



The America First Conception of National Interest

U.S. Self-Perception of Power and
Foreign Policy in the Post-Unipolar World

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Chapter

1

President Donald Trump, having reclaimed
the White House (Photo: Samuel Corum/Pool/
ABACAPRESS.COM/Kyodo News Images)

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

Abstract

At the core of the Donald Trump administration's "America First" foreign policy lies a conception of national interest characterized by three features: (1) a narrowing of geographic scope, (2) a compression of time horizons, and (3) a pursuit of relative gains. While it is tempting to trace the origins of America First thinking in U.S. history, such as the isolationism of the interwar period, historical analogies have their limits. Trump's version of America First is best understood in its contemporary context. In particular, over the course of the 2000s and 2010s, China's rapid rise contributed to a growing perception within the United States of relative decline and to fear that the country might soon lose its status as the world's preeminent power. This loss of confidence and resentment underlie Trump's narrative to "Make America Great Again." That said, the post-pandemic economic recovery has prompted some reassessment of America's enduring strengths, and American self-perception now presents a more complex picture, no longer dominated by pessimistic forecasts of inevitable U.S. decline.

Introduction

“From this moment on, it’s going to be America First.”¹ On January 20, 2017, having won the presidential election against most expectations, Donald Trump declared in his inaugural address that the United States would put its own national interest first in every policy decision. This conviction rested on his diagnosis that “we’ve made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon.” Eight years later, after four years out of office, Trump returned to the White House and reiterated the same message in his second inaugural address: “During every single day of the Trump administration, I will, very simply, put America first.”²

“America First” has taken root as one of the keywords defining the Trump administration’s foreign policy. The importance of properly understanding the meaning of America First is clear. Even as observers note the unpredictability of Trump’s words and actions, the concept offers a useful lens for identifying coherent threads running through his policy direction. The second Trump administration is said to have sharpened its America First posture still further. With conservatives now holding majorities not only in the executive branch but also in both chambers of Congress and on the Supreme Court, and with Trump’s grip on the Republican Party tightening, many of the constraints visible during his first term have fallen away. America First is thus a key concept for gauging how far the second Trump administration will go. It is also an unavoidable factor in the competitive pluralization in the Indo-Pacific, since most countries in the region are profoundly affected by the United States. In that sense, this chapter provides essential context for the discussion of other regional states’ foreign policies that follows.

What does an America First foreign policy actually mean, and why has it emerged now? Understanding this trend requires attention to the underlying shifts in American self-perception. With this question in mind, the chapter clarifies the character of the Trump administration’s America First posture and traces the shifting perceptions of and debates over U.S. power that lie behind it. Section 1 analyzes the character of Trump’s brand of America

1) Donald J. Trump, “The Inaugural Address,” January 20, 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>.

2) Donald J. Trump, “The Inaugural Address,” January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/>.

First, arguing in particular that the conception of national interest running through it is characterized by three features: (1) a narrowing of geographic scope, (2) a compression of time horizons, and (3) a pursuit of relative gains. Section 2 then discusses where the origins of the Trump administration's America First should be located. Departing from arguments that locate its intellectual roots in earlier historical episodes such as the interwar period, when similar slogans were in vogue, this section contends that today's America First is best understood squarely within its contemporary context. Finally, Section 3 traces the shift in perceptions within the U.S. foreign policy community and among the American public since the end of the Cold War. It shows that changes in U.S. self-perception regarding national power over the 2000s and 2010s form an important backdrop to America First thinking, and that China's rise has weighed heavily on that self-perception.

As of July 2026, the second Trump administration has only completed a year and a half, and its foreign policy may yet evolve over the remainder of the term. Much depends on the coming midterm elections, too. Accordingly, this chapter does not undertake a detailed examination of specific policies. Its aim is rather to capture the character of the America First mindset that lies behind them and the context in which that mindset has come to the fore. Nor is the chapter an attempt to pin down what is genuinely novel about the Trump administration across 250 years of American history. As many of the commentators discussed in Section 2 observe, parallels with the Trump administration can be drawn from various periods in the history of U.S. foreign policy. Cataloguing the differences between every such precedent and the present administration may have its place as a historiographical exercise, but it contributes little to assessing the contemporary implications of the phenomenon. The fact that parallels can be drawn does not necessarily mean that the same forces are at work or that future trajectories will follow similar paths. Rather than relying on facile historical analogy, the Trump administration's America First should be understood within the context that connects directly to the present.

1. The America First Conception of National Interest

What does America First actually mean? Beyond the literal sense of putting the United States first, the term lacks any clear or unified definition. The 2017 *National Security Strategy* (NSS), issued during the first Trump administration, characterized America First foreign policy as grounded in “American principles” and “a clear-eyed assessment of U.S. interests” in pursuit of

“prioritizing the interests of our citizens and protecting our sovereign rights as a nation.”³ Yet it does not specify what those “American principles” are. The 2025 NSS, issued under the second Trump administration, emphasizes that the administration will judge policy by “what works for America” and will act in a pragmatic manner, rather than being bound by any “traditional, political ideology.”⁴

The central issue here is how national interest is conceived. In an anarchic international system that has no central authority to enforce peace and cooperation, states are ultimately responsible for their own security and prosperity. In that sense, putting one’s own interests first is a matter of course. Why, then, does the Trump administration feel compelled to expressly insist on self-interest? The answer lies in a perception that the established course of U.S. foreign policy was sacrificing the national interest for the benefit of other countries. This view comes through clearly in Trump’s inaugural address quoted at the outset. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has likewise stated that “the United States government is not a charity,” adding that “the Chinese will do what’s in the best interests of China, the Russians will do what’s in the best interest of Russia, the Chileans are going to do what’s in the best interest of Chile and the United States needs to do what’s in the best interest of the United States.”⁵ Whether successive U.S. administrations actually failed to pursue national interests is, of course, debatable. Typically, cooperation and assistance that may appear to serve other countries reflect a strategic choice to advance U.S. interests, too. None of the U.S. policymakers in the past would admit that they did not represent U.S. interests. What distinguishes America First is the framing of national interest itself.

This chapter identifies three interrelated features of the Trump administration’s America First conception of national interest: narrowed geographic scope, compressed time horizons, and the pursuit of relative gains. This conception of national interest underlies the administration’s key

3) [U.S.] White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, I and 1. Hereafter cited as 2017 NSS.

4) [U.S.] White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, 8. Hereafter cited as 2025 NSS.

5) Quoted in Brantly Womack, “Rubio’s Revolutionary Downsizing of America’s Global Role,” *The Hill*, February 20, 2025, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/5153362-rubios-revolutionary-downsizing-of-americas-global-role/>. The full transcript is available at the U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Germany, <https://de.usembassy.gov/secretary-rubio-on-the-megyn-kelly-show/>.

foreign policy initiatives, including tariffs and trade negotiations, pressure on allies to share burdens, and aversion to international institutions.

(1) Narrowing of Geographic Scope

The first feature is a conviction that the geographic scope within which the United States should locate its vital interests must be narrowed. Historically, the United States completed a continental geopolitical configuration of “oceans to the east and west, smaller states to the north and south,” established regional hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, and expanded its sphere of influence by deepening its engagement in key regions of Eurasia—especially Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. World War II, in particular, marked a turning point. As Germany and Japan sought to establish regional hegemony in Europe and Asia, and after the United States itself came under armed attack at Pearl Harbor, Washington concluded that its interests could not be safeguarded without active overseas engagement in peacetime as well.⁶ Whether one calls it a liberal international order or not, the postwar United States, working in concert with allies, built a wide range of international institutions and regimes and led the construction of the international political and economic system.⁷

After the Cold War, U.S. foreign policy tended to set ambitious goals that included the spread of democracy. The Bill Clinton administration’s eastward “enlargement” of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the George W. Bush administration’s “nation building” projects in

6) Patrick Porter, *The Global Village Myth: Distance, War, and the Limits of Power* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015); Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

7) G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, new edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Lloyd Gruber, *Ruling the World: Power Politics and the Rise of Supranational Institutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Carla Norrlof, *America’s Global Advantage: US Hegemony and International Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Kyle Lascuett, *Orders of Exclusion: Great Powers and the Strategic Sources of Foundational Rules in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

the Middle East had strong liberal undertones.⁸ As the historian Charles Kupchan has put it,

