

Trump's Second-Term U.S. Foreign Policy: Response to a New International Order

Sang-min Lee (Advisory Editor, Global Bridge Institute)

Abstract

This study examines the foreign policy of the Trump administration during its second term, with a particular focus on its challenge to the U.S.-led liberal international order. Since World War II, this order—characterized by multilateralism, free trade, democracy promotion, and rule-based institutions—has been central to American global leadership. However, the Trump administration has rejected these principles, arguing that they undermine U.S. national interests, and instead has pursued an “America First” approach. This article analyzes the administration’s policies in four key areas: protectionist tariffs and the weaponization of trade; withdrawal from multilateral institutions; the marginalization of democracy and human rights in diplomacy; and selective engagement through offshore balancing and transactional diplomacy. It also highlights the theoretical foundations of Trump’s foreign policy in offensive neorealism, emphasizing power maximization, skepticism toward international institutions, and reliance on strategic leverage. Special attention is given to the Middle East, where Trump has combined aggressive pressure on Iran with active mediation efforts in regional conflicts. The article concludes that Trump’s second-term foreign policy represents not merely a personal departure but a structural response to the decline of the liberal order, suggesting that elements of this strategy are likely to persist beyond his presidency.

I. Introduction

Since Donald Trump was re-inaugurated as President of the United States this past January, the world has been shocked by the foreign policy he has been pursuing. This is because the United States, the world's superpower, is openly criticizing and dismantling the "Liberal International Order" it has built and defended since the end of World War II. The Trump administration's second term argues that although the Liberal International Order—represented by free trade, multilateralism, and democracy—once served U.S. national interests, it no longer does. They insist that a new international order must be established. Under the banner of "America First," the Trump administration is prioritizing the maximization of U.S. national interests, pushing forward foreign policies that run counter to the principles of the Liberal International Order.

This paper aims to address three key questions:

1. What exactly is the Liberal International Order that the Trump administration is criticizing and dismantling?
2. Why is the Trump administration attempting to dismantle this order?
3. What kind of foreign policy is the Trump administration pursuing in its second term amidst this context?

II. The Liberal International Order

1. Concept

The Liberal International Order refers to an international order based on liberalism. Liberalism, along with realism, is one of the representative theories for understanding international relations. While acknowledging that the international system is in a state of anarchy (lacking a central authority), liberalism maintains that cooperation between states is possible. It does not view states as the only important actors in international relations, but also emphasizes non-state actors such as international organizations and multinational corporations. Liberalism argues that international organizations and institutions make cooperation between states possible. Through free trade and the development of science and technology, interdependence among states increases, which in turn enhances wealth and prosperity, spreads democracy, and makes peace possible (Park Jaeyoung, 2016).

In contrast, realism argues that the international system, being anarchic, compels states to pursue power and security, leading to conflict and competition, and that even when common interests exist, cooperation is unlikely. Realism sees states as the most important actors in international relations, rejecting the independent status of non-state actors such as international organizations and multinational corporations. States are regarded as rational actors that calculate costs and benefits coldly in order to maximize their interests (Park Jaeyoung, 2016).

2. Characteristics

The representative characteristics of the Liberal International Order based on liberalism are as follows (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.):

1) Emphasis on Multilateralism

It promotes multilateralism—cooperation among states—to solve international problems. States are expected to address global issues through international organizations and institutions such as the UN, IMF, World Bank, WTO, and NATO.

2) Pursuit of a Rule-Based Order

Stability in the international order is believed to come not from sheer power but from adherence to rules, treaties, agreements, international law, and customs.

3) Free Trade and Growing Economic Interdependence

By reducing tariffs between states and liberalizing trade, the global market expands, raising economic interdependence. This interdependence, in turn, is thought to promote cooperation over war.

4) Spread of Democracy

Democracy is seen as the ideal political system. It is argued that the likelihood of war is lower between democratic states, and thus the spread of democracy and the protection of human rights should be emphasized (Democratic Peace Theory, Doyle, 1983).

5) U.S. Leadership as a “Benign Hegemon”

With overwhelming military, economic, and diplomatic power, the United States acts as a “benign hegemon.” This means it punishes states that threaten the Liberal International Order while unilaterally providing public goods (such as security and economic support) to states that seek to uphold it (Kindleberger, 1973).

