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EPIS REPORT
on International Relations & Diplomacy





Hostage Diplomacy

The return of Coercion in International Relations

Making Greenland and Venezuela Great Again

An Analysis of Trump's Foreign Policy and its Conformity with Scholarly Definitions of Imperialism

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Editorial



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EPIS Report on International Relations & Diplomacy

Dear reader,

Unpredictability has become one of the defining features of international politics. Alliances that were long taken for granted are being questioned, coercion has returned to the diplomatic toolbox, and powerful states increasingly act outside the rules they once promoted. The question is no longer whether the international order is changing, but how states – large and small – can navigate it.

This second issue of the EPIS Report on International Relations & Diplomacy brings together eight contributions from our Think Tank for Foreign Affairs & Security Policy that approach this question from different angles.

Sacha Sikora opens the issue with a historical perspective: he argues that the world's swings between order and disorder follow a cyclical logic rather than chance. Mihai Postelnicu examines U.S. conduct towards Venezuela and Greenland and asks to what extent it fits scholarly definitions of imperialism.

In our joint article, Sophie Lohosha and I show that the European Union has responded to U.S. unpredictability not by abandoning the transatlantic alliance, but by diversifying its partnerships. Lauren Mc Hugh challenges the assumption that small states belong in the background and looks at how Ireland can use its ties with the United States.

Delfina Ertanowska turns to information warfare and the cooperation between Russia and Venezuela in disinformation. Eleonora Crespi analyses hostage diplomacy and explains why detaining foreign nationals as leverage persists. Diogo Albuquerque Nascimento examines how China has reacted to U.S. actions in Venezuela, Greenland and Iran, and why Beijing has chosen restraint over exploitation. Finally, Sophie Lohosha's policy paper recommends that policymakers hedge by diversifying sector-specific partnerships in energy, supply chains and digital infrastructure.

What unites these contributions is the insight that uncertainty is not only a risk, but also a space for agency. I would like to thank all authors for their work, Sydney Armor for coordinating our Thematic Report Groups, and Design Affairs for bringing this issue into its final form.

I hope you enjoy reading it.

Yours sincerely,
Pedro Lima
Report Group Leader, International Relations & Diplomacy

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS & DIPLOMACY



The Global Disorder Cycle

How does the world tremble between order and disorder?

Sacha Sikora

About the Article

Main question: Is the world really oscillating between eras of recession and expansion, or is this logic purely linear and the result of chance?

Argument: The various periods of recession across history are not the result of some events, but the reflection of a cycling logic throughout times.

Conclusion: This logic will never stop : it may evolve, but the mechanism stay the same, pursuing the logic that spanned since the beginning of mankind.

About the Author

Sacha Sikora is pursuing a Master's degree in Public International Law at the University of Strasbourg, specialised in humanitarian law. Also reservist member of the French Military, he is interested in the evolution of national and international law alongside geopolitical changes, with backgrounds in German and British studies.

The "global disorder cycle"



Figure 1 : A comic map of political situations in Europe in 1899 depicting several, made by Fred W. Rose. Yale University Library, source : https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/15259160

Introduction

Since the end of the Seven Years War (1756-1763), observers of international relations have repeatedly been struck by a strange déjà-vu: every violent war that claims to be 'the last', ephemeral peace settlements that promise durable stability, and new legal institutions that assert they have finally overcome the violence of the past. Yet, decade after decade, crises return, rights recede, and global disorder resurfaces in different forms but with a familiar logic. This recurrence is too cyclical to be accidental. As Paul Kennedy observed, "the rise and fall of the great powers" (Kennedy, 1987) follows a pattern where economic overstretch systematically precedes political decline, revealing the cyclical — rather than linear — nature of international order It reflects a structural dynamic that brings global history closer to the logic of a market economy than to a linear march toward progress. Just as economies oscillate between growth and recession, the international legal and political landscape alternates between phases of expansion of rights and phases of contraction, where security, sovereignty, or ideology justify such restrictions, or worse, denial.

This cyclical reading can be applied not only to war and peace but also to the development of international law, rights, and liberties. When a major systemic shock occurs – whether an important war, the collapse of an empire, the beginning of an era of peace, or a global pandemic – it is often interpreted as an unprecedented rupture demanding unprecedented responses At each turn, international law is simultaneously invoked as a tool of stabilisation and revealed as fragile, selective, or subordinated to power politics.

The theory of the global disorder cycle defines how the world oscillates between recession periods, and expansions eras, about rights, sciences, knowledge, and how this cycle influences our history.

The core thesis of this article is not to interpret history through an esoteric approach. The understanding of today's world, in particular with the rise of uncertainty towards the trajectory of international law, necessarily passes through a factual understanding of history. Periods of apparent stability, legal innovation, and universalist discourse are followed by phases of tension, erosion of rights, and outright collapse. The central interrogation that will follow us is to know if those moments of global disorder are

exceptional shocks or predictable phases within a recurring structural cycle.

In the first part, this article will examine how, from the Seven Years War to the dawn of the 20th century, a specifically Western form of cyclical global governance emerged, combining legal expansion and deep structural inequality (I). This article will then show how the interwar period illustrates a typical phase of 'legal optimism' without enforcement, where rights progress in theory but regress in practice, preparing the ground for systemic collapse (II). In a third part, this article analyses the Cold War and the immediate post–Cold War era as a moment of controlled expansion and 'managed disorder', where law is universalised but applied selectively (III). Finally, this article argues that the post-Covid era should not be seen as an entirely new crisis, but rather as the latest phase of a recurrent recession of rights within this long historical cycle (IV).

From the Seven Years War to the Dawn of the 20th Century: The Emergence of Cyclical Global Governance in the West

Post–Seven Years War Reordering (1763–late 18th century)

The Seven Years' War (1756–1763) is often considered the first 'world war', (Canadian Encyclopedia, 2006) involving major European powers and their colonial possessions. Indeed, the revolution of armament permitted a lot of States to reinforce their influence, such as the Duchy of Prussia and the British Empire. Its outcome, formalised notably in the Treaty of Paris of 1763, profoundly restructured the global balance of power, especially by consolidating British dominance in North America and India (cession of the New France territory to Great Britain). This reordering represents a typical post-crisis phase of systemic stabilisation: after a generalised conflict, the victorious powers attempt to impose a new equilibrium presented as durable and rational.

At the same time, the post–Seven Years War period saw a significant expansion of international trade and early forms of globalisation. Battles of Pondichéry and Abraham Plains, in 1759, testify to the rivalry between France and Britain, not only on the European theater but also about their worldwide claims. Colonial empires extended their reach, maritime commerce intensified, and networks of financial and commercial interdependence deepened between Europe and the rest of the world (French General Trade Chart, 1938). To sustain these flows, imperial powers developed increasingly sophisticated legal frameworks, governing trade and navigation, such as the Ordonnance Royale des Eaux et Forêts (1681), before the war. However, this legal ordering was highly asymmetric: it was designed to secure the interests of metropolitan elites and merchants, not to recognise equal rights for all subjects of the empire, with the example of the maintenance of slavery in the colonies.

Alongside the progression of Europe on the international scene, arts and philosophy started to catch up on the delay taken during the Middle Ages over the Muslim world. Indeed, many thinkers, including Voltaire, Montesquieu, Kant, and Schopenhauer, contributed to the expansion of the Lumières philosophy (a philosophical and intellectual movement defending liberalism, opposed to political and religious oppression

during the seventeenth century). Thus, the separation of property and power, in public or private domains, was defined and incorporated, especially during the French Revolution, into legal frameworks, such as Constitutions and laws. This led to, despite some short-lived eras of recession (the Terror, 1793-1794), a brutal dictatorship led by the Public Salute Committee ; despite this episode, a constant progression within the States that was later diffused through French conquests over the continent.

Here we see the first fundamental tension that will characterise later cycles: economic expansion goes hand in hand with an evolution of the legal framework, sometimes selective and uneven recognition of rights. In Europe and North America, debates on natural rights, sovereignty of peoples, and constitutional limitations on power intensified, especially in the wake of the American and French Revolutions.

"Recognizing this cyclical logic does not mean resigning ourselves to fatalism."

2.2. The 19th Century: Legal Expansion and Structural Inequality

The 19th century is often read as the century of constitutionalism, liberal thought, and the codification of rights in Europe and North America. Through the Napoleonic Code, the diffusion of constitutional charters, and the generalisation of parliamentary institutions are usually presented as milestones in the progress of the rule of law: the most durable legal revolution of the modern era (Carbonnier, 2002). The Napoleonic Empire (1804-1815) and various forms of enlightened despotism, in Prussia, Russia and Sardinia, combined, in different proportions, modernisation of state structures, rationalisation of law, and recognition—at least for certain categories—of civil and political rights. The vassalisation of Europe under the rule of the French Empire led to the establishment of property protection and commercial frameworks (such as the Code du Commerce, 1807). After this era of wars, the stabilisation of borders in mainland Europe and the expansion of the United States westwards led to a significant era of development.

Yet, this expansion was accompanied by deep structural inequalities. While some European states gradually abolished serfdom and recognised broader civil rights, they simultaneously maintained or expanded systems of colonial domination. The abolition of slavery, in particular, was often tardy and ambiguous: France reinstated slavery, although it was abolished in 1794 (Victor Hugues' Declaration, 1794). In Eastern Europe, Russian imperialism weighed heavily on territories like Poland, Courland and Finland, subject to partitions, repression, and denial of national self-determination, often resorting to serfdom. During the conquest of the American West, the United States chased amerindian lands, in order to expand, deporting them, while developing its own cities on the East Coast.