These strategic errors were the product of ideological excess and overconfidence in the ability of American power to shape global affairs; since the 1990s, the idealist ambitions of *Pax Americana* have gone unchecked by realist constraints, producing successive bouts of strategic overreach. Americans are today reacting against this overreach. Remaking the world in America's image has proved a costly and futile proposition. As a consequence, the pendulum is swinging back from internationalism toward isolationism.⁹

At the heart of America First lies the belief that problems closer to home should be the priority. Promoting an international order on a global scale is out of the question, and the long-standing commitments to Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia also warrant reconsideration. President Trump's lament for a government "that has given unlimited funding to the defense of foreign borders but refuses to defend American borders or, more importantly, its own people" and his call to "repel the disastrous invasion of our country," referring to immigration and border control, vividly reflect this view.¹⁰ Likewise, the Department of Defense's "Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance" lists as its first concern "a vulnerable homeland arising from years of unsecured borders and increasingly capable air and missile threats."¹¹ The forthcoming National Defense Strategy (NDS), now under development on this basis, is reportedly set to operationalize America First by ranking as priorities, first, "defense of the U.S. homeland," followed by "detering China in the Indo-Pacific," and then the promotion of burden-sharing with allies and partners.¹² The "Golden Dome" air and

8) Maeda Yuji, "Daisenryaku no hyoryu: Reisengo Amerika no daisenryaku to taichu seisaku" [Drift of Grand Strategy: Post-Cold War U.S. Grand Strategy and China Policy], in *Biden no Amerika: Sono seikaikan to gaiko* [Joe Biden's Foreign Policy and His Vision], eds. Sahashi Ryo and Suzuki Kazuto (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2022), 151-164.

9) Charles A. Kupchan, *Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself from the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 23.

10) Donald J. Trump, "The Inaugural Address," January 20, 2025.

11) [U.S.] Department of Defense, *Defense Budget Overview*, June 2025 (revised July 1, 2025), https://comptroller.war.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2026/FY2026_Budget_Request.pdf.

12) [U.S.] Department of Defense, "Statement on the Development of the 2025 National Defense Strategy," May 2, 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/article/4172735/statement-on-the-development-of-the-2025-national-defense-strategy/>.

missile defense system covering the continental United States, whatever form it ultimately takes, is another example that reflects this homeland-first sensibility.

The 2025 NSS likewise mounts a sharp critique of globalism, declaring that the United States has no willingness to “shoulder forever global burdens to which the American people saw no connection to the national interest.”¹³ As an expression of its emphasis on the Western Hemisphere, the document proposes a “Trump Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine, echoing the “Roosevelt Corollary” through which President Theodore Roosevelt once justified military intervention in Latin America.¹⁴ The aim is to take whatever action is needed to defend U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere, including blocking flows of illegal immigration and narcotics and excluding hostile influence from strategic chokepoints such as the Panama Canal.

This is not, however, an immediate abandonment of security commitments outside the Western Hemisphere or a return to the original Monroe Doctrine and isolationism of the nineteenth century. Its character is closer to cost-cutting, or, more precisely, a reconsideration of the extraordinarily far-reaching international engagement of a United States that has reigned as a unipolar hegemon since the end of the Cold War. To understand this outlook, the foreign policy factions that coexist within the Trump administration are important. For some time, observers have pointed to a contest among “primacists,” “prioritizers,” and “restrainers” within the Republican Party.¹⁵ The primacists are the traditional hawks (the neoconservatives), who emphasize global American leadership and advocate active overseas intervention. They are now in decline, however,

13) 2025 NSS, 1.

14) 2025 NSS, 5.

15) These categories are ideal types, and individuals do not necessarily fall neatly into a single category. President Trump himself, for example, is best understood not as belonging to a single faction but as combining various elements that span multiple factions. On these factions, see Mori Satoru, “Dai 2 ji Toranpu seiken no gaiko boei (1): Yokuseishugisha to yusenshugisha no anzenhoshokan to domeikoku e no inpurikeshon” [Foreign and Defense Policy of the Second Trump Administration (1): The Security Outlooks of Restrainers and Prioritizers and Their Implications for U.S. Allies], *SPF Amerika Genjo Monita* [SPF America Monitor] (Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 2024), https://www.spf.org/jpus-insights/spf-america-monitor/spfamerica-monitor-document-detail_173.html; Majda Ruge and Jeremy Shapiro, “Polarised Power: The Three Republican ‘Tribes’ That Could Define America’s Relationship with the World,” European Council on Foreign Relations, November 17, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/polarised-power-the-three-republican-tribes-that-could-define-americas-relationship-with-the-world/>.

and the second Trump administration is composed mainly of prioritizers and restrainers.

The prioritizers' core view is that U.S. grand strategy should rest on clear priorities across a wide range of foreign policy and security challenges. They distance themselves from the idea of maintaining or promoting a liberal international order on a global scale, and instead advocate more tailored, region-specific approaches based on the nature of each problem. By this logic, the strategic challenge that should command the highest priority is China's rise. Elbridge Colby, who serves as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, argues, for example, that the United States should pull resources back from Europe and other regions wherever possible in order to prepare for long-term competition with China and a Taiwan contingency in East Asia.¹⁶ Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's address at the IISS Asia Security Summit (the Shangri-La Dialogue), in which he insisted that "'America First' does not mean 'America Alone'" and stressed the need to strengthen deterrence against China through cooperation with other countries, was likewise consistent with the prioritizer outlook.¹⁷

The prioritizers' approach of a focused, sharply differentiated foreign policy through selective concentration of resources draws on concepts that emerged in the post-Cold War debates over U.S. grand strategy, including selective engagement and offshore balancing, and rests on a relatively substantial intellectual foundation.¹⁸ The George W. Bush administration had already aired a view of China as a new competitor, and the Barack Obama administration proposed "rebalancing" to the Asia-Pacific, taking an increasingly tough stance on China especially in its second term.¹⁹ The Bush administration, however, shifted toward cooperation with China

16) Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

17) Koga Kei, "Shangrurira Daiarogu ni okeru Hegusesu enzetsu no yottsu no ronten" [Four Points of Debate in Hegseth's Address at the Shangri-La Dialogue], *Nichibei Domei Kenkyukai Kōmentari* [U.S.-Japan Alliance Study Group Commentary] no. 67 (Nakasone Peace Institute, 2025), 1.

18) Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996): 5-53; Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security* 22, no. 1 (1997): 86-124; Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July/August 2016): 70-83.

19) Nina Silove, "The Pivot Before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (2016): 45-88.

amid the war on terror, and the Obama administration's rebalancing strategy was criticized as lacking real substance. China's role in U.S. grand strategy remained ambiguous. The first Trump administration differentiated itself from its predecessors by explicitly treating China as the principal strategic competitor.

The restrainers, by contrast, broadly oppose the global security burdens borne by the United States. At the heart of their thinking is the belief that U.S. security is not as tightly tied to events overseas as traditional internationalists insist. What restrainers despise above all is the allies "free-riding" on U.S. security commitments and neglecting to bear an appropriate share of defense burden, because the regional states directly exposed to military threats should be the ones making the greatest effort at self-defense. Vice President J. D. Vance, who at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025 devoted only passing attention to the war in Ukraine before launching into a critique of European countries, is widely regarded as the leading restrainer voice within the administration.²⁰ The dissatisfaction over the Biden administration's massive aid to Ukraine made the burden-sharing issue particularly thorny in relations with European countries, but the restrainers' aversion to foreign entanglements is not inherently limited to any one region.

The prioritizers and restrainers do not necessarily clash on policy. They converge in seeking to narrow the expansive scope of U.S. overseas commitments. Reluctance to support Ukraine, for instance, is shared by prioritizers, who want to redirect resources from Europe to East Asia, and by restrainers, who simply want to reduce massive overseas assistance wherever possible. Likewise, calls for Japan and South Korea to increase their defense budgets are consistent with both prioritizer reasoning, namely that preparation against the Chinese threat is inadequate, and restrainer reasoning, namely that regional states rather than the United States should shoulder more of the burden.

