertiveness alongside unintended consequences, including alliance strain and signaling ambiguity.

Taken together, three conclusions emerge:
◎ National interest operates as the structural constant, the ostinato, across policy domains.
◎ Domestic politics mediates its interpretation and implementation.
◎ Strategic interaction introduces uncertainty and the possibility of suboptimal outcomes.

Thus, U.S. foreign policy under Trump is neither erratic nor purely idiosyncratic. It represents a strategically bounded, domestically mediated, and interaction-driven expression of enduring realist principles.

More specifically, economic statecraft employs tariffs as signals within iterated bargaining games, leveraging asymmetric advantages to compel renegotiation. Iran policy reflects deterrence as dynamic equilibrium under uncertainty, combining coercion with ambiguity. Transatlantic tensions signify renegotiation within repeated cooperation frameworks rather than systemic breakdown. In the Middle East, strategic uncertainty functions as a flexible policy instrument, while a shift toward bilateralism enhances leverage by reducing multilateral constraints. The domestic politics, understood through the two-level game framework, links internal and external bargaining, with outcomes shaped by electoral incentives and elite competition.

Overall, the synthesis of realism, neoclassical realism, and game theory reveals a coherent strategic architecture: U.S. foreign policy under Trump, manifests a disciplined yet adaptive pursuit of national interest, with calculated uncertainty deployed as a deliberate and consistent instrument. Within this ostinato framework, all actors,states, non-state entities, and asymmetric participants◎operate according to a logic that privileges strategic interest over ethical considerations, while international law functions largely as an observer rather than an active regulator of behavior. The nationalist internationalism embodied in Trump◎s ◎America First◎ rhetoric and doctrine of necessity exemplifies this principle, underscoring the ostinator logic whereby strategic calculation, leverage, and relative advantage govern action. In this competitive, multi-actor environment, outcomes are shaped less by normative prescriptions or institutional constraints than by the continuous, interest-driven management of power, signaling, and strategic positioning across the complex and dynamic terrain of international relations.

Conclusion

The Recurring Logic of U.S. Foreign Policy Under Donald J. Trump (2025-) demonstrates that beneath the apparent volatility of U.S. diplomacy lies a consistent strategic rhythm: national interest as the ostinato of international

relations. Like a recurring musical pattern, this principle structures policy across domains, persisting through shifts in tone, tactics, and context. Under the ◎America First◎ doctrine◎and more fundamentally, the doctrine of necessity◎foreign policy is anchored in the imperative to preserve power, autonomy, and relative advantage.

In economic statecraft, tariffs function as strategic signals within iterated bargaining games, where asymmetric advantage is leveraged to compel renegotiation. In the Iran case, deterrence operates as a dynamic equilibrium of calibrated escalation, where coercion and ambiguity serve the overriding goal of safeguarding U.S. strategic interests. Transatlantic tensions similarly reflect not rupture but recalibration: alliances are renegotiated to redistribute burdens in line with national priorities.

Across the Middle East, strategic uncertainty becomes an instrument of policy, enabling flexible responses within a complex, multi-actor environment. Institutionally, the shift from multilateralism to bilateral, transactional engagements reflects a preference for arrangements that maximize U.S. leverage and minimize constraint. Domestic politics, understood through the two-level game framework, further reinforces this logic, as internal incentives shape how national interest is defined and pursued. Even normative tools such as CPC designations are subsumed within this broader strategic calculus.

The synthesis of realism, neoclassical realism, and game theory clarifies this pattern: power and interest remain foundational; domestic structures mediate their expression; and strategic interaction introduces uncertainty. Yet beneath this complexity lies a single unifying thread.

Ultimately, U.S. foreign policy under Trump (2025◎) is best understood as a disciplined expression of necessity, where national interest functions as the enduring ostinato◎repetitive, adaptive, and determinative. Apparent unpredictability is not a departure from logic but a strategic method, ensuring that across all domains, the continuous reassertion of interest remains the defining principle of international engagement.

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