On the international level, law was less a universal normative system than a tool of stability for dominant powers.. The Holy Alliance, bringing together Russia, Austria, and Prussia, sought to preserve the monarchical order and contain revolutionary movements under the guise of preserving European peace: the balance of power, despite national revendications in Italy, modern-day Germany, led

to a relative stability in order to maintain peace on the continent. Interventions and non-interventions were justified not by the protection of self-determination, but by the defense of an order favorable to great powers.

3. The Interwar Period: Legal Optimism and Structural Regression

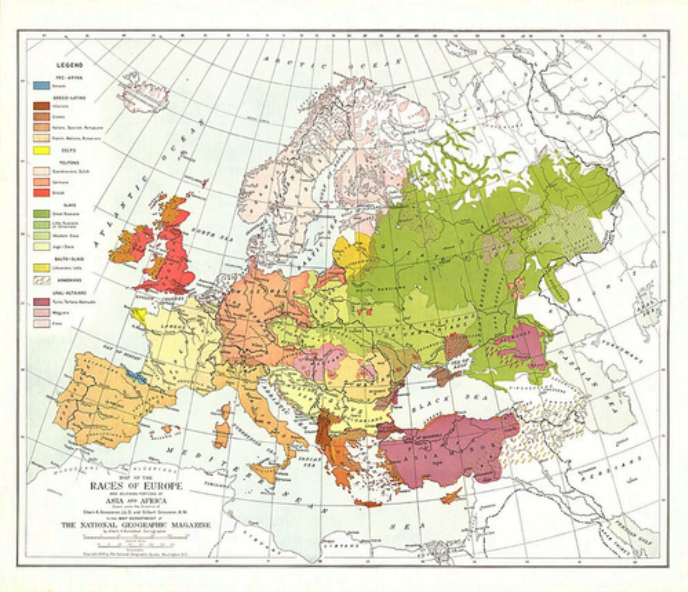

Figure 2 : Map of the Races of Europe at the end of World War I, as the Treaty of Versailles is defining new borderlines. National Library of Australia, source: https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-280523200/view

The end of the First World War inaugurated a new phase of legal optimism. In response to the unprecedented devastation of 1914–1918, the victors sought to build an international order based on collective security and law, rather than on a mere balance of power. The creation of the League of Nations and the development of new legal norms were intended to prevent the return of such a conflict. The famous Lotus case of 1927 (often dated 1923 in abbreviated references) symbolised a moment when international law, and particularly the Permanent Court of International Justice, appeared capable of settling disputes through legal reasoning rather than violence.

However, this reconstruction suffered from a decisive flaw: the lack of binding and effective enforcement mechanisms. While states proclaimed their attachment to collective security, they remained reluctant to accept strong constraints on their sovereignty. The reluctance to intervene during crises such as the occupation of Sankt Veit an der Flaum (1918), or the Russian Civil War (1917-1923), illustrates this dilemma: the fear of provoking a new large-scale conflict led to a policy of minimal to non-intervention, even when violations of norms were obvious. Sanctions, when they existed, were limited and inconsistent: embargos remained rare and often ineffective, and no serious measures were taken against Japan or Italy when they engaged in acts of aggression.

Concrete cases reveal this structural weakness. The Memel dispute (Freistaat Preußen v. Lietuva, 1920), and the Volhynia question exacerbated the tension between the new States. Linked to the League of Nations' mandates, such as Cameroon, Palau Islands, and Japan (1919), or the Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916, showed how the new order largely preserved the interests of former colonial powers.

At the normative level, the interwar period also saw significant advances in the recognition of minority rights and the principle of self-determination. The creation of new states such as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, the system of minority treaties, and the rhetoric of national self-determination seemed to mark a decisive break with the imperial logics of the

decisive break with the imperial logics of the 19th century. On paper, more groups than ever before were recognised as subjects entitled to protection and representation. Women, in some states, were even granted the right to vote, in Hungary, Poland, or the United Kingdom, all in 1918.

Nevertheless, these advances were undermined by economic instability and social unrest. The Great Depression, mass unemployment, and social conflicts eroded confidence in liberal institutions. The Spartacist uprising in Germany revealed the fragility of the young Weimar democracy and the radicalisation of political struggles, which was also intensified by the evolution of authoritarianism, such as Austria, Hungary, Romania, or, more notably, Poland, with the Constitution of the 3rd of April 1935. In many states, emergency powers—initially presented as temporary—gradually became normalised, leading to a considerable recession of rights, even in democracies. In France, for instance, the administration was given a lot of power through law-decrees, especially with the political violence resulting from the end of the war (law of the 24th March 1924).

In this sense, the interwar period is a textbook example of a cycle where rights expand in theory but retract in practice. This gap between normative ambitions and political reality is precisely what Eric Hobsbawm characterised as the "Age of Catastrophe" (Hobsbawn, 1994) – a period where the institutions of liberal democracy proved structurally incapable of resisting the combined pressures of economic crisis and nationalist extremism. The apparition of fascism was the ultimate nail to the coffin of the global peace hopes.

Far from consolidating a new stable order, the interwar years can be interpreted as a failed stabilisation phase within the historical cycle. International law proved largely incapable of absorbing economic and political shocks. Institutions such as the League of Nations lacked both legitimacy in the eyes of some major powers and the instruments necessary to constrain others. Each new breach – Japanese expansion in Asia (since 1932), Italian aggression in Ethiopia (1936), Germany's rise of power in Europe – eroded a little more the credibility of the system.

At the same time, civil liberties were progressively eroded in several states before the outbreak of overt conflict: the Reichstagsbrandverordnung zum Schütz von Volk und Staat (Reichstag's Fire Decree, for People's and State's protection), of the 28th February 1933, prohibited communist journals and limited liberty of movement, expression, and the press Bundestag, 2006). This example shows how legislation was used, after the blaze of the Reichstag, probably caused by the nails themselves, in order to constrain the population. The violent rupture of the 1939–1945 war was therefore not an unexpected accident, but the culmination of a contraction phase already well advanced by the remilitarisation of the Rhineland (7 March 1936), the annexation of the Sudetenland (30 September. 1938), and the claim of Memel (20 March 1939). Totalitarianism appears as the extreme expression of this logic: a regime in which law is absorbed by ideology, and where rights are sacrificed in the name of security, nationalism, or racial myths.

end all wars and a legal re-foundation presented as a guarantee of peace, structural forces of regression reasserted themselves. The failure of this stabilisation phase paves the way for a new systemic collapse, which will, in turn, give birth to a new phase of legal reconstruction after 1945.

4. The Cold War Era and the Post–Cold War Moment: Controlled Expansion and Managed Disorder

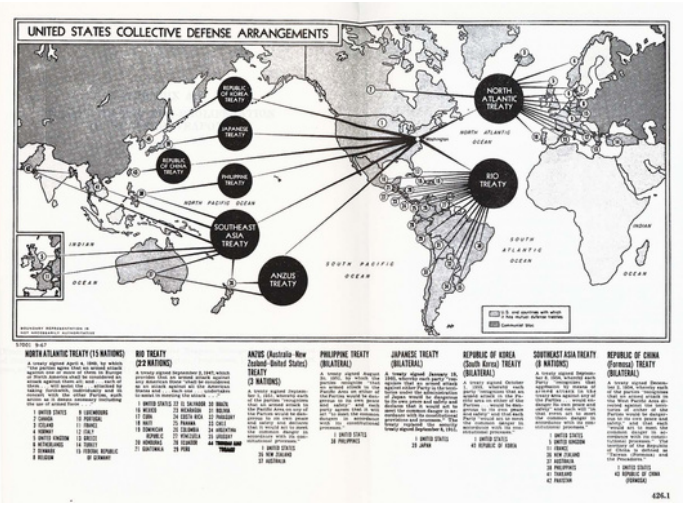

Figure 3 : Map from the US department of State, 1967, deputizing the different defense agreements throughout the 'Western Bloc", Library of Congress, source : https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3201f.ct004057/?r=-0.12,-0.024,1.25,0.739,0

During the Cold War, global order was characterised by a paradoxical combination of relative stability between superpowers and intense, often violent, conflicts in the so-called 'Third World'. Rights protection was frequently subordinated to ideological alignment. Western powers and the Soviet bloc both supported regimes that committed serious human rights violations, as long as they remained strategically loyal. In Asia, the case of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot is emblematic: despite atrocities and genocide, political and diplomatic considerations long impeded a coherent international response, such as the China and the USSR massively helping the dictatorship with material and trade, in order to maintain the repression.

International law was applied inconsistently, depending on strategic interests. The case Military Activities in Nicaragua (International Court of Justice, 1987) show very much this logic : the United States of America did not respect international law, in order to act against the left-wing regime that was elected in the country ; and this happened while the Western Bloc was condemning the repression and occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, after the Prague's Spring, a peaceful revolution against the communist authoritarian regime.

Meanwhile, in formally democratic states such as France, post-war restrictions on certain liberties—linked to colonial wars or internal security concerns—were regularly contested, notably during the events of May 1968. This led to the end of the emergency powers' application in France, as the Général De Gaulle exercised them for almost ten years.