(2) Compression of Time Horizons

Second, the Trump administration tends to frame U.S. national interest in short time horizons. When each party rationally seeks to maximize self-interest, the bargaining outcome depends on whether the interaction is

20) Mike Wendling, "How JD Vance Sees the World: And Why That Matters," BBC, March 12, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly82yx09zeo>.

a one-shot game or a repeated one. The classic example is the prisoner's dilemma.²¹ Even in a situation where mutual cooperation would maximize the joint payoff, in a one-shot game it is rational for each player to defect regardless of the other's choice. Cooperation thus fails to take hold, and both end up worse off. In a repeated game, however, choosing cooperation can become rational as a means of maximizing payoffs over the long run. Even when the underlying structure that rewards short-term defection remains unchanged, players can "learn" through repeated interactions—with strategies like tit-for-tat, in which one matches the other's choice in the next round—that building a long-term cooperative relationship is more advantageous on balance. This depends, of course, on the assumed payoff structure of the game and does not imply that cooperation is always rational in real-world interstate bargaining.

The short time horizon encourages policies to exploit other states' economic and military dependence to apply pressure and extract concessions for short-term gain, rather than building long-term relationships. The Trump administration's so-called transactional approach to diplomacy embodies this logic. A trade policy that has neutralized the World Trade Organization (WTO) arbitration function while wielding tariffs as a weapon to extract favorable terms in bilateral negotiations is a clear example. The America First Policy Institute (AFPI), founded in 2021 with a view to a return of the Trump administration, has set out an agenda that proposes to "tie federal funding—whether military, diplomatic, or foreign assistance—to clear objectives that *directly* benefit the American people" (emphasis added).²² In this approach, the idea of creating an international environment that benefits the United States indirectly over the long term is sidelined, and international institutions and regimes are spurned as instruments that dilute U.S. advantages in bilateral negotiations and constrain its freedom of action. This is why Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, who once advanced the concept of complex interdependence, characterize the Trump administration as "myopic."²³

21) Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167-214; Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, "Achieving Cooperation Under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions," *World Politics* 38, no. 1 (1985): 226-254; Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

22) Scott Toland, Aaron Hedlund, and Steve Smith, eds., "America First Agenda: Guide to the Issues," America First Policy Institute, esp. chap. 28, <https://agenda.americafirstpolicy.com/strengthen-leadership/establish-an-america-first-foreign-policy>.

23) Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., "The End of the Long American Century," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 4 (July/August 2025): 68-79, 70.

The issue of time horizons also has profound implications for alliance politics. Some alliances are short-lived and reshuffled on an ad hoc basis to meet a specific and immediate threat. In that case, states simply want to maximize the ally's contribution. Other alliances are geared toward sustaining a long-term relationship, which sometimes warrants granting concessions that favor the partner. According to Tamaki Nobuhiko's study of the dynamics of asymmetric alliances, the United States built its alliance network in Asia during the Cold War not by making unilateral demands and strong-arming the allies but by making considerable concessions to them.²⁴ Concessions tended to be chosen as a preferred policy when Washington took into account the domestic political circumstances of the partner state and judged that there was an advantage to sustaining a cooperative, pro-American government and forging a long-term relationship. On the other hand, where maintaining and strengthening a long-term relationship is not a priority, the calculus shifts toward pressuring the partner for concessions and extracting more favorable terms in the short term.

To be sure, the America First logic has its own medium-to-long-term outlook in terms of preserving and bolstering U.S. power as much as possible when its preeminence is increasingly challenged by rising powers. The interest in acquiring Greenland, for example, presumably reflects considerations of the Arctic Ocean's growing strategic importance in the future. In defending the legitimacy of America First policies, the Trump administration argues that a wealthy and strong United States benefits its allies as well.²⁵ However, the core of the time-horizon issue discussed here concerns the *interactive* dynamics in interstate bargaining. The question is how far the Trump administration anticipates the reactions of other states to its own actions. International politics is marked by various dilemmas and trade-offs, and blunt power-maximizing behavior invites pushbacks from both friends and adversaries. All states put their own interests first, but the pursuit of national interest requires careful calibration that anticipates foreign pushback in order to avoid mutually undesirable outcomes.

24) Tamaki Nobuhiko, *Teikoku Amerika ga yuzuru toki: Joho to atsuryoku no hitaisho domei* [When Imperial America Yields: Concession and Pressure in Asymmetric Alliances] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2024).

25) 2025 NSS, 10.

(3) Pursuit of Relative Gains

The third feature of the America First conception of national interest is an explicit tendency to prioritize relative gains over absolute gains. It is a long-standing question in international relations whether states want to maximize their gains in absolute terms, or in relative terms.²⁶ In economics, rationality refers to maximizing one's gains regardless of how much others gain. The fact that states actually engage in trade, even though no bilateral economic relationship has a perfectly equal balance sheet, cannot be explained without reference to absolute gains. Many countries take it as a win when their citizens enjoy rising living standards. In security affairs, however, relative gains often take on greater importance. In a world where national fortunes are ultimately decided by competition and war with others, power is fundamentally relative.

The Trump administration's foreign policy reflects a stark, zero-sum calculus of gains and losses. President Trump has consistently advanced a neo-mercantilist view that frames international economic relationships in zero-sum terms, asserting that "we are losing our jobs, we're losing our base, [and] we're losing our money."²⁷ This message has won broad support among American voters. Trade policy that wields tariffs as a negotiating weapon to extract concessions has grown still more aggressive in the second administration. Tariffs raise the prices of goods and can fuel inflation, with attendant downsides for the U.S. economy, too. But they can be a powerful negotiating tool as long as the other country suffers more from stagnating trade. As Sahashi Ryo observes, the underlying rationale is that "no other

26) Joseph M. Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 485-507; Robert Powell, "Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory," *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 4 (1991): 1303-1320; John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994): 5-49; Robert O. Keohane and Lisa L. Martin, "The Promise of Institutional Theory," *International Security* 20, no. 1 (1995): 39-51.

27) "Presidential Candidate Donald Trump Interview with Maria Bartiromo and Charlie Gasparino," Fox Business News, August 20, 2015, retrieved from the American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-maria-bartiromo-and-charlie-gasparino-fox-business-news>.

country should be allowed to gain more than America does.”²⁸

A similar logic applies to alliance management, where the Trump administration emphasizes the importance of reducing the U.S. burden as much as, if not more than, working together for shared goals. The 2025 NSS sets out not only “burden-sharing” but also “burden-shifting,” reinforcing the message that allies in each region should bear primary responsibility for the security of their own region.²⁹ The burden-sharing agenda has already led to some new agreements, such as when NATO countries set a new defense spending target of 5% of GDP by 2035 (3.5% as core defense expenditure and 1.5% for related infrastructure and other investments) in June 2025.³⁰ Likewise, in November, South Korea announced that it would raise defense spending to 3.5% of GDP.³¹

If allies acquire independent capabilities and reduce their dependence on the United States, U.S. influence in alliance politics could gradually decline over the long run.³² These dilemmas of alliance management, however, are either not taken seriously or are subordinated to the priority of reducing U.S. burdens. There is also likely a calculation at work that the European and Asian allies would be inclined to accept burden-shifting without causing a serious rupture with the United States, because the growing military threats of Russia and China incentivize them to expand their own capabilities and to retain the U.S. alliance in any case.

In sum, the Trump administration’s America First foreign policy rests on a distinctive conception of national interest. Perceiving that the traditional foreign policy establishment has failed to serve U.S. interests, Trump’s America First narrows the geographic scope, operates on shorter time horizons, and emphasizes relative gains.

28) Sahashi Ryo, “Toranpu gaiko towa nanika: Beichu tairitsu to kokusai chitsujo no shorai” [What Is Trump’s Foreign Policy? U.S.–China Rivalry and the Future of International Order], in *Toranpu no Amerika: Naisei to gaiko, soshite sekai* [America Under Trump: Divided at Home, Watched by the World], eds. Sahashi Ryo and Umekawa Takeshi (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2025), 123-140, 127.

29) 2025 NSS, 12.

30) “Trump Says Nato’s New 5% Defence Spending Pledge a ‘Big Win’,” *BBC News*, June 26, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/japanese/articles/cj3rnv212p0o>.

31) Jesse Johnson, “Pentagon No. 3 Praises Seoul’s Defense Budget Hike as Eyes Turn to Tokyo,” *Japan Times*, November 16, 2025, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/11/16/japan/politics/south-korea-defense-spending-us-japan/>.

32) Brian Blankenship, “Managing the Dilemmas of Alliance Burden Sharing,” *Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2024): 41-61.

2. The Origins of America First

Given that the Trump administration's brand of America First, with its distinctive features, directly challenges the internationalism that has long enjoyed a bipartisan consensus within the United States, it is natural that questions arise about why and from where it has emerged.

Many analyses look to history for the answer. Walter Russell Mead of the Hudson Institute, for instance, marked the launch of the first Trump administration by pointing to a revival of early-nineteenth-century Jacksonian populism.³³ Combined with nationalism, that populism produces an orientation toward the home front rather than abroad, prioritizing domestic problems and rejecting the wasteful expenditure of resources on ambitious foreign policies aimed at maintaining and promoting a liberal international order. Michael Kimmage of the Wilson Center, writing on the launch of the second Trump administration, has argued that Trump's "populist, nationalist, antiglobalist spirit" can be traced back to the anti-communist right-wing movement of the 1950s, positioning it as a strain of nativism set against an internationalism that emphasizes universal values.³⁴ Others have focused on the unpredictable, risk-taking "madman" approach to foreign policy and drawn comparisons between the Trump administration and the Richard Nixon administration.³⁵

The most prominent historical comparison, however, is with the United States' tradition of isolationism dating from the nation's founding, and especially with the interwar period in which the "America First" slogan first came into vogue. According to this view, isolationism, rather than the internationalism that took root after World War II, has actually exerted the longer and more deeply rooted influence on U.S. foreign policy. Trump's America First is simply a return to the past.

In the interwar United States, resistance to active engagement in Europe and other regions remained strong. Even President Woodrow Wilson,

33) Walter Russell Mead, "The Jacksonian Revolt: American Populism and the Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 2 (March/April 2017): 2-7. See also Walter Russell Mead, "The Return of Hamiltonian Statecraft: A Grand Strategy for a Turbulent World," *Foreign Affairs* 103, no. 5 (September/October 2024): 52-66.

34) Michael Kimmage, "The World Trump Wants: American Power in the New Age of Nationalism," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 2 (March/April 2025): 8-21, 10.

35) James D. Boys, "The Unpredictability Factor: Nixon, Trump and the Application of the Madman Theory in US Grand Strategy," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34, no. 3 (2021): 430-451; Daniel W. Drezner, "It's a Madman's World," *Foreign Policy* 255 (January 2025): 52-55.

commonly remembered for his liberal internationalist ideas (Wilsonianism) including the League of Nations, only shifted his position reluctantly. At the outbreak of World War I, Wilson stated that as a basic American posture, the country should think of “America first” and maintain neutrality. Walter Page, the U.S. ambassador to the United Kingdom, wrote to Wilson that as the European powers wore one another down through war, “we shall be immensely stronger financially and politically.” American leaders initially saw themselves as a bystander gathering the spoils of others’ conflict.³⁶ Wilson decided to intervene only after American lives and interests were directly threatened by German submarine attacks. Even after the war, Senate ratification of membership in the League of Nations was rejected over concerns that it would constrain U.S. sovereignty and freedom of action, and a common narrative took hold that Americans had needlessly shed blood for European problems. The 1920s saw the Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge administrations pursue a small government by downsizing the federal government, cutting taxes, easing regulation, and reducing military spending.

The United States subsequently rejected international cooperation in responding to the Great Depression as well. The Smoot-Hawley Act, enacted in 1930 under the Herbert Hoover administration, became an infamous symbol of protectionism for the way it chilled international trade through sweeping tariffs. President Franklin Roosevelt, who succeeded Hoover, set out the following stance in his first inaugural address: “Our international trade relations, though vastly important, are in point of time and necessity secondary to the establishment of a sound national economy. I favor as a practical policy the putting of first things first.”³⁷ In the summer of 1933, when an international conference convened in London to stabilize exchange rates, Roosevelt sent a message declaring that each country should focus on its own domestic economic recovery rather than on international exchange rates, effectively gutting the conference. Even into the late 1930s, Roosevelt maintained a posture of supporting countries under attack by the Axis powers while avoiding being drawn into the war. According to the historian Warren Kimball, Roosevelt “wanted... victory and global political influence without paying the price.”³⁸ From the private

36) Quoted in Dale C. Copeland, *A World Safe for Commerce: American Foreign Policy from the Revolution to the Rise of China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024), 200.

37) Quoted in Kupchan, *Isolationism*, 271.

38) Quoted in Kupchan, *Isolationism*, 286.

sector, the America First Committee, formed in September 1940, mounted vigorous lobbying against U.S. entry into the war. Drawing on the lesson that attacks on American shipping had pulled the country into World War I, the committee campaigned to keep U.S. ships out of European waters and to oppose material assistance through the Lend-Lease Act.³⁹ In the end, this stance only gave way once the United States itself came under direct attack at Pearl Harbor.

It is possible to discern important parallels between this history of the interwar period and the Trump administration's policies. The prioritization of domestic over foreign concerns and the underlying skepticism over why Americans should shed blood and sweat overseas underlie the "America First" slogan then as now. One might also add that the geographic conditions that insulate the United States from other great powers and provide better security than most tend to encourage isolationist thinking across eras.

Although lessons from history are valuable, we should be cautious about suggesting a direct lineage between today's America First and the history of the interwar period. Suppose, hypothetically, that contemporary Japan were to undertake a major shift toward fully autonomous defense and protectionist economic policies. Would it be persuasive to characterize that as a return to the Edo-period *sakoku* policy of seclusion? There may be social value in sounding the alarm about such historical regressions, but the factors actually driving a strategic shift should be sought in a more proximate context.

Differences from the interwar period can also be identified. Harding and Coolidge, for example, sharply cut military budgets, and even Roosevelt was reluctant to expand armaments until war in Europe loomed in the late 1930s. The America First Committee called not only for non-intervention but also for stronger armaments. By then, however, it was 1941 and the world was already at war, so the committee can hardly be said to have placed particular weight on military power given the circumstances. The Trump administration, by contrast, is keen to maintain the edge of American military power. Robert O'Brien, who served as National Security Advisor in the first Trump administration, advocates the Trump administration's "peace through strength" approach and advances a narrative of rebuilding a U.S. military weakened by previous administrations.⁴⁰ In July 2025, the

39) Wayne S. Cole, "The America First Committee," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 44, no. 4 (1951): 305-322.

40) Robert C. O'Brien, "The Return of Peace Through Strength: Making the Case for Trump's Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 103, no. 4 (July/August 2024): 24-38.

administration's flagship "One Big, Beautiful Bill" passed with sweeping tax cuts and reductions in social welfare spending, alongside a substantial increase in military spending. Total defense-related expenditure for fiscal year 2026 is projected to exceed one trillion dollars.⁴¹

U.S. public opinion likewise reflects a deep-seated attachment to American military power. Opinion polls show that, whereas Americans are split roughly evenly on whether being the world's leading economy matters, those who consider being the world's leading military power important outnumber those who do not by nearly two to one. This ratio has stayed more or less constant over the thirty years from 1993 to 2025.⁴² Interestingly, this emphasis on military power is still stronger among Republicans than among Democrats. According to a separate survey conducted in April 2024, around 41% of Democrats list "maintaining U.S. military superiority" as a foreign policy priority, compared with 68% of Republicans.⁴³ Despite the enormous costs, support remains strong for sustaining the military power that is the wellspring of U.S. global influence.

3. U.S. Self-Perception of National Power and America First

(1) Perceptions of National Power

To understand the background against which America First thinking has gained traction, U.S. self-perception of national power offers a key. A widely held view is that a loss of self-confidence has produced the inward-looking America First tendency. President Trump's "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) rhetoric itself rests on the perception that the United States has been exploited by other countries and weakened relative to them. Some attribute the growth of the MAGA movement to a growing perception of

41) Erin D. Dumbacher, Michael C. Horowitz, and Lauren Kahn, "Will Trump's 'Big Beautiful' Defense Spending Last?" Council on Foreign Relations, July 9, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/will-trumps-big-beautiful-defense-spending-last>.

42) Gallup, "U.S. Position in the World," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116350/position-world.aspx>.

43) Jim Lobe, "What Are Americans' Biggest Foreign Policy Priorities?" *Responsible Statecraft*, April 24, 2024, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/us-foreign-policy-poll/>.

U.S. economic downturns and income inequalities at home.⁴⁴ Research has also shown that perceptions of one's own country's preeminent power are associated with public support for more militarist and hardline foreign policies.⁴⁵ If the converse also holds, the perception of relative decline should lead to public attitudes leaning toward more passive and inward-looking foreign policies.

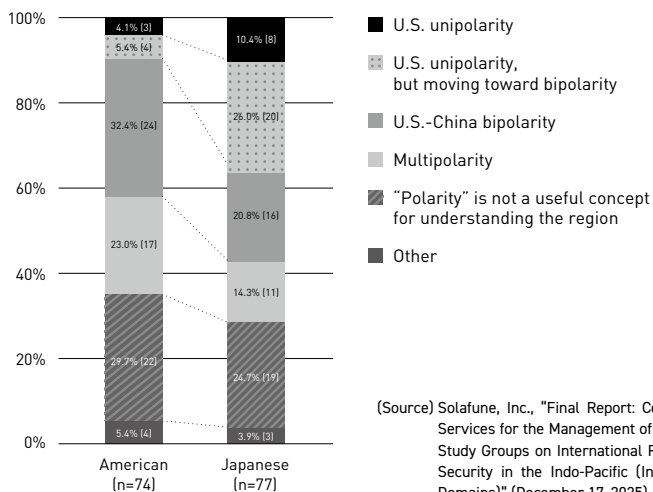
One important concept for analyzing the U.S. position in the international political system is polarity. Power in international politics is notoriously difficult to define and measure, and American researchers do not strictly agree on the polarity of today's world. However, it is increasingly common to question U.S. unipolarity. John Mearsheimer, well known for his offensive realism, identifies the United States, China, and Russia as poles primarily on the basis of military power.⁴⁶ The East Asia specialist Jennifer Lind, in her recent work, presents an analysis of U.S.-China bipolarity.⁴⁷ Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth argue for a "1+1+X" configuration in which the United States remains the world's preeminent state while China stands well above the others.⁴⁸ Some hold that unipolarity is unlikely to give way easily, given the many unique strengths the United States possesses, but this view is in the minority.⁴⁹ When Charles Krauthammer suggested the end of the Cold War would usher in a "unipolar moment," he predicted that it would persist for 30 to 40 years.⁵⁰ Thirty-five years on, that period may now have

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- 44) Mariana Mazzucato, "The Broken Economic Order: How to Rewire the International System in the Age of Trump," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 2 (March/April 2025): 121-132; Jason Furman, "The Post-Neoliberal Delusion: And the Tragedy of Bidenomics," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 2 (March/April 2025): 133-147.
 - 45) Caleb Pomeroy, "Hawks Become Us: The Sense of Power and Militant Foreign Policy Attitudes," *Security Studies* 33, no. 1 (January 1, 2024): 88-114; Charles A. Kupchan, "Elite Persuasion, Threat Perception, and Ideological Mobilization: The Real Drivers of Hawkish Public Attitudes," *Security Studies* 33, no. 3 (May 26, 2024): 485-494.
 - 46) John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014); John J. Mearsheimer, "War and International Politics," *International Security* 49, no. 4 (2025): 7-36.
 - 47) Jennifer Lind, "Back to Bipolarity: How China's Rise Transformed the Balance of Power," *International Security* 49, no. 2 (2024): 7-55.
 - 48) Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position," *International Security* 40, no. 3 (2015): 7-53; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Myth of Multipolarity: American Power's Staying Power," *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 3 (May/June 2023): 76-91.
 - 49) Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).
 - 50) Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990): 23-33.

run its course.

An opinion survey of Japanese and U.S. experts commissioned by NIDS (Figure 1) brings out the divergence in perceptions between the two countries.⁵¹ Among Japanese experts, the view that the Indo-Pacific region remains under U.S. unipolarity persists strongly (a combined 36.4%), exceeding the share that sees the region as having U.S.-China bipolarity or multipolarity (a combined 35.1%). Among American experts, by contrast, only a small share believes the region is characterized by U.S. unipolarity (a combined 9.5%), while a majority hold a view of bipolarity or multipolarity (a combined 55.4%). These data suggest that Americans themselves perceive U.S. relative decline more sharply than the Japanese do.

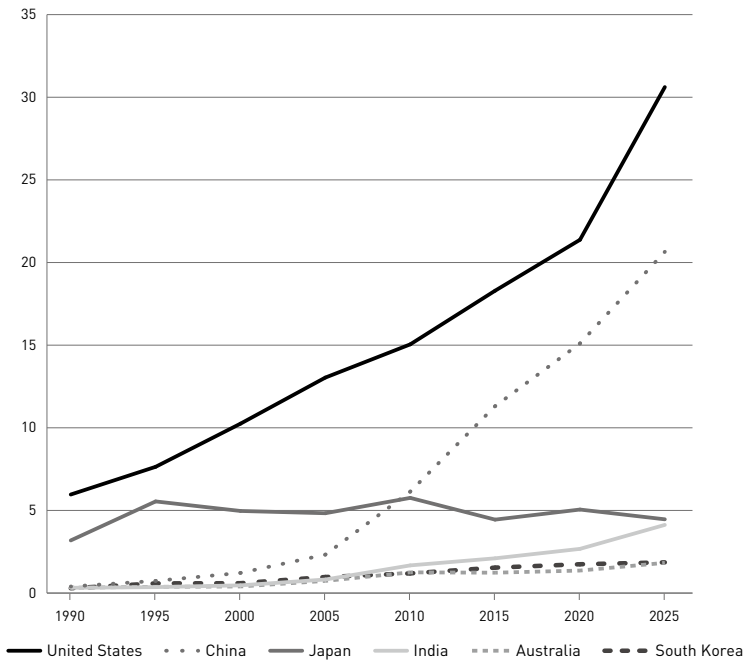
Figure 1. American and Japanese Expert Opinions on U.S. Power in the Indo-Pacific



51) National Institute for Defense Studies, *Indo Taiheiyō no kokusai kankei anzenhoshō (shinryōiki o fukumi-uru) ni kakaru chosa oyobi kenkyūkai no jissai ni kakaru kaigi uneī gyomū itaku saishu hokokusho* [Final Report: Commissioned Services for the Management of Surveys and Study Groups on International Relations and Security in the Indo-Pacific (Including Potentially New Domains)] (December 17, 2025, commissioned to Solafune, Inc., unpublished). The survey targeted private-sector researchers, primarily affiliated with universities and think tanks; the number of valid responses was 77 Japanese and 74 American. Note that the report does not include a statistical significance analysis.

Figure 2, though a simple comparison of economic size, makes clear that China's national power has reached a scale that stands well above that of Japan or India. Even during the Cold War, often described as a U.S.-Soviet bipolar structure, the Soviet economy at its peak amounted to only about half the size of the U.S. economy. The United States during the Cold War acknowledged the Soviet Union as a military equal but never treated it as an equal in the economic and other domains.⁵² A full parity with the United States across all dimensions of power should not be a strict requirement for a rival state to be counted as America's peer competitor and a pole.

Figure 2. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Indo-Pacific Countries, 1990-2025
(Trillions of U.S. dollars)



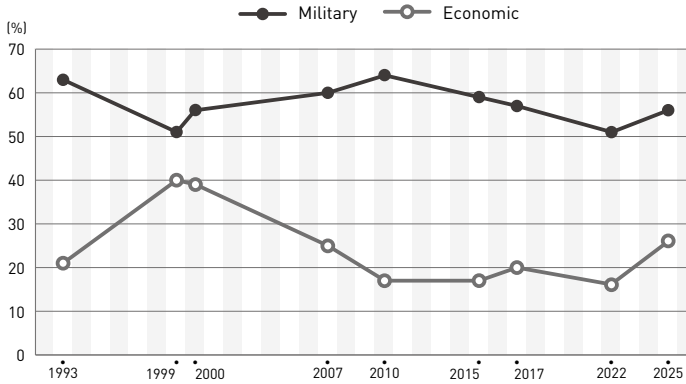
(Source) Author's illustration based on data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). International Monetary Fund, "World Economic Outlook," [https://data.imf.org/en/Data-Explorer?datasetUrn=IMF.RES:WEO\(9.0.0\)](https://data.imf.org/en/Data-Explorer?datasetUrn=IMF.RES:WEO(9.0.0)).

52) William C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions During the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

On the other hand, the continued growth of the U.S. economy has spurred a more optimistic view, too. Many Americans today believe that the gap between the United States and China is unlikely to close as easily as it was assumed ten years ago. Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi, who handled China policy in the Joseph Biden administration, observe that “a new consensus took hold” in U.S. perceptions of China.⁵³ As they put it, “an aging, slowing, and increasingly less nimble China would not overtake an ascendant United States. Washington shifted from pessimism to overconfidence.” China’s post-pandemic economic recovery has lagged, while the U.S. economy has shown robust growth. This has overturned the view that China would inevitably overtake the United States in economic size. Americans, on this account, are once again deepening their confidence in U.S. staying power. Whether this shift of opinions amounts to “a new consensus” is another matter, but it is an important point that American perceptions of the U.S.-China balance of power are not uniformly pessimistic.

Figure 3 shows changes in the share of U.S. public opinion that perceives the United States as the world’s leading military and economic power. Over the past thirty years, a majority of Americans have consistently believed that the United States is the world’s strongest military power. Comparatively, Americans are less sure of U.S. economic preeminence, which shows more substantial fluctuations over time. In particular, since the global financial crisis of 2008, the share of Americans who view the U.S. economy as the world’s number one has remained below 20% for extended periods, reaching its lowest point (16%) in 2022 amid the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Trump’s rise to power coincided with this American loss of confidence especially through the 2010s.

53) Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi, “Underestimating China: Why America Needs a New Strategy of Allied Scale to Offset Beijing’s Enduring Advantages,” *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 3 (May/June 2025): 66-81, 68.

Figure 3. Share of Americans Who View the United States as the World's Leading Power (Military and Economic)

(Source) Author's illustration based on data from Gallup. Gallup, "U.S. Position in the World," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116350/position-world.aspx>.

Yet here too, the most recent data carry an important qualification. The share of Americans who rate the U.S. economy as the world's number one recovered to 26% in 2025, marking the largest upward shift since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Americans have consistently identified either the United States or China as the leading economy since the 2010s. In 2012, more Americans (53%) named China as the world's economic leader, compared to 33% naming the United States. This ratio changed dramatically by 2023, when 44% of the respondents said the United States was the world's greatest economy, against 42% for China.⁵⁴ Again, this shows that U.S. self-perception of national power is not on a simple downward trajectory. Rather, it presents a more complex picture where pessimistic forecasts of relative decline coexist with an optimism that rediscovers America's enduring strength.

To some extent, this converges with a dual character of the Trump administration's political rhetoric. Trump has stoked a sense of crisis over American decline, yet at the same time argues that it is still possible to preserve and bolster U.S. power by shifting to America First policies. According to his narrative, the United States fell into crisis because of the misguided direction of the foreign policy establishment, but he could "Make

54) Gallup, "U.S. Position in the World."

America Great Again” under his leadership. The 2025 NSS, issued under the second Trump administration, calls for a strategic shift “to ensure that America remains the world’s strongest, richest, most powerful, and most successful country.”⁵⁵ It conveys a sense of crisis over U.S. power, yet builds its argument around the logic that a strategic reorientation can turn things around. Notably, the perception of U.S. economic power shown in Figure 3 trends upward in tandem with Trump’s two presidential inaugurations, in 2017 and 2025. While one cannot generalize too much from these data, we cannot wholly dismiss the possibility that Trump’s projected image of a strong America has influenced public opinion.

This raises a chicken-and-egg question: Did public opinion give rise to Trump’s America First, or did Trump produce that public opinion? In reality, both are likely at work. Public discontent over relative decline and economic problems at home supplied the soil that Trump exploited and amplified for political gain. At the same time, the substantial upward shift in 2025 coincides not only with Trump’s return but also with the moment at which a rapid post-pandemic economic recovery came to be widely recognized. Americans’ perceptions of their country’s power do not simply follow pronouncements by political leaders but also reflect macroeconomic realities on the ground.

(2) The Spread of Inward-Looking Attitudes

Mirroring this shift in U.S. perceptions of national power, the growing inward-looking tendency to favor the home front over foreign affairs shows clearly in opinion polls. According to a Gallup compilation of survey data since the turn of the century, the share of Americans who believe the United States should play a leading or major role in the world fell to a record low of 65% in 2023.⁵⁶ The “leading role” share had fallen sharply on previous occasions as well, but the decline had been absorbed into responses for a “major role,” leaving the combined share largely unchanged. Since the 2010s, however, support for the United States playing only a “minor role” has grown, reaching a record high of 28% in the most recent 2025 data.⁵⁷

55) 2025 NSS, 1.

56) Jeffrey M. Jones, “Fewer Americans Want U.S. Taking Major Role in World Affairs,” *Gallup*, March 3, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/471350/fewer-americans-taking-major-role-world-affairs.aspx>.

57) Gallup, “U.S. Position in the World.”

This trend is corroborated by the June 2024 Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey, which found that 56% of Americans believe the United States should play an active role in the world, close to the lowest level since the survey began in 1974.⁵⁸

Notably, whereas Republicans traditionally tended to advocate more proactive and interventionist foreign policies than Democrats, the two parties' preferences reversed around 2015. Republican supporters have since become far more reluctant to support international commitments. The same survey reveals growing isolationist sentiments among independents as well, with a majority responding that the United States should "reduce its involvement in world affairs." On the partisan divide, a Pew Research Center survey asked respondents to choose between the views: that "It's best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs," and that the United States "should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems here at home." Among Republicans, 67% chose the latter.⁵⁹ Since Trump became the center of gravity of the Republican Party, the GOP base has displayed an unmistakable inward turn.

To be sure, the view that traditional alliance relationships are valuable for U.S. security continues to be shared by a majority of Americans,⁶⁰ and is held especially firmly among foreign policy experts.⁶¹ When it comes to the use of military force, however, caution has grown stronger. A June 2025 survey conducted shortly after the launch of the second Trump administration drew a distinction between optimists and pessimists about U.S. overseas military intervention. Pessimists, who believe such intervention worsens rather than improves the situation both in the country of intervention and in the United

58) Dina Smeltz, "American Support for Active US Global Role Not What It Used to Be," *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, August 22, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/american-support-active-us-global-role-not-what-it-used-to-be>.

59) Richard Wike et al., "Majorities of Americans Support Several – But Not All – Types of Foreign Aid," Pew Research Center, May 1, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/05/01/majorities-of-americans-support-several-but-not-all-types-of-foreign-aid/>.

60) Dina Smeltz and Karl Friedhoff, "Republicans and Democrats Support US Alliances, but for Different Reasons," *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, August 22, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/republicans-and-democrats-support-us-alliances-different-reasons>.

61) Dina Smeltz et al., "US Opinion Leaders Endorse Alliances and Security Guarantees," *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, December 18, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/us-opinion-leaders-endorse-alliances-and-security-guarantees>.

States itself, outnumber optimists by nearly two to one.⁶² Support for the use of military force also varies substantially by scenario.⁶³ If Germany were attacked by Russia, for example, support for U.S. intervention is strong across party lines, but if China were to use force over Japan's Senkaku Islands, support for U.S. military intervention falls below half. In the case of a Taiwan contingency, there is broad support for providing supplies, but public and expert opinion diverge with regard to military intervention.⁶⁴ When asked whether the U.S. Navy should be sent to break a blockade around Taiwan, taking into account the risk of direct conflict with PLA forces, a majority of experts across party lines respond affirmatively. By contrast, the general public is far more reluctant to take the risk. In short, even as maintaining U.S. military superiority and alliance relationships continues to be regarded as important, the use of military force is approached with a strong sense of caution.

Trade is looked at generally favorably in U.S. public opinion, but skepticism is growing among Republican supporters. According to a February 2025 survey, 81% of respondents believe that trade offers the United States opportunities for economic growth, compared to just 14% stressing that imports from other countries threaten U.S. industries.⁶⁵ Another survey similarly found that a large majority (75%) take the overall view that trade is good for the U.S. economy, and majorities across all party affiliations hold the view that "trade between the United States and other countries benefit

62) Support for overseas military intervention shows a strong partisan pattern. Approval of the use of military force runs higher when the respondent's preferred party is in office, and lower when the opposing party is in office. That said, the shifts that accompany changes of administration occur in both Republican and Democratic ranks and partly cancel out, so changes in overall voter sentiment also carry meaning. Jamie Ballard, "Do Americans Think the Bombing of Iran and Other U.S. Foreign Military Interventions Were the Right Decisions?" *YouGov*, July 7, 2025, <https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/52495-do-americans-think-the-bombing-of-iran-was-the-right-decision>.

63) Karl Friedhoff, "Americans Largely Support Using US Troops to Defend Allies," *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, September 23, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/americans-largely-support-using-us-troops-defend-allies>.

64) Craig Kafura et al., "Republican Foreign Policy Experts Signal Strong Support for Taiwan," *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, February 6, 2025, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/republican-foreign-policy-experts-signal-strong-support-taiwan>.

65) Gallup, "U.S. Position in the World."

both the United States and other countries.”⁶⁶ One step deeper, however, an interesting nuance emerges. When asked to choose among (1) reducing trade and improving self-sufficiency, (2) forming trade blocs with friendly states, and (3) advancing global free trade, a majority of Republican supporters choose the first option. By contrast, Democratic supporters and independents lean strongly toward the third. The second option is by far the least popular, suggesting that trade blocs of the kind seen during the Cold War are viewed unfavorably. The outlook on trade among Republican voters seems to coalesce around putting a pause on ever-expanding free trade and avoiding giving special treatment to allies and friends. This outlook aligns with the Trump administration’s trade policy.

(3) The Growing Presence of a Rising China

Finally, the China factor in this transformation of American perceptions of national power and foreign policy preferences warrants attention, since the rise of America First has coincided with the recognition of China’s rise. For decades beginning in the 1970s, America’s engagement policy toward China operated on the basis of a lopsided power balance between the two countries. When China set out on the path of reform and opening up under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership, its national power base was minuscule relative to that of the United States. China’s disproportionate gains from participating in the global market were therefore not seen as a major problem. U.S. capital flowed into China as an attractive investment destination offering cheap labor, and U.S.-China trade expanded dramatically. During this period, many experts argued that there was no need to be alarmed by China’s growth.⁶⁷ However, all of that changed with China’s rapid economic growth and military modernization, its assertive actions in the East and South China Seas, and the centralization of power under Xi Jinping. Expectations that

66) Karl Friedhoff, “Americans See Benefits of Trade, yet Support Restrictions to Protect US Jobs,” *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, August 22, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/americans-see-benefits-trade-yet-support-restrictions-protect-us>. See also Craig Kafura and Sam Dong, “Most Americans Think the United States Should Pursue Global Free Trade,” *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, May 5, 2025, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/most-americans-think-united-states-should-pursue-global-free-trade>.

67) Robert S. Ross, “Beijing as a Conservative Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 2 (March/April 1997): 33-44; Thomas J. Christensen, “Posing Problems Without Catching Up: China’s Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy,” *International Security* 25, no. 4 (2001): 5-40.

economic engagement would lead to political liberalization in China and to stable, friendly U.S.-China relations collapsed. Around the mid-2010s, during Obama's second term, the U.S. foreign policy community came to perceive China as a strategic competitor.⁶⁸ The Trump administration takes credit for reversing a long-standing U.S. engagement policy with China.⁶⁹

A Chicago Council on Global Affairs analysis compiling data from 1978 onward finds that U.S. public sentiment toward China has reached a historic low across party lines, with the deterioration since 2020 especially pronounced.⁷⁰ Respondents were asked, for example, to choose between “undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China” and “actively work to limit the growth of China’s power.” They had previously favored the former by roughly 70 to 30. That ratio reversed around 2020, and as of 2024 the latter is the majority view by 55 to 40. In another survey, only 25% of respondents view U.S.-China trade as benefiting both sides equally, while 46% believe China gains more.⁷¹ Among Republicans alone, the share that views the relationship as overly favorable to China reaches 60%. The perception that trade favors foreign countries over the United States, and the resulting shift toward a relative-gains outlook, developed in tandem with the trajectory of U.S.-China relations over the past several decades.

Figure 4 shows which country Americans have identified as the greatest enemy of the United States since 2016. The data reveal that U.S. public hostility toward China surged at two points. The first came when the first Trump administration announced strategic competition with China (2018 to 2019). The second, even more dramatic, shift came when Americans suffered tangible harm from the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 to 2021). Broken down by party, Democrats tend to see Russia as the greatest threat rather than China, while a majority of Republicans (58%) point to China rather than Russia.⁷² In every domain, Republicans display a roughly fifteen- to twenty-point higher share than Democrats in expressing skepticism about

68) Maeda, “Daisenryaku no hyoryu.”

69) 2025 NSS, 19-20.

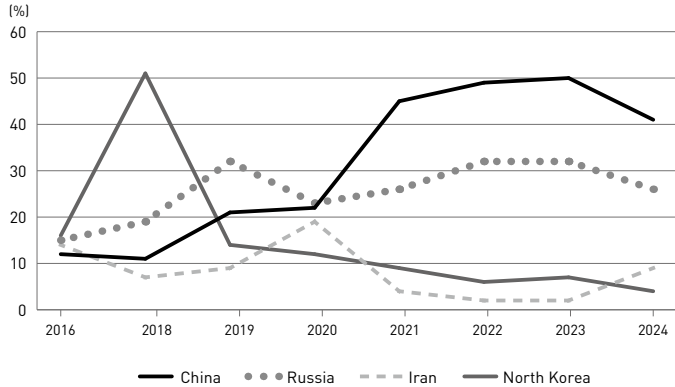
70) Craig Kafura, “American Views of China Hit All-Time Low,” *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, October 24, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/american-views-china-hit-all-time-low>.

71) Christine Huang, Laura Silver, and Laura Clancy, “Negative Views of China Have Softened Slightly Among Americans,” Pew Research Center, April 17, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/04/17/views-of-trade-between-china-and-the-us/>.

72) Wike et al., “Majorities of Americans Support Several – But Not All – Types of Foreign Aid,” Pew Research Center, May 1, 2025.

cooperation with China.⁷³ This, together with differing views on the war in Ukraine and thus on the Russian threat, reflects the prioritizer outlook within the Republican Party that places the China challenge first.

Figure 4. Countries Identified by Americans as the Greatest Enemy



(Source) Author's illustration based on data from Gallup. In addition to the four countries shown, a notable share of respondents also answered "United States itself," reaching 5% in 2024. Gallup, "U.S. Position in the World," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116350/position-world.aspx>.

To sum up, the loss of confidence in U.S. relative economic power, particularly during the 2000s and 2010s, formed the backdrop for the spread of America First thinking especially since the mid-2010s. China's rise has served as the key reference point for the growing awareness of U.S. relative decline. The Trump administration responds to and amplifies this sense of crisis, while at the same time advancing a narrative that a shift to America First will preserve the United States' preeminent power position. There are also signs of a renewed appreciation of America's enduring strength amid the post-pandemic economic growth, and U.S. self-perception of national power remains fluid. The changing American self-perception of power merits close and sustained attention when attempting to understand the long-term shifts in U.S. foreign policy.

73) Laura Silver, Christine Huang, Laura Clancy, and Moira Fagan, "Americans Are Critical of China's Global Role: As Well as Its Relationship with Russia," Pew Research Center, April 12, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/04/12/americans-are-critical-of-chinas-global-role-as-well-as-its-relationship-with-russia/>.

Conclusion

This chapter has identified three features of the conception of national interest at the heart of the Trump administration's America First policy: a narrowing of geographic scope, a compression of time horizons, and a pursuit of relative gains. The first is a priority given to problems closer to home over issues overseas. At work here is a categorical rejection of promoting the liberal international order, and a desire to revise even the long-standing strategic commitments in key regions of the world. The second is a tendency to prioritize short-term gains over long-term relationship-building. This is starkly visible in trade negotiations and alliance management. It is also bound up with a strong aversion to international institutions. The third is a zero-sum worldview. This too is on full display in protectionist trade policies grounded in a narrative that the United States has been exploited while others have profited, and in concerns over burden-sharing with allies that "free-ride" on U.S. security commitments.

Tempting as it is to locate the origins of America First in earlier historical episodes such as the interwar period, historical analogy has its limits. Understanding today's America First demands attention above all to the context that connects directly to the present. The key here lies in U.S. self-perception of national power. Particularly over the 2000s and 2010s, perceptions of U.S. relative decline steadily spread, both in expert debate and in public opinion. China's rapid rise added force to this trend, and a sense of crisis emerged: in economic terms especially, the United States might soon lose its status as the world's preeminent power. This perception underpins the America First impulse to "Make America Great Again," and with it the inward-looking policy preferences and emphasis on relative gains.

Interestingly, however, signs are also emerging of a renewed appreciation of America's enduring strength amid the post-pandemic economic recovery. Whether this reflects expectations and wishful thinking surrounding the second Trump administration, or a sober assessment of trends in economic, military, and technological competition, is difficult to judge. Nonetheless, U.S. self-perception is not uniformly pessimistic. Whether a return to a more confident self-perception would lead to a retreat from America First thinking, however, is highly questionable. If the prolonged downturn in self-perception lay at the root of the shift toward America First thinking, a modest, short-term upturn in American self-confidence is unlikely to alter the orientation of the Trump administration's outlook.

It seems clear that, under the Trump administration, the America First

turn in U.S. policy is one of the factors driving competitive pluralization in the Indo-Pacific. The traditional security architecture of this region has rested on the assumption of deep, sustained U.S. engagement at the center of an extensive network of alliances and partnerships. As that assumption is shaken, regional states will naturally reconsider their security policies. As argued in this chapter, however, the Trump administration's America First policy is less an effort to sever ties with the world than to recalibrate them in America's favor. There is therefore continuity as well as rupture. Both America First thinking and U.S. self-perception of national power remain highly fluid, and the analysis offered here is neither exhaustive nor final. With its mix of varied elements, the Trump administration's foreign policy will likely remain a challenge both for policy and scholarship for a long time to come.

It is an open question to what extent other countries in the Indo-Pacific region prove willing to accommodate the shift in U.S. foreign policy. That is a question to which neither the United States nor regional states yet have a clear answer. For example, Japan and South Korea have answered positively to calls to increase their defense spending, because they recognize it as something necessary to counter the rising threats from China and North Korea. One key question about burden-sharing is whether the United States will reduce its own defense resource allocation to the Indo-Pacific as regional states shoulder a larger role. Judging from the prioritizer logic within the Trump administration and from the actual policies during the first year of the second Trump administration, this seems unlikely. Were such a reduction to occur, however, it would deepen doubts about the U.S. commitment more powerfully than any statement by President Trump could. It might accelerate the region's pluralization in which many countries begin to see the United States less as the one indispensable leader than as one of several important partners.

America First and Realism

It is unusual for the U.S. government to invoke realism as a guiding principle. The 2017 NSS, issued under the first Trump administration, branded its underlying outlook “principled realism.”¹ As that document put it, this approach “acknowledges the central role of power in international politics, affirms that sovereign states are the best hope for a peaceful world, and clearly defines our national interests.” This thinking carries over into the 2025 NSS of the second Trump administration, where it appears under the banner of “flexible realism.”² The emphasis there is that interstate relations should not be defined by affinity (or difference) between domestic political systems and that the United States will no longer promote democracy. A. Wess Mitchell, who served as Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs in the first Trump administration, rejects the “idealist” U.S. foreign policy since the Cold War that was geared toward creating a world federation through international rules and institutions.³ Instead, he calls for the return to “diplomacy in its classical form,” which focuses on the balance of power.⁴ There are also some prominent realist scholars, such as Randall Schweller, who advocate the Trump administration’s foreign policy approach.⁵

Mitchell’s framing is reminiscent of the so-called First Debate between realists and idealists at the dawn of international relations as an academic discipline.⁶ As E. H. Carr once charged, the international institutions centered on the League of Nations proved powerless to prevent World War II, and the intellectual current shifted as realists like Carr

1) 2017 NSS, 55.

2) 2025 NSS, 9.

3) A. Wess Mitchell, “The Return of Great-Power Diplomacy: How Strategic Dealmaking Can Fortify American Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 3 (May/June 2025): 24-39.

4) *Ibid.*, 26.

5) Randall Schweller, “Three Cheers for Trump’s Foreign Policy: What the Establishment Misses,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 5 (September/October 2018): 133-143.

6) Various accounts have been advanced, but the Second Debate is generally said to have pitted traditionalism, with its emphasis on historical interpretation, against scientism, which sought the construction of general theory; and the Third Debate, positivism, which emphasizes hypothesis-testing on the basis of empirical data, against post-positivism, which emphasizes the social processes by which knowledge is constructed.

and Morgenthau “won” the debate.⁷ Today’s circumstances differ from that era in that no catastrophic showdown on the scale of World War II has occurred. Yet the message is much the same: U.S. foreign policy should be guided by the balance of power principles, rather than the endless ideological crusade for spreading democracy and promoting a liberal international order.

As a school of thought, realism is not a singular theory but a family of theories and concepts. Running through them, however, is a common worldview of power politics: in an anarchic environment without central authority, each state pursues its own self-interest and seeks to enhance its relative power position. The Trump administration’s messaging deliberately tracks this worldview.⁸ Indeed, the America First foreign policy outlook discussed in this chapter has much in common with realist thought. The emphasis on relative gains, for example, was a central realist position in the so-called neo-neo debate that pitted neoliberal institutionalism against neorealism.⁹

One major challenge that arises for America First as realist policy in practice concerns the time horizon. Realism does not necessarily assume a one-shot interaction, like the prisoner’s dilemma, where states simply attempt to maximize their immediate gains without considering long-term consequences. Rather, rational states would anticipate the opponent’s reactions and work to mitigate the dilemmas that may produce undesirable outcomes.¹⁰ Even John Mearsheimer, who argues that states’ power maximization behavior easily creates such dilemmas, posits that states carefully calculate the potential costs and benefits of their actions.¹¹ If the pursuit of short-term gains undermines greater

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- 7) E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Yosef Lapid, “The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era,” *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1989): 235-254; Brian C. Schmidt, “Anarchy, World Politics and the Birth of a Discipline: American International Relations, Pluralist Theory and the Myth of Interwar Idealism,” *International Relations* 16, no. 1 (2002): 9-31.
 - 8) Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1948); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979). Space does not permit a detailed treatment here, but on debates over the definition of realism, see, for example, Ken Booth, “Realism Redux: Contexts, Concepts, Contests,” in *Realism and World Politics*, ed. Ken Booth (Routledge, 2011), 1-14; Jack Donnelly, “Realism,” in *Theories of International Relations*, 5th ed., eds. Scott Burchill and Andrew Linklater (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 32-56.
 - 9) Grieco, “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation”; Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions.”
 - 10) Charles L. Glaser, “Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994): 50-90; Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Dale C. Copeland, *Economic Interdependence and War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).
 - 11) Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.
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long-term gains, that can only be called irrational.

Alliance management is likely to be one of the most important touchstones in this regard. In an emerging bipolar system, the long-term strategic competition with a peer competitor like China requires the United States to manage its alliances effectively. The existing alliance network gives Washington a distinct advantage that Beijing does not possess. Yet making unilateral demands for concessions from allies sits uneasily with that strategic imperative. If pushed to extremes, demands for military burden-sharing may encourage greater allied autonomy and erode U.S. influence, while economic pressure imposed through tariffs may discourage allies from deferring to U.S. leadership. To be sure, such unwelcome pressure will not necessarily lead allies simply to walk away, so long as their relationship with the United States remains essential to their own security. The task, then, is to discern the fine line at which the United States can pursue the America First approach without fundamentally undermining long-term cooperation with its key strategic partners. If the Trump administration's foreign policy aspires to be realist, its success hinges on whether it can anticipate the dilemmas and trade-offs inherent in international politics and strike an appropriate balance.