3. Historical Background

The Liberal International Order was established by the United States during the early Cold War in order to confront the Soviet Union, targeting Western Europe, Japan, and what was called the “free half” of the world (Acheson, 1969; Allison, 2018).

1) The Bretton Woods System

After World War II, the U.S. launched the Bretton Woods international monetary system, which provided the economic foundation of the Liberal International Order. Decided in 1944 in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, this system made the U.S. dollar the key currency—the central unit for international trade and financial transactions—and established a fixed exchange rate system in which other currencies were pegged to the dollar. This stabilized the fragile postwar financial system and promoted international trade. The U.S. also established the IMF and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) to supply funds for postwar reconstruction. Countries like Western Europe, Japan, and Korea borrowed from these institutions to rebuild infrastructure such as power plants, roads, and ports, enabling rapid industrial recovery. In 1947, the U.S. concluded the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), laying the groundwork for promoting free trade through tariff reductions and removal of trade barriers. GATT would later evolve into the WTO.

2) NATO and the United Nations

After the war, the U.S. founded NATO and the UN, spreading democracy, human rights, and the rule of law as international norms and thereby providing the political foundation of the Liberal International Order. In 1949, the U.S. created NATO as a collective security system to contain the Soviet Union, while also signing bilateral security treaties with Japan (1951), Australia (1951), and Korea (1953). Earlier, in 1945, the U.S. had led the founding of the UN and built an institutional framework based on multilateralism, including the IMF, IBRD, and GATT—thus designing a “rule-based order.” In 1948, the U.S. announced the Marshall Plan, providing about \$13 billion (equivalent to about \$100 billion today) to 16 European countries to rebuild Western European democracy. During the Cold War, defined by the ideological conflict of “democracy versus communism,” the U.S. sought to

expand human rights, the rule of law, and democracy as international norms while leading the democratic camp. As part of this effort, it established Voice of America in 1942 and Radio Free Europe in 1949 to transmit democratic messages into the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In 1961, it founded USAID to provide economic aid and development support to developing countries as a counterbalance to Soviet influence.

3) Globalization of the Liberal International Order

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the U.S.-led Liberal International Order was seen as victorious over Soviet communism (Fukuyama, 1992), and globalization accelerated. The WTO was founded in 1995, while FTAs expanded, reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers and leading to rapid growth in global trade. A global supply chain emerged: advanced economies consumed while developing countries manufactured. Multinational corporations invested worldwide and relocated production to low-wage countries, with China rising as the “world’s factory.” The U.S. also attempted to spread democracy through military force (Allison, 2018). In 1999, President Bill Clinton bombed Yugoslavia to stop ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo. In 2003, President George W. Bush launched the Iraq War under the “Bush Doctrine,” which held that democratization of the Middle East would bring peace. In 2011, when the Arab Spring democracy movement spread to Libya and the Gaddafi regime cracked down violently, President Barack Obama ordered airstrikes against Gaddafi.

4. Challenges

Since the late 2000s, however, the Liberal International Order has been in decline due to several challenges: the rise of “revisionist powers” seeking to reshape rather than conform to the order, global democratic backsliding, the strengthening of nationalism, and growing fatigue among Americans over international interventions (Liblett, 2017).

1) Rise of Revisionist Powers (Mearsheimer, 2001)

The U.S. government has labeled China and Russia as “revisionist powers” (White House, 2017). Many in Washington also see Iran and North Korea as part of

this group, forming an “axis of revisionist powers” (Mead, 2025). Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, disregarding another state’s sovereignty, and launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. China, pursuing its own Eurasian strategy through the Belt and Road Initiative, has sought to alter regional order by militarizing the South China Sea and pressuring Taiwan (Mead, 2014). Iran and North Korea have defied the international nuclear non-proliferation regime by pursuing nuclear weapons while providing military support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

2) Failure and Retreat of Democratization

U.S. military interventions aimed at democratization—Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), and Libya (2011)—failed to establish democracy. The Middle Eastern democratization wave sparked by the Arab Spring in 2011 led to chaos and civil wars in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, ultimately resulting in a return to authoritarianism. After the Soviet collapse, the U.S. and Western Europe hoped that integrating China and Russia into international economic systems like the WTO would gradually lead to democratization. The expectation was that economic interdependence would bring peace, an expanding middle class would demand democracy, and participation in international institutions would make them “responsible stakeholders” (Zoellick, 2005). China joined the WTO in 2001, and Russia in 2012, but the outcomes diverged from expectations. After returning to power in 2012, Vladimir Putin entrenched authoritarian rule in Russia, while Xi Jinping, after taking office in 2012, consolidated power and in 2018 removed presidential term limits.

Freedom House, a U.S. NGO, annually publishes the Freedom in the World index, assessing global democracy and political freedom. In 2024, it reported that global political rights and civil liberties had declined for 19 consecutive years. It pointed to democratic backsliding in Hungary, Poland, Türkiye, India, the Philippines, Brazil, Tunisia, and Ethiopia (Freedom House, 2024). Democratic backsliding refers to the gradual weakening of democratic institutions, where elections may remain but the rule of law, media, civil society, and separation of powers collapse (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This is often called “illiberalism.”

3) Rise of Illiberalism

In Hungary, since taking power in 2010, Prime Minister Orbán has strengthened long-term rule through constitutional and electoral changes, weakened judicial independence, and suppressed media and civil society. In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS), in power since 2015, has undermined judicial independence and restricted the media under the pretext of judicial reform. In Türkiye, President Erdoğan, in power since 2003, has eroded media and judicial independence and centralized power through the 2017 constitutional amendment establishing a presidential system. Tunisia, once hailed as a success story of democratic transition after the 2011 Arab Spring, has seen President Saied dissolve parliament and concentrate power since 2021.

Populism, often intertwined with illiberalism, also contributes to democratic backsliding. Populism frames society as a struggle between “pure people” and “corrupt elites” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Populist leaders claim to represent the “true will of the people” while disregarding institutional checks such as the judiciary, media, and legislature. U.S. President Donald Trump is seen as a prototypical populist leader who continually attacks democratic institutions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Illiberalism and populism together weaken democratic institutions and norms, posing challenges to the Liberal International Order.

4) Strengthening of Nationalism

In 2016, the United Kingdom left the EU (Brexit). The main reason was to “take back control,” restoring sovereignty from the EU (KDI Economic Education Center, 2022). This was a direct challenge to the supranational model of the EU—considered a prototype of the Liberal International Order—and demonstrated that nationalism, prioritizing state sovereignty, has become a barrier to liberal order (Mearsheimer, 2017). Earlier, in 2015, as Syrian refugees entered Europe in large numbers, the EU proposed a quota system for distributing refugees among member states. Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic rejected it, while far-right nationalist parties opposing refugees rose in Germany, France, and Italy. At the same time, China’s President Xi Jinping promotes the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (the Chinese Dream), and Russia’s President Putin justified annexing Crimea and waging war against Ukraine as efforts to “protect the Russian nation.” U.S. President Trump’s “America First” is also evaluated as a form of “illiberal nationalism” (Kim Sunghan, 2021).

5) Fatigue Among Americans

American fatigue with acting as the “world’s policeman” became more pronounced after the 2008 financial crisis (Pew Research Center, 2013). The crisis shifted public focus to domestic economic recovery, while skepticism grew over the costs of maintaining global order (such as military interventions and foreign aid). Particularly, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—launched in 2001 and 2003—generated enormous fatigue. The Iraq War toppled Saddam Hussein but failed to create a “free democratic Iraq.” The Afghanistan War, which lasted 20 years before U.S. troops withdrew in 2021, ended with the Taliban’s return to power. Many Americans asked: after losing thousands of soldiers and spending trillions of dollars, was this the result? A strong sentiment emerged that the U.S. should no longer act as the maintainer of the Liberal International Order (In Nam-sik, 2025).

III. Trump and the Liberal International Order

1. Criticism of the Liberal International Order

Amid these developments, Donald Trump—an outsider to the established U.S. political establishment—was elected U.S. president in 2016 on the slogan “Make America Great Again (MAGA).” Re-elected last year, Trump has maintained the same foreign policy stance in both his first and second terms: “America First.”

This policy asserts that the Liberal International Order, which the United States has built and defended over the past 80 years, has harmed U.S. national interests. Therefore, it must be dismantled, and U.S. interests must be maximized through power and deals (Brands, 2025).

Trump’s View of the Liberal International Order

Trump’s view of the Liberal International Order was clearly expressed during the Senate confirmation hearing last January for then-Secretary of State nominee Marco Rubio, who now also serves as National Security Advisor (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2025). At that time, Rubio denounced the Liberal International Order that the U.S. had pursued since the Cold War as a “dangerous delusion” that has now turned into a “weapon aimed at America.”

He argued that: An excessive obsession with free trade had destroyed America's middle class, weakened its industrial base, and moved supply chains to rival nations. Free movement of people had deepened immigration and refugee crises both in the U.S. and worldwide. Revisionist powers—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—had exploited this order for their own gain. In particular, he criticized: The Chinese Communist Party, which, after joining the WTO, had reaped benefits while shirking obligations, rising to superpower status through “lies, hacking, and theft” that stole America's prosperity. Iran and North Korea, which fueled instability through nuclear weapons and terrorism, while evading responsibility by abusing the UN Security Council veto.

In this chaos, Rubio argued, the free world must be recreated—and only a strong and confident America can make this possible. He pledged to pursue foreign policy that would make the U.S. “safer, stronger, and more prosperous” by prioritizing national interests. Supporters of the Liberal International Order, including American liberal political scientists like Joseph Nye and John Ikenberry, have condemned Trump as an even greater revisionist power than China or Russia—accusing him of being the one truly destroying the order (Keohane & Nye, 2025; Chosun Ilbo, 2025a). By contrast, realist scholars such as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt argue that Trump is not the cause but the product of the structural challenges already facing the Liberal International Order.

2. Trump's Second-Term U.S. Foreign Policy

The defining feature of Trump's second-term foreign policy is that it systematically reverses each element of the Liberal International Order, represented by free trade, multilateralism, and the spread of democracy.

1) Strengthening Protectionism through Tariffs

The Trump administration regards the existing free trade system as unfair and has wielded tariffs as a weapon to protect American industries (especially manufacturing) and jobs. On April 2, Trump declared “Liberation Day” and imposed a basic 10% tariff on almost all countries. In addition, he levied reciprocal tariffs—ranging from 11% to 50% (average 15%)—depending on the degree of trade imbalance or market barriers of each country (Chosun Ilbo, 2025b). Tariffs are not just economic measures but also diplomatic leverage. They pressured the EU, Japan,

South Korea, and others to make concessions on security, investment, and defense burden-sharing.

2) Weakening Multilateralism

The Trump administration argues that multilateral institutions restrict U.S. sovereignty and undermine U.S. interests, leading to a wave of withdrawals. On his first day back in office this January, Trump signed an executive order to withdraw from the World Health Organization (WHO). He also withdrew from the Paris Climate Accord, declared that the U.S. would not rejoin the UN Human Rights Council, and imposed sanctions on the International Criminal Court (ICC) when it sought to prosecute senior Israeli officials despite Israel not being a party to the treaty. Instead of multilateralism, the Trump administration prioritizes bilateral approaches to international issues.

3) Exclusion of Democracy and Human Rights Values

Trump is extremely reluctant to invoke democratic values in foreign policy (Kim Sunghan, 2021). He sees previous U.S. efforts—such as promoting democracy in the Middle East—as wasted energy that served other countries’ systems rather than U.S. interests. Accordingly: The Trump administration dissolved the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which had long provided foreign aid to developing nations. It effectively shut down Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Asia (RFA), and Radio Free Europe (RFE), which had introduced external information into Eastern Europe and Asia to promote democracy. It denied funding to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in its 2026 budget. The State Department, which traditionally published annual reports on human rights conditions in 198 countries, delayed its report by six months after Trump’s second-term inauguration, releasing it on August 12. The report was more than 50% shorter than in previous years. For instance, criticism of North Korea’s political system was drastically reduced (King, 2025).

4) Selective Engagement in International Issues

Trump does not pursue isolationism but rather a strategy closer to “offshore balancing” (Choi Woosun, 2024; Kim Sunghan, 2021). This approach calls for the U.S. not to act as a global policeman but to intervene selectively in key strategic

regions—Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Middle East. The idea is to let regional powers balance themselves, with the U.S. stepping in only when necessary, thereby avoiding democratization or regime-change missions and reducing costs (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016). At the NATO summit this June, Trump secured a commitment from member states to raise defense spending to 5% of GDP, while pressuring South Korea and Japan to increase their share of U.S. troop stationing costs. He declared that U.S. troops would not be sent to defend Ukraine, stressing that Europe, not the U.S., must bear the primary responsibility for Ukraine's security (AP News, 2025).

In June, the U.S. carried out airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. Unlike long-term occupations, these precision strikes were intended to curb Iran's nuclear capabilities while preventing its rise as a regional hegemon. After the strikes, the U.S. pushed European powers (the EU3) to resume diplomatic negotiations with Iran. Such moves reflect the logic of offshore balancing—and also send a warning signal to other revisionist powers like China, Russia, and North Korea.

At the same time, Trump has actively mediated peace, as he did in his first term with the Abraham Accords between Israel and several Arab states (UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan). In his second term, he has intervened in brokering peace deals such as the Congo-Rwanda agreement, an India-Pakistan ceasefire, cessation of Cambodia-Thailand border clashes, and an Armenia-Azerbaijan peace accord.

IV. The Theoretical Background of Trump's Foreign Policy

Trump's second-term U.S. foreign policy can be considered theoretically rooted in realism, because it emphasizes power and the maximization of national interest, disregards international organizations, institutions, and norms, employs tariffs as tools of coercion to pursue protectionism, and ignores democracy and human rights values.

Furthermore, in a context where revisionist powers such as China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are rising—states that do not conform to the existing Liberal International Order but seek to revise it—the U.S., under Trump, acts as an offshore balancer. It intervenes selectively only in strategic regions such as Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Middle East. For this reason, his foreign policy can also be said to rest on the theory of offensive neorealism (Kang Ryang, 2019).

Unlike defensive neorealism, which assumes states are primarily status quo actors seeking balance of power, offensive neorealism argues that: The anarchic nature of the international system makes it impossible for states to be certain that other states do not harbor hostile intentions.

Therefore, in order to ensure survival against potential attacks, states pursue power maximization aggressively and seek to revise the status quo to become a hegemon. According to this theory, once a state becomes a regional hegemon, it then acts as an offshore balancer to prevent the rise of other hegemonies in different regions (Walt, 2011).

V. Trump's Second-Term Middle East Policy

The defining feature of Trump's second-term Middle East policy is active engagement (Mead, 2025). This does not mean a neoconservative approach like that of President George W. Bush, who stationed U.S. troops long-term in the Middle East to promote democratization. Rather, it is an offensive neorealist approach: preventing the rise of rival regional hegemonies by working through existing regional powers, while actively influencing key issues for the sake of U.S. national interests. At present, the regional powers with which Trump is aligned in the Middle East appear to be Israel, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia (The Washington Post, 2025).

After his re-inauguration, Trump's first overseas visit was in May to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, where he concluded economic deals worth hundreds of billions of dollars. In Saudi Arabia, he also met with Syria's new president, Ahmed al-Shara, for the first time. Trump promised to lift U.S. sanctions on Syria and urged al-Shara to normalize diplomatic relations with Israel. Since April, the Trump administration has held five rounds of nuclear negotiations with Iran, and in June it carried out a surprise airstrike on Iranian nuclear facilities. Trump also announced a plan to resettle large numbers of Palestinians from Gaza to other locations, presenting it as part of his efforts to end the war between Israel and Hamas and to promote Gaza's reconstruction.

VI. Conclusion

Trump's second-term U.S. foreign policy can be summarized as the dismantling of the Liberal International Order, which the United States had built and

defended over the past 80 years since the Cold War. As a result, the U.S., once a “benign hegemon” that provided public goods to the world as a global policeman, now prioritizes its own national interests, leveraging its overwhelming economic and military power to deal coercively with the world—including its allies. Some predict that, just as Democratic President Joe Biden returned to prioritizing the Liberal International Order after Trump’s first term, the U.S. will revert to its previous posture once Trump’s current term ends.

However, Trump’s “America First” foreign policy appears to be less a personal aberration and more the product of structural changes in the Liberal International Order, which is facing multiple challenges. For this reason, Trump’s second-term foreign policy is likely to continue as a new U.S. strategy for responding to an emerging international order, even after Trump himself leaves office.

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