From the perspective of the cycle, the Cold War appears as a phase of controlled expansion and 'managed disorder'. Legal frameworks proliferated, and institutions multiplied, but their application remained highly selective. Global stability between superpowers, based on deterrence and spheres of influence, masked localised legal regressions and recurrent conflicts. Law functioned as both an instrument of legitimation and a terrain of ideological competition.

The end of the Cold War was widely interpreted as the opening of a new era of peace and legal

progress. The collapse of the Soviet bloc, alongside the spread of electoral democracies, and the strengthening of international institutions fed a discourse of "end of history," famously theorised by Francis Fukuyama: "what we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, but the end of history as such" (Fukuyama, 1992). International criminal law experienced an unprecedented boom with the creation of ad hoc tribunals and the International Criminal Court.

This era led to the European Charter of Fundamental Rights in 2000, the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), which included themselves in the dynamic of recognition of human rights, as the Cairo Declaration (1990) was following the European example.This period reached a peak of legal optimism. Rights and liberties seemed destined to progress irreversibly, while neoliberal economic globalisation extended its norms until the 2007–2008 financial crisis.

5. The Covid and Post-Covid era: A Contemporary Recession of Rights

The Covid-19 pandemic is often presented as an unprecedented event that suddenly disrupted global governance and domestic legal orders. Yet, in a cyclical perspective, it appears more as a catalyst than a true cause. The crisis accelerated pre-existing trends rather than creating them ex nihilo: distrust toward institutions, rise of populism, growing tensions between security and rights, and fragmentation of multilateralism were already visible well before 2020. Measures initially presented as temporary —lockdowns, curfews, suspension of certain freedoms—tended, in many countries, to be extended, renewed, or transformed into ordinary instruments of governance. Giorgio Agamben, in the Stato di Eccezione (State of Exception), 2005, said that "the state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics". Executives saw their authority expand at the expense of parliamentary oversight and judicial review. In some cases, emergency rhetoric served to justify restrictions that went well beyond strictly sanitary necessities, targeting political opposition or disfavored minorities.

The long-term consequences of this phase for rights and liberties are considerable. Restrictions on freedom of movement, assembly, and privacy risk becoming semi-permanent in the name of public security, health, or the fight against new threats. Many events are now completely protected, allowing trespass of property, in order to avoid new islamist attacks, such as Christmas Markets or Technological surveillance – via contact-tracing applications, biometric data collection, or algorithmic monitoring – has been justified as a rational and neutral response to crisis management. However, once these tools are in place, it is often difficult to roll them back, especially when they serve other political or administrative objectives. The French état d'urgence sanitaire (sanitary emergency state) allowed a total quarantine of the population, which even the justice confirmed (Conseil d'État, 2020).

At the international level, trust in norms and institutions has eroded. Disputes over vaccine distribution, border closures, and divergent national strategies have fueled the perception that multilateralism is unable to provide fair and effective responses. Some states have openly challenged the authority of international organisations, while others have used the crisis

to reinforce discourses of sovereignty and control. This dynamic contributes to a broader questioning of the universality of rights, increasingly presented as relative or negotiable depending on circumstances.

Following the investiture of Trump to the White House, in the context of an international rise of tension, especially with the Russian war against Ukraine (since the 24th February 2022), the sign of a broader contraction appeared as evidence.

International law, already weakened by different interventions, is nowadays living a hard time since 2026. Following the different conflicts happening during the several months of the year, from the invasion of Venezuela on 3rd January 2026, by the Operation Absolute Resolve (Ourbak, 2026), the war between Pakistan and Afghanistan (since the 21st February 2026), and the open war since the American strikes on the Islamic Republic of Iran (since the 27th February 2026).

This boiling international context may remind us of the interwar times, especially the 1930s. Indeed, even in internal affairs, States tend to limit rights and to follow a sort of laissez-faire. In Europe, since the islamist wave of terrorist attacks, many states have opted for emergency power, and still use them: in France, emergency powers are still used by the Government (Défenseur des Droits, 2024), and the Défenseur des Droits, a constitutional and independent authority, altered on the recession of such rights. This contraction is also visible in other States, outside Europe: in Iran, where many young protesters were killed by the Police and Army.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued with relatively little risk that history, like the economy, advances through oscillations rather than in a straight line. It moves backward and forward, alternating phases of expansion and phases of contraction. Although societies evolve and norms are reformulated, they tend to repeat the same patterns and mistakes, resulting in a cycle of recession and progression in rights, especially in international relations. Recognizing this cyclical logic does not mean resigning ourselves to fatalism, but it does invite us to approach each episode of 'global disorder' not as an unprecedented accident, but as a moment that reveals, once again, the persistent structural tensions at the heart of global governance: still, citizens of States are also a part of the process, influencing the conduct of politics and the possible shrinking, or expansion, of their rights.

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS & DIPLOMACY



Making Greenland and Venezuela Great Again

An Analysis of Trump's Foreign Policy and its Conformity with Scholarly Definitions of Imperialism

Mihai Postelnicu

About the Article

The article aims to determine if Trump's behaviour regarding Venezuela and Greenland fit modern scholarly definitions of Imperialism. Both Venezuela and Greenland show characteristics of economic and geological imperialism. Trump's behaviour can fit into a imperialism definition, but a lack of consensus on modern imperialism characteristics and other influences unrelated to imperialism makes a definite answer difficult.

About the Author

Mihai Postelnicu is a recent graduate of European Studies. He is passionate about international relations and diplomacy, with a focus on the Middle East and Europe regions. Topics of interest include NATO security on the eastern flank and more.

Introduction

The United States of America is, undoubtedly, one of the most important geopolitical actors in the world. With a GDP of almost $29 trillion (World Bank Group, 2024) and a defense budget of $1 trillion, expected to rise to $1.5 trillion in 2027 (Chia, 2026), the country's hard power cannot be questioned.

This year's events have put the spotlight once more on the USA, both internally and externally. On 3rd of January 2026, the USA conducted a military intervention in Venezuela, which resulted in the removal of the sitting Venezuelan President, Nicolas Maduro (Center for Preventive Action, 2026). Furthermore, Trump expressed interest in acquiring Greenland, a self-governing territory of Denmark. At the beginning of 2026, Trump ramped up efforts to acquire the island, at one point even threatening military intervention if his demands weren't met, but eventually backing off on these claims (Blake, 2026). These recent developments have brought more disorder to an already disorderly geopolitical landscape and could mark a critical juncture for both the USA and the world's international affairs. Some world leaders have already acknowledged this, with Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney saying that the rules-based international order, as we know it, is coming to an end (World Economic Forum, 2026).

While Trump's diplomatic tactics have been controversial, even in his first presidential term in 2016, the recent events are a clear escalation compared to the first term. Based on the above-mentioned developments, the goal of this research is to explore the two events mentioned and determine if they can be characterized as imperialism, using Stephen Kettel and Alex Suttons' characteristics of imperialism as a baseline for the paper, alongside other academically important papers on modern imperialism.

As such, the research question for this paper will be the following: To what extent do Trump's recent military intervention in Venezuela and territorial ambitions in Greenland conform to, or depart from, standard scholarly definitions of imperialism?

Imperialism: "the systematic inter-play of capitalist development and geopolitical conflict in the construction and reproduction of international hierarchy"

The paper will not seek to provide conclusive explanations for both events or to fill a literature gap. Rather, its purpose is to explore whether President Trump's recent decisions fit a scholarly definition of imperialism or any international relations model, thereby offering a potential explanation of the recent events.

Definitions of imperialism

Imperialism as a concept has various definitions, but little consensus on a standardized one (Johnson, 2026). What is certain is the origin of the word, which was used to describe the new phenomenon that was manifesting in the British Empire at the turn of the 20th century. One of the important researchers who wrote about early imperialism is John Hobson, who made

significant contributions to economics and sociology with his work on British Imperialism. Hobson wrote about the economic factors that drive imperialism, focusing on how financial elites controlled the surplus of goods produced (Wood, 1983). Hobson's work on economic imperialism laid the groundwork for Marxist theories, with prominent Marxists such as Lenin, also influenced by Karl Marx's writings about capitalism's global expansion, expanding imperialism definitions (Cain, 2007). Classical Marxists focused on the necessity for new emerging markets and the exploitation of the colonies that opened those markets (Ratcliffe, 1983).

"Securing critical supplies necessary for the economy aligns with the economic imperialism school of thought and reflects Trump's attempts to exert international influence through economic means."

There has been a revival in the literature about the study of the United States as an empire, but little consensus regarding an answer (MacDonald, 2009). Contemporary schools of thought have various approaches to modern imperialism. Works such as John Smith's book 'Imperialism in the 21st Century" focus on the economic factors that motivate global powers to pursue economic imperialism (Smith, 2015). Antony Anghie looks at the War on Terror that the United States pursued after the events of 9/11 (2012). A problem with the current stream of research on new imperialism is the lack of consensus on its characteristics and how to distinguish it from classical branches (Kettell & Sutton, 2013). In general, new schools of thought place new imperialism into 2 categories: economic and geopolitical. The economic perspectives argue that modern imperialism is driven by global capitalism, and the powerful states in this economy continue to expand their power, but, unlike classical imperialism, this is done through the control of global markets. Geopolitical perspectives argue that modern imperialism is driven by social factors, with military force being justified from a humanitarian and moral perspective. Scholars argue that new indirect mechanisms such as diplomacy, finance, and trade, as well as nations of equality, democracy, and self-determination are used to exert influence across the globe (Kettell & Sutton, 2013).

For this paper, imperialism will be defined according to Johnson (2026), who states that it is "the systematic inter-play of capitalist development and geopolitical conflict in the construction and reproduction of international hierarchy" (p.3). While the definition is broad, the nature of modern imperialism, compared to older versions, makes it difficult to concentrate on a specific definition, as modern geopolitics is constantly shifting. Johnson's definition encapsulates both economic and geopolitical perspectives and, considering the nature of Trump's diplomacy, will help with deducing if the cases of Venezuela and Greenland could be considered imperialism.

USA: A history of Imperialism

The United States, at the turn of the 20th century, expanded its influence across the world. One of the events looked at by historians as the starting point of US global influence is the Spanish-American War. In 1898, the U.S. fought against Spain after the destruction of the USS

Maine battleship. The U.S won the war, taking control of former Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and the Pacific (Britannica, n.d.). A key characteristic of this American expansion is the use of gunboat diplomacy, a type of diplomacy where the use of military (in this case, naval) power was used to undermine foreign powers and gain concessions. This is considered a key characteristic of the "Age of Imperialism" in the 19th and 20th century (Bodovitz, 2025), as the United States was pursuing territorial gains to raise its influence in the Western Hemisphere.

A more recent example of a U.S. intervention that caused academic debates on its justification is the Iraq invasion. The United States invaded Iraq in 2003, after the Bush administration claimed Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and had ties to terrorism, framing the war as a defensive move to protect global security and "liberate" the Iraqi people (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026). Scholars such as Johnson (2026) and Anghie (2012) have explored the imperialist characteristics of the Iraq invasion, and have argued that the War on Terror, alongside the use of pre-emptive defensive strikes, have Imperialistic characteristics. The United States' justification for protecting global security and liberating the Iraqi people can be described as a form of geopolitical imperialism. This is extended by the numerous works that have analysed the Iraq invasion as a case of US Imperialism (O'Meara, 2006).

This section aimed to show that the United States, throughout its history, has exhibited behavior that some schools of thought would describe as imperialism. With this precedent in mind, we will examine Donald Trump's behavior as the current president of the United States.

Trump's foreign policy influence

President Trump's second term in office has been characterized by uncertainty on the international stage; the Venezuela and Greenland situations exemplify this. That being said, while this behavior from Trump has become expected, it is less clear as to the underlying reasons for it. The following section will look at some factors that potentially contributed to the above-mentioned events.

One of Trump's most trusted advisors is Stephen Miller. Miller is a conservative "firebrand" who is in Trump's close inner circles and considered one of the big influencers behind Trump's recent policies (Zurcher, 2026). His position at the White House is deputy chief of staff for policy and homeland security adviser, but his influence can also be seen in foreign affairs, as, after the capture of Maduro, he was seen behind Trump during the announcement (Zurcher, 2026). During the Greenland situation, Miller has appeared on television talking about the U.S.'s position as the dominant world power of the Western Hemisphere. He even declared that "Nobody is going to fight the United States militarily over the future of Greenland" (Miller 2026, cited from Zurcher, 2026).

Trump has also been influenced by former US presidents. He has not shied away from using the 'big stick', a characteristic of US diplomacy during the Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt (Cohen, 2026), a man Trump has declared several times to be one of his favorite Presidents (Thorndike, 2025). But Roosevelt is not the only President that Trump is taking inspiration from.

The Monroe Doctrine is a document from 1823, where President James Monroe claimed:

"Any attempt by a European power to oppress or control any nation in the Western Hemisphere would be viewed as a hostile act against the United States", resulting in the western hemisphere being directly under U.S. influence only" (Britannica, 2026).

The 'Donroe Doctrine', in a nod to James Monroe, is a term used by observers to describe Trump's recent endeavors in the western hemisphere; interventions in Venezuela, claiming Greenland for the U.S., conducting a "war on drugs" coming from Mexico, and even renaming the Gulf of Mexico into the Gulf of America.

The case of Greenland

Trump first exhibited interest in acquiring Greenland in 2018 because of its strategic position in the North Atlantic amid rising Russian submarine activity. During his first term, he framed control of Greenland as essential for Arctic security, in the context of Russian and Chinese advancements in the area. This never materialized during the first term, but now, in the second term, Trump has threatened Denmark with sanctions, even mentioning the use of military force to seize the island (Cortellessa, 2026).

This came as a surprise, as the U.S. already has a military presence on the island. Indeed, in total, it has the largest number of military bases around the world, with 742 permanent bases (IBON Foundation, 2024).



Figure 1: US Overseas Military Footprint, Source: https://www.ibon.org/us-russia-china-military-footprint/

What would be the reason for Trump's acceleration for the pursuit of Greenland? Perhaps answers could be obtained by looking at what other benefits acquiring Greenland would give. Trump has wanted to implement a system called the Golden Dome, meant to act as a line of defense against hypersonic and ballistic missiles (Cortellessa, 2026). The project was announced last year, with the goal of full implementation by 2028. The Golden Dome has been described as a "herculean effort" to be implemented in such a short time-frame, with the project seeing multiple delays currently (Decker, 2026). Another important factor would be the cooperation of American allies, such as Canada and, importantly for our case, Greenland. They are needed as help for tracking the missiles that would be launched over the Arctic, and without them, the implementation of the Golden Dome would be difficult. This can help explain Trump's recent efforts to acquire Greenland through various means, including military intervention.

Can we characterize Trump's behavior regarding Greenland as imperialist? If we look at the new imperialism schools of thought, specifically at economic and geopolitical, we see that the Greenland situation could fit into both. Firstly,

Trump has said that he wants Greenland due to "international security" (Verger, 2025) and to "free the people of Greenland" (Aikman, 2025). These claims fit into the geopolitical imperialism school of thought, as Trump is using moral and democratic claims to justify the takeover of Greenland.

Furthermore, the threat of military intervention is a characteristic of classical imperialistic schools of thought. Trump has threatened to intervene militarily if Denmark does not cooperate (Aikman, 2025). Military intervention from the United States has been described as a means to increase the country's international position when it feels weakened, and scholars such as Harvey have described American military intervention as the "tip of the imperialistic iceberg", highlighting its importance (Kettell & Sutton, 2013).

In addition, Trump has announced a framework for a potential deal with Greenland regarding its vast deposits of rare minerals. The island has a vast resource of rare minerals, ranking 8th in the world. Trump has been interested in these resources on the background of securing rare supplies in the competition with China (Cohen, 2026). Securing critical supplies necessary for the economy aligns with the economic imperialism school of thought and reflects Trump's attempts to exert international influence through economic means, rather than solely through military force.

The case of Venezuela

Trump's actions in Venezuela also present an interesting picture. As mentioned in the introduction, Trump captured Nicolas Maduro and his wife after US military intervention in Caracas, in a move that shocked the world. The pretext was different compared to Greenland. The Trump administration has repeatedly claimed that drugs were coming from Venezuela into the country, using the war on drugs as a justification for military intervention (Adriaensen, 2026). Further accusations were about hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants and gang members allegedly sent by Venezuela to the USA. In contrast with the Greenland situation, Trump did send military troops, initially with strikes on Venezuelan boats, then on the Venezuelan capital, and finally sending special troops to capture Maduro (Buschschlüter, 2026).

Nicolas Maduro has claimed that Trump wanted to depose him to access Venezuela's vast oil reserves (Buschschlüter, 2026). At first look, this would make sense. Venezuela has the largest crude oil reserves in the world, alongside the 9th highest natural gas reserves. The country further has untapped reserves of gold and rare minerals (Duggal & Ali, 2026), prospects that would certainly attract a hegemonic intervention, like the one that occurred.

While this would fit the definitions of imperialism used in this paper, there are other factors to consider. Firstly, while the reserves of Venezuela are impressive, the oil is very heavy and sour, which means that it is dense and viscous, even described as tar-like. This makes the oil very difficult to refine and process. Furthermore, while certain US refineries are equipped to deal with such crude oil, US companies are unlikely to be interested in the Venezuelan market due to the leadership instability and previous investment problems within the country while Chavez was president (Power, 2026).

Rather, there is an alternative explanation for the US intervention that would still fit into imperialism definitions. China purchased the largest amount of Venezuelan, at a volume of 81.7% (Duggal & Ali, 2026). In this case, the intervention could have been a result of Trump wanting to impede one of the United States' biggest rivals internationally. The race for resources or, in this case, impeding a rival from resources, could certainly be considered a form of economic imperialism, as the US has gained an upper hand in the control of South America. This could also reflect the "Donroe Doctrine" ambition, which aims to recreate US hegemony over the western hemisphere. The US State Department seems to reflect this assumption as they posted on X, formerly Twitter, after the capture of Nicolas Maduro, that "This is OUR hemisphere", alongside a picture of Trump (US State Department, 2026 cited from Borger, 2026).

The military intervention by itself seems to be rooted in geopolitical imperialism. The United States' defense budget is the highest in the world, dwarfing its nearest competitors by spending more than the next 4 ranked countries combined (GFP, 2026).

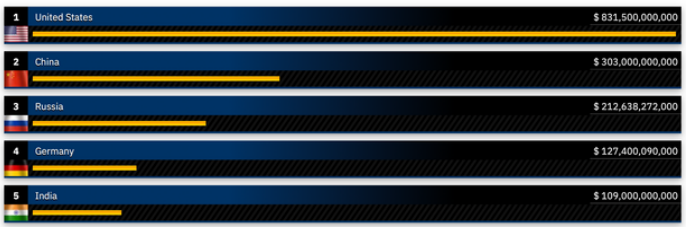

Figure 2: Defense Budget by Country 2026, Source: https://www.globalfirepower.com/defense-spending-budget.php

There have been precedents set, for example, with the Iraq War, but a military intervention from the US has not occurred in several years, certainly not to the magnitude of removing a sitting president.

The military intervention in Venezuela was impressive from a military perspective: there were no US casualties, the operation was swift and successful in its goal (Evans, 2026). The resounding success can be interpreted as sending a message to the United States's rivals: the US still has the most powerful military in the world and is not afraid of using it. This would be in line with academia regarding the US military as the tip of the imperialistic iceberg.

Conclusion

In conclusion, some characteristics define Trump's foreign policy for Venezuela and Greenland as imperialistic. According to Johnson's definition, both situations could be classified as forms of economic and/or geopolitical imperialism. That being said, academia also struggles with a common definition of imperialism, and new perspectives are brought up frequently. Furthermore, the cases of Greenland and Venezuela are still ongoing in one form or another. As such, it would make it complicated to classify both situations with certainty as imperialist. Nonetheless, both case studies are interesting analyses and could showcase how applying the lens of current new imperialism could be used.

What is more observable is the influence other factors have on Trump's recent behavior internationally, be it a form of imperialism or extreme nationalism, as in the case of Stephen Miller, or historical institutionalism in play, such as the 'Donroe Doctrine'.

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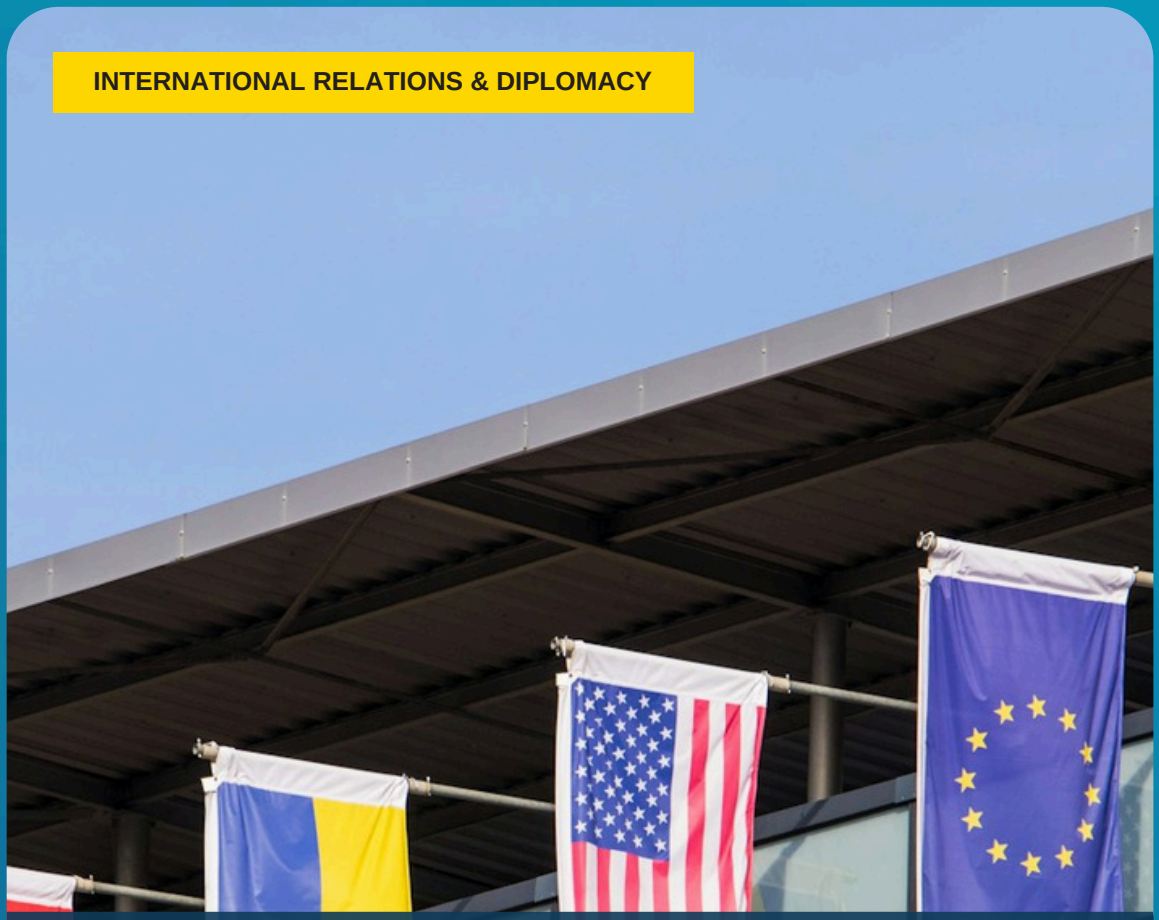
These recent developments have brought more disorder to an already disorderly geopolitical landscape and could mark a critical juncture for both the USA and the world's international affairs.

— Mihai Postelnicu, Making Greenland and Venezuela Great Again

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS & DIPLOMACY



Old Reliable Allies in New Uncertain Times with an Unclear Future

How U.S. Unpredictability Is Reshaping European Strategy

Sophie Lohosha & Pedro Lima

About the Article

Main question: How has the EU responded to perceived unpredictability in U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration?

Argument: Unpredictability erodes credibility, generating alliance uncertainty incentivizing allies to diversify partnerships rather than abandon existing alliances.

Conclusion: In response to unpredictability in U.S. foreign policy, the EU has not abandoned the transatlantic alliance but has instead diversified its partnerships and developed limited strategic autonomy.

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Introduction

The stability of the post–Cold War rules-based international order, long grounded in credible commitments, is increasingly contested. In recent years, major powers have pursued more unpredictable foreign policy behaviour, raising uncertainty among allies about the reliability of established rules and partnerships. Actions taken by the United States under the second Trump administration, such as the imposition of tariffs on allies and shifting positions in international engagements, illustrate a pattern of inconsistent signalling that challenges expectations of stable and predictable leadership.

The credibility of commitments is central to sustaining international order. It functions as a signalling mechanism that underpins deterrence and alliance reassurance. When signals become inconsistent and unpredictable, perceptions of reliability decline, weakening their deterrent and persuasive force (Fettweis, 2017). This raises an important question: how do allies respond when the credibility of a leading power becomes uncertain? Specifically, how has the European Union responded to perceived unpredictability in U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration? This article addresses this question by examining shifts in EU–U.S. transatlantic relations under Trump 2.0.

EU–U.S. relations are characterised by structural dependence. The United States remains the primary provider of security and defence guarantees for Europe, particularly through NATO, while the European Union lacks the capabilities to ensure effective deterrence independently (Anderson, 2025). This dependence constrains the EU's strategic options. At the same time, recent developments indicate that the EU is pursuing greater self-sufficiency in areas such as energy, industrial and technological policy, and defence.

This article argues that perceived U.S. commitment unreliability has not led the European Union to abandon the transatlantic alliance. Instead, it has prompted a strategy of adaptation: the EU seeks to diversify its partnerships while developing limited strategic autonomy. In this sense, unpredictability erodes credibility and generates alliance uncertainty; however, rather than causing alliance breakdown, it incentivises allies to adjust within existing structures.

Credibility of commitments is the perceived reliability that a state will follow through on promises and threats, based on consistent behavior, enabling belief, deterrence, and alliance reassurance.

Credibility of commitments

Credibility of commitments is an essential component of the rules-based international order because credible commitments are predictive and consistent. Such signalling reassures allies that the status quo will not be contested. When signalling becomes inconsistent and unpredictable, perceptions of reliability decline, leading to an erosion of trust in mutual commitments within alliances. However, this does not necessarily mean that partnerships will be abandoned; rather, partnerships may be diversified.

Credible commitments are those perceived as reliable, meaning that states are expected to follow through on their promises and threats. Such signalling reassures allies that the status quo will not be contested. When signalling becomes inconsistent and unpredictable, perceptions of reliability decline (Fettweis, 2017). This leads to the erosion of trust in mutual commitments within alliances. However, this does not necessarily imply abandonment; instead, it may encourage diversification of partnerships.

Credible signalling in International Relations (IR) theory is a complex mechanism through which states communicate their intentions and capabilities to other actors in the international system. This process is crucial for maintaining stability and avoiding conflict. The key characteristics of credible signalling include the clear communication of intentions, the use of costly signals, and the generation of audience costs. According to Fettweis (2007–2008), credibility can be understood as the capacity to be believed or trusted. In foreign policy decision-making, credibility is shaped by perceptions of consistency, understood as behavioural stability over time, and predictability, understood as the ability to anticipate behaviour. If actors consistently follow through on their threats and commitments, they signal reliability, which contributes to their reputation in the international system. In this sense, credibility, consistency, and predictability are interrelated components of a state's perceived reputation. High credibility enables states to deter adversaries and reassure allies, whereas low credibility leads both adversaries and allies to question the reliability of a state's commitments (Fettweis, 2007–2008, p. 609). Following this logic, when signalling becomes inconsistent and unpredictable, a state loses its reputation as a reliable ally, which may incentivise allies to diversify their partnerships in search of more dependable actors.

Similarly, McMahon (1991) emphasises that credibility is closely tied to reputation, reflecting a state's perceived reliability, determination, and status as a major geopolitical actor. However, empirical developments suggest a different dynamic. Rather than leading to a complete abandonment of alliances, inconsistency in major power signalling may instead produce uncertainty that alters alliance behaviour. The case of U.S. foreign policy under Donald Trump illustrates this dynamic. The administration's signalling was often characterised by shifts between threats, reassurances, and economic coercion, which introduced ambiguity into U.S. commitments. Such inconsistency complicates the ability of allies and adversaries to accurately assess U.S. intentions and reliability, thereby affecting perceptions of credibility.

Olesen and Schmidt (2026) describe how European countries perceive the U.S. as either a friend or an adversarial actor. They argue that this perception is, to a large extent, shaped by the Trump presidency. A March 2025 poll by Le Grand Continent ('Baromètre de l'opinion publique européenne: "Quelle défense pour l'Europe?"') shows that 51% of respondents perceive Trump as an enemy of Europe (Olesen & Schmidt, 2025).

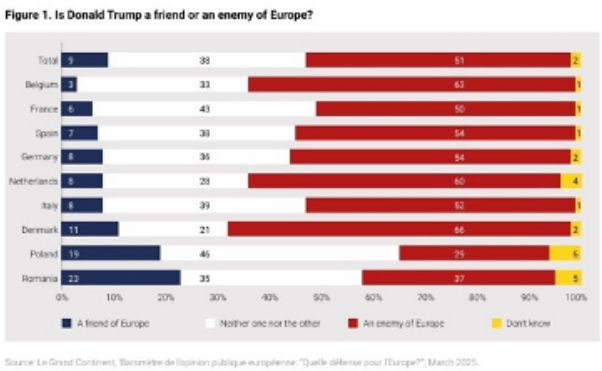

Figure 1: Is Donald Trump a friend or an enemy of Europe? Source: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep71877.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Ac3ebc857941e8615f76e4d92e8bb6559&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&initiator=search-results&acceptTC=1

Despite this perception, the U.S. remains a central pillar of EU security and defence, primarily because the European Union does not possess sufficient capabilities to provide effective deterrence independently. 'The U.S. defence industry dwarfs its European counterparts in scale, innovation, and integration' (Anderson, 2025). Although the European Union has established initiatives such as the European Defence Fund and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), these do not constitute viable alternatives to U.S.-led security structures such as NATO (Anderson, 2025). As a result, despite concerns about the reliability and predictability of U.S. foreign policy, the European Union cannot fully abandon the transatlantic alliance or substitute U.S. security guarantees. Instead, it remains structurally dependent on the United States while simultaneously exploring complementary partnerships. Contrary to the expectations of Fettweis (2017) and McMahon (1991) regarding the effects of declining credibility, the uncertainty of major power foreign policy does not lead the EU to fully hedge against the U.S., but rather to adopt a more flexible strategy of diversification.

Credibility of commitments matters, and the loss of credibility does not necessarily mean that states will abandon alliances and form alternative ones. Rather, it suggests that states may gradually lose trust in their allies' commitments and seek to diversify their partnerships to secure vital areas such as security and defence.

Defense and Security Policy

The EU is trying to reorganise its defence industrial sector, protect European economic interests, secure access to essential raw materials, and raise the funds necessary to support Ukraine. Structural fragmentation across national defence markets has historically limited the Union's capacity to project hard power efficiently, making systematic industrial integration a pressing geopolitical imperative for European strategic autonomy.

"Despite concerns about the reliability and predictability of U.S. foreign policy, the European Union cannot fully abandon the transatlantic alliance or substitute U.S. security guarantees."

The European Commission has launched several initiatives in 2025 to boost European defence. The white paper for European defence aims to rearm Europe by enabling the industry to produce quickly "made in Europe" and facilitating the rapid deployment of military troops and assets across the EU. It will also help the EU to respond to the short-term urgency of supporting Ukraine. Another platform is the ReArm Europe plan / Readiness 2030 to boost defence funding by giving EU countries more financial flexibility, allowing Member States to

increase defence spending without breaching fiscal constraints. It also launched a €150 billion loan instrument, Security Action for Europe (SAFE), to help spend better, together and European. The instrument is also boosting defence cooperation, demonstrated by the deal with Canada to join SAFE (POLITICO, 2025). Finally, the last part of the puzzle is supporting the European Investment Bank Group in broadening its lending to defence and security projects and accelerating the savings and investment union to mobilise private capital, so the European defence industry is not reliant on public investment alone.

As to capabilities in the defence industry, the Commission launched the European Defence Fund to mobilise the European defence industry to produce more in Europe, alongside the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) and the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), to convince Europeans to invest more and together within the Union. By incentivising joint procurement and cross-border industrial consortiums, these initiatives aim to reduce costly duplication and ensure seamless operational interoperability across European armed forces. Furthermore, institutionalising defence spending helps shield long-term capability development from domestic electoral volatility across individual member states.

When it comes to defence partnerships, the EU has to date established 10: Moldova, Norway, Japan, South Korea, North Macedonia and Albania in 2024; United Kingdom and Canada in 2025; and most recently, India in 27 January, Iceland in 18 March and Australia in 24 March of 2026 (Council of the European Union, 2026). These are an indispensable pillar of the EU's efforts to promote peace and security in Europe and across the world, thus constructing mutually beneficial bilateral partnerships with like-minded non-EU partners. Even though they are tailored individually, all the partnerships cover a common range of areas of cooperation, such as: peace, conflict prevention and crisis management; defence initiatives and capabilities; countering hybrid threats and foreign information manipulation and interference; space, cyber and maritime security; counterterrorism; non-proliferation, disarmament and arms control; climate security; and women, peace and security.

This ultimately demonstrates the EU's will to diversify its defence partnerships structures to start decreasing (at least on the intentions sphere) its dependency on the United States and NATO. By building institutionalized security frameworks alongside non-NATO democratic partners, the Union creates a flexible secondary security network to hedge against strategic uncertainty and potential shifts in Washington's commitments. This approach allows the EU to project stability beyond its immediate borders without relying exclusively on traditional alliance structures.

Energy Policy

The Union's energy independence is recognized as one of the main pillars of its autonomy, even though the EU still has a long way to go in order to reach its objective. Achieving genuine energy resilience requires navigating a complex balancing act between rapid decarbonisation, security of supply, and maintaining competitive industrial energy tariffs across European markets.

According to Oberthür & Dupont (2024), energy independence through renewable investments offers enhanced security, economic stability, and environmental sustainability, reducing external dependencies.

Therefore, the EU must keep diversifying its partnerships. As Europe pivots towards renewable energy and enhanced self-sufficiency, it must simultaneously acknowledge the interconnected nature of global energy markets. This could destabilize energy-exporting countries and regions, with repercussions that extend back to Europe, and it may shift geopolitical leverage to other global powers by replacing one set of dependencies with another, such as reliance on critical raw materials or renewable technology supply chains.

The EU's pursuit of energy independence is unfolding globally. The dependence on external energy suppliers has placed the EU vulnerable, as seen in Russia's strategic use of natural gas as a geopolitical lever. However, with its growing role as a liquefied natural gas (LNG) exporter, allies like the United States may have economic and strategic motivations to discourage an independent European energy system. If not countered with robust policies and international collaboration, pressure strategies could undermine the EU's ambitions for energy independence.

In 2024, the share of homegrown renewables in the EU's energy consumption was of 25.2%. The REPowerEU Plan has played a critical role in phasing out Russian fossil fuels imports (which the EU still imports), but the strategic diversification was pressed even harder in 2025, due to Trump's second administration. To achieve its goals, the EU must expand its partnerships when it comes to energy supply routes. For that purpose, according to the European Commission, there are established agreements with Egypt, Israel, Azerbaijan, Canada, the USA, Australia, Qatar, and East African countries to start or increase Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) imports, and with Norway, the United Kingdom, and North Africa through pipelines. The European Union is also investing in nuclear energy, as translated by the publication of the latest Nuclear Illustrative Programme (PINC) in 2026, by creating a €200 million guarantee to support private investment (European Commission, 2026).

Simply put, Europe is and must continue to accelerate its own energy policy, diversify its supply chains, and reduce its reliance on any single energy partner, fostering a more resilient and autonomous energy system capable of enduring external geopolitical coercion. In doing so, the bloc secures both its economic competitiveness and its geopolitical standing in a volatile international landscape.

Technological and Industrial Policy

Despite progress, an integrated European strategy for technological sovereignty remains elusive. Various national agendas, unaligned investments, and limited coordination at the EU level hinder industrial scaling and strategic coherence, leaving the bloc structurally exposed to technological dominance by non-European actors and foreign supply chokepoints.

Europe's Open Strategic Autonomy strategy, as well as the Chips Act, are important steps forward, but coherence and execution remain limited. Technological sovereignty is a strategic

necessity for Europe's competitiveness, security, and democracy. Nevertheless, the European Commission is acting and has presented the Clean Industrial Deal in 2025, aiming to lowering energy prices, boosting demand for low-carbon European-made technologies and products, mobilising over € 100 billion to support EU-made clean manufacturing and securing critical raw materials to reduce dependence on "unreliable suppliers" (Critical Raw Materials Act) (European Commission, 2025).

The digital transformation poses a second vector for the industrial strategy of the European Union. Since 2018, the declaration of the Single Digital Gateway has been ensuring the gradual digitalisation of administrative procedures across Europe. Moreover, the EU created the first legal comprehensive framework on AI, the AI Act, and created the European AI Office 2024 (European Commission, 2023). To strengthen this process, and to address the disruption of supply chains, given the shortcomings in key chip design and manufacturing, the Chips for Europe initiative was launched, pulling together €11.15 billion of public investment.

The goal is to reduce dependencies through the diversification of partnerships and to further develop self-reliant EU capabilities on its industrial sectors. By establishing unified regulatory standards alongside targeted industrial subsidies, the EU aims to leverage its single market scale into diplomatic influence and secure European leadership in critical emerging technologies. Furthermore, building domestic technological capacity ensures that European values regarding digital privacy, algorithmic transparency, and data governance remain protected from external pressure.

Commercial Policy

The European Union is the largest trading bloc in the world. The EU also has the world's largest network of trade agreements. The EU's 44 Free Trade Agreements (FTA) network aims to expand commercial manoeuvring room and reduce dependencies at a time of regulatory volatility, especially due to China's and the USA's stances. The EU–Mercosur agreement, signed in January 2026 after more than two decades of negotiations, is one pillar of this strategy. The FTA with India represents a second pillar of the EU's trade network (Lima, 2025). Most recently, on the 24th March 2026, another FTA was signed, with Australia. These vectors demonstrate the diversification strategy the EU is applying to its commercial policy, securing different markets and diversifying supply chains.

Another instrument that must be mobilized for this commercial and economic effort is the Global Gateway programme. In times of economic and trade diversification for Europe, the EU's Global Gateway must promote and take European investment all around the world. A great example is the EURO 20 billion investment that will drive seven green hydrogen projects in Namibia. The demand exists, and Europe must leverage it as hard as it can. While estimates of the affected export value differ across stakeholders, the direction is clear: relying on unilateral preferences is becoming less reliable, strengthening the case for an FTA that locks in stable, treaty-based access. Deploying trade policy as a defensive and offensive statecraft instrument helps cushion European industries against growing global protectionism, supply chain weaponisation, and arbitrary trade barriers. By embedding high environmental and labor standards into these bilateral treaties, the

EU simultaneously advances its normative leadership on the global stage.

Conclusion

The inconsistency and unpredictability of U.S. foreign policy have a significant impact on the stability of the global order. Such behavior is perceived as unreliable by allies, prompting them to form strategic partnerships with other actors in the system. This article argued that inconsistency in major power signaling produces uncertainty that alters alliance behavior.

In response to unpredictability in U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration, the European Union has not abandoned the transatlantic alliance but has instead diversified its partnerships and accelerate ongoing negotiations (just like the EU-Mercosur agreement) and developed limited strategic autonomy across defence and security, energy, commercial, technological, and industrial policies.

Credible commitments remain central to international relations because they reassure allies and provide certainty that the status quo will not be challenged. Even in periods when major powers contest shared rules, maintaining credibility and reliability is essential for sustaining the stability of the global order. Ultimately, Europe's proactive adoption of hedging strategies, structural resilience, and multi-vector partnerships demonstrates that strategic adaptation, rather than passive alignment, is vital for navigating an increasingly fragmented and unpredictable international system. This pragmatic reorientation ensures that the Union remains a resilient, credible, and autonomous pillar of global governance.

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Despite concerns about the reliability and predictability of U.S. foreign policy, the European Union cannot fully abandon the transatlantic alliance or substitute U.S. security guarantees.

— Sophie Lohosha & Pedro Lima, Old Reliable Allies in New Uncertain Times with an Unclear Future

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS & DIPLOMACY



Rise of the Rest

How ‘uncertainty’ allows small states to exert increased influence

Lauren Mc Hugh

About the Article

In a time of geopolitical uncertainty whether grounded in historical ties, economic relations, pacts, treaties, or a combination of these. This article examines the influential role that Ireland lays in its relationship with the US and how it can leverage this position to promote democratic values within the international system. It challenges the assumption that small states should remain in the background of international affairs, arguing instead that they are more important than ever.

About the Author

Lauren Mc Hugh is an MSc International Relations candidate with an interest in foreign policy and diplomacy, particularly regarding small states like Ireland.

Introduction

This article examines how small states can use economic and cultural power to leverage influence during periods of international uncertainty. Using Ireland as a case study, this essay aims to demonstrate how derivative ties to a great power can serve positive sum gains to both the small and great power. Given that the current international rules-based order is transforming the current US administration, this article will use Irish-US relations to highlight how being 'small' relies on strong relational ties with key allies, especially great powers. This article addresses the following research question:

Being a 'small state' is a contested term in international relations, with some arguing that material power and resources are only part of the definition (Long, 2017).

To what extent does international uncertainty expand the capacity of small states to exercise influence, and through which mechanisms is this influence operationalised?

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative case study approach, drawing on secondary literature and empirical evidence from Irish–US relations to illustrate broader theoretical dynamics in small-state behaviour. It proceeds in three parts: first, it reconceptualises small-state power under conditions of systemic uncertainty; second, it identifies key mechanisms through which Ireland converts structural asymmetry into influence; and third, it reinterprets the 'Rise of the Rest' narrative through a small-state lens.

This paper argues that uncertainty in international relations does not mean 'decline', but rather it allows small states to create niche areas of influence with strategic cultural, economic and relational aspects to exercise disproportionate influence. In the following argument, uncertainty refers to the weakening of US commitments to the liberal order, fragmentation of rules-based institutions and the increased unpredictability with the wider multipolar transition. As such, this will be highlighted by Ireland's ties with the US from a historical standpoint and its increasing relevance for Irish foreign policy today under the Trump administration. This article advances the argument that international uncertainty can enhance, rather than diminish, the capacity of small states to exercise influence, particularly when they are able to convert structural asymmetries into forms of derivative, collective and normative power. Building on recent advances in small-state theory, it demonstrates that influence is not reducible to material capabilities alone, but can be generated through relational positioning, institutional embeddedness, and reputational capital (Long, 2017). In this context, small states are not merely passive rule-takers; they can act as brokers, amplifiers, and stabilisers within an evolving international order. However, Ireland has been selected as a unique case study, in that it possesses long -standing historical and cultural affinity with the US that other small, advanced countries may lack. It serves as a reminder to scholarly literature that historical identity may still matter just as much as material interests, especially the presidential identity in the case of the US-Ireland. The US Presidents Biden and Trump, as the most recent examples, have unique ties in Ireland that serve two distinct

purposes. The latter has majority economic interests in Ireland, with Trump Doonbeg golf course generating part of the Trump real estate empire. Whereas former President Biden has been dubbed one of the most Irish presidents in history, maybe second to John F Kennedy. Biden's infamous remark during the election campaign in 2020 he was asked by Nick Bryant for a "quick word for the BBC". He swiftly replied: "The BBC? I'm Irish!" (Smith, BBC News, p.1) While this should not be the basis for which economic policy decisions are made in favour of Ireland, it does indicate a certain sympathetic and therefore advantageous influence for Ireland in many ways that will be explained in this article.

Rethinking order and small states in international relations

Furthermore, this article challenges Walz's claim that the international system is dominated by great powers, arguing that in times of order uncertainty, conditions that small states are able to exploit for increased influence (Waltz, 1979). [10] [LM11] This is primarily focused on their ability to uphold the international norms and multilateralism needed to sustain a rules-based international order. Underpinning this is international cooperation. Small states have little to gain from binaries such as 'East versus West', which have immersed themselves in international relations since the end of the Second World War (Long, 2017). Rather, small states must continue to leverage their positions in multilateral institutions, especially the UN, where they can facilitate collective dialogue and consensus-building of international norms to produce a positive-sum game within the system (Lupel et al, 2024,).[12]

Furthermore, in creating new visions of international order, small states must be a key part of the calculations. A recent Chatham House report entitled the 'competing visions of international order' examines the changing nature of the US's role alongside 11 allies in deciphering the characteristics for the future (Vinjamuri et al., 2025).[13] Notably, this literature fails to mention any 'small state' or collective region of smaller states, for example, the Balkans, in its assessment of the future expectations of the international community. They note that 'emerging and middle power now can shape and affect outcomes at a regional level' yet had previously noted that power is far more dispersed than at any point since the Second World War (Vinjamuri et al., 2025, p. 117). Therefore, it begs the question, why are small states not part of the conversation? What follows in the next section is the mechanism that illustrates how Ireland can attribute power and influence in relation to the US, and subsequently on the international stage.

Mechanisms for small states

Ireland is a critical case study illustrating the aforementioned selective influence small states can project amid international uncertainty. For Ireland, it has developed a foreign policy position that leverages its economic interdependence and cultural relations with the US to exert influence disproportionate to its size. This concept will be explored through the following mechanisms through which this influence is exercised: diaspora politics and transatlantic economic interdependence.

Diaspora networks and politics assess

The following section will examine the mechanisms that Ireland uses to create 'order' in international politics. Firstly, the diaspora networks that have been laid in the US since the famine of the 1840s. From this, the annual St Patrick's Day celebration of Ireland's patron saint is marked between An Taoiseach (Irish prime minister) and the US President each year. The US Congress has proclaimed March as the Irish American Heritage month since 1991, with 10.4% of the US population claiming Irish ancestry in 2014 (US Census Bureau, 2016). It was made clear from Marco Rubio's Munich speech (2026) that the current US administration emphasised cultural alignment and historical values between Europe and the US. Arguably, in these terms, no stronger alliance exists than between the US and Ireland; a relationship characterised by diaspora politics, understanding of economic ties, shared values and diplomatic practices. As such, Ireland has taken on key roles in these areas to bolster relations, and as this article argues, will allow it to maintain influence with the global superpower and fellow international states.

Unique to the Irish-US relationship is the fact that the diaspora communities function as political networks that shape political elite preferences, coupled with privileged access to the decision-making process rather than just a cultural asset (White et al., 2019). In this case, the Irish American community comprises 32.4 million individuals who claim Irish ancestry (Smyth, O'Dwyer, 2023). The culmination of this influence is on St Patrick's Day, March 17th, with meetings between the Irish and American leaders that are not only subject to ceremonial importance but rather they serve as a functional role to maintain access and symbolic legitimacy within the US foreign policy circles (White et al., 2019). For current data, the US Census states that 32.4 million US residents, or 9.5%, claimed Irish ancestry in 2024, meaning that Presidents have a political imperative to tap into the 'Irishness' given the electoral leverage that this section of the population possesses (US Census Bureau, 2026).

Figure 1: map overview of Irish American heritage numbers and where they are most densely located in the US, source: https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2016/cb16-ff04.html.

"Ireland would always be spiritually closer to Boston than Berlin" - (Mary Harney, 2000, p.1)

The extent to which these Irish-US networks influence politics is within the context of the Northern Irish peace process in the 1990s. The institutionalisation of the Congressional Friends of Ireland organisation led by Tip O'Neill and Ted Kennedy played a critical role in reframing US policy towards Northern Ireland in a mediation-orientated approach (White et al., 2019). This shift from traditional deference to British sovereignty towards the interventionists model was built from the lobbying efforts of the Irish American elites and advocacy organisations. Irish American political actors were instrumental in facilitating direct U.S. diplomatic engagement. Throughout the early 1990s, lobbying from diaspora-linked networks contributed to President Bill Clinton's decision to grant a visa to Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams in

1994; a highly controversial move that signalled a departure from prior U.S. policy and helped legitimise republican participation in negotiations (Mc Loughlin, 2023) More broadly, Irish-American advocacy was critical in embedding Northern Ireland within U.S. foreign policy priorities, creating the political conditions under which sustained diplomatic involvement became viable.

Economic Interdependence

A second mechanism through which Ireland exercises influence lies in its deeply embedded economic relationship with the United States. Ireland is attractive for US foreign direct investment for three main reasons, according to this author: low corporation tax, access to the European single market, and an English-speaking workforce. Since the 1990s, US multinational corporations have been the bedrock for Ireland's growth with 970 US companies employing close to 211,000 people directly supporting another 168,00 jobs indirectly, equating to over 12% of the total Irish workforce (Walsh, 2025). However, crucial to this argument is the fact that this is not a one-way stream from the hegemon; Ireland is the sixth largest investor in the US (Walsh, 2025). Moreover, around 203,000 people are employed in the US by Irish companies highlighting the strong interconnectedness of these two economies (Cockerill, 2025).

This reciprocal investment relationship complicates simplistic dependency narratives. Rather than being unilaterally dependent on US capital, Ireland occupies a position of strategic brokerage, facilitating flows of investment, innovation, and market access between the United States and the European Union. This intermediary role enhances Ireland's structural relevance within the transatlantic economy, providing it with a degree of leverage in shaping regulatory discussions, tax negotiations, and broader economic policy debates.

Figure 2: comparative table summarising both countries economic footprint, American Chamber of Commerce Ireland, 2025. Source: https://assets.ireland.ie/documents/IrelandsEconomicFootprintUSA.pdf.

Notably, this article does not wish to overstate the 'Irish impact', but it does acknowledge that this economic interdependence reinforces Ireland's political significance. As Farrell and Newman 2019 argue, states that occupy central positions within global economic networks can derive influence from their capacity to control or mediate critical nodes of interdependence (Farrell, Newman, 2019). In sum, Ireland punches above its weight. Taken together, these mechanisms demonstrate that small-state influence is not derived from any single resource, but from the strategic interaction between relational, economic and institutional forms of power.

Challenging the traditional 'rise of the rest' narrative

In international relations, the 'Rise of the Rest' narrative is employed to depict the rise of non-Western, predominantly non-democratic states as an indication of Western decline. However, this article reinterprets this term to argue that it could be an internal rise within the West to pay more attention to smaller counterparts that are the bedrock of the order. The traditional 'Rise of the Rest'' narrative often adopts a zero-sum perspective: as non-Western powers gain share

in global GDP and military spending, the West, specifically the United States, is seen as being in terminal decline (Zarakol, 2003, 32). She suggests that the 'Rest' is not a monolith but a fragmented group of actors with varying interests. When we frame the rise of others as an automatic source of disorder, we ignore the possibility that these rising actors might actually seek to uphold or refine international norms rather than dismantle them.

Ireland has been used as an example to show that peripheral small states can exercise agency. Ireland's trajectory is a 'return to order' because it demonstrates how small states can stabilise the international system during periods of transition. Rather than adding to the 'disorder' that realists fear when hegemonies shift, Ireland utilises its neutrality and diplomatic credibility to facilitate dialogue. By acting as a 'norm entrepreneur', Ireland ensures that the 'Rise of the Rest' includes a commitment to the rule of law. Rather than signalling systemic decline, the diffusion of power creates interstitial spaces in which small states can exercise stabilising influence, particularly through norm entrepreneurship and multilateral engagement. It suggests that the future global order may not be a chaotic struggle between giants, but a more complex, networked system where small actors maintain the threads of cooperation (Smith et al, 2005).[15]

Conclusion

This article has argued that prevailing assumptions about small-state vulnerability under conditions of international uncertainty are analytically incomplete. Rather than uniformly constraining their agency, periods of systemic flux can expand the strategic space available to small states, enabling them to exercise influence through relational, institutional and normative channels. Drawing on the case of Ireland, the analysis has demonstrated how such influence is generated through the interaction of diaspora-linked political access and transatlantic economic interdependence. Ultimately, small states do not reshape the international order in the manner of great powers. However, they play a critical role in determining how order adapts, persists and functions in practice – being a small state matter.

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Small states do not reshape the international order in the manner of great powers. However, they play a critical role in determining how order adapts, persists and functions in practice.

— Lauren Mc Hugh, Rise of the Rest

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS & DIPLOMACY



From Moscow to Caracas

A United Front in Information Warfare

Delfina Ertanowska

About the Article

In an era of rapidly developing social media, cyber threats such as manipulation, fake news, and disinformation are also expanding as elements of planned psychological and information campaigns—tools of hybrid warfare used to build influence and sustain autocratic power. The article describes cooperation in this area between a "teacher" and a "student": namely, Russia, which has over a century of experience in propaganda, and Venezuela, a client that makes use of its tools and methods.

About the Author

Delfina Ertanowska holds an MA in Journalism and Social Communication from UITM and an Executive Diploma in the Art of Diplomacy (EDAD) from the European Academy of Diplomacy. A media and hybrid warfare specialist, she has spent eight years researching Russian propaganda, visual communication, and social media as tools of hybrid warfare and PSYOP in Ukraine, Romania, and Kosovo. She is an expert in hybrid warfare, political science, and international relations, and speaks five languages.

Introduction

International relations are often perceived in an idyllic manner through the prism of their encyclopaedic definition as relations between nations or national groups encompassing issues of identity, minority rights, integration, ethnic conflicts, and states' nationality policies. Negative phenomena are typically described using terms such as conflict, open armed confrontation, military aggression, or war. In Europe, particularly since the collapse of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc, we have grown accustomed to a positive image of alliance-building, especially regarding NATO's 1999 enlargement to include the first countries of the former Eastern Bloc, followed by those same states. Everything appeared forward-looking and positive: alliances built upon shared values, equality, and cooperation.

However, alliances also exist that are founded on opposite principles — violence, wrongdoing, corruption, and even the propagation of war. The infamous "Axis of Evil" of the Second World War era, as well as the USSR and its satellite states (a common front of communist countries), were examples of such configurations. Russia, as the successor to the criminal Soviet communist regime, has for years continued to cultivate alliances of this nature — albeit less regionally and increasingly on a global scale.

Benedict Anderson, in his book Imagined Communities, argues that the nation is an "imagined community", and that national relations stem from the ways in which members of national communities perceive themselves and others within this imagined framework (Anderson,1983 p.6-7).One of the key elements in image-building is media presence. In this regard, national branding, propaganda, and both soft and sharp power (particularly in the context of information warfare and digital diplomacy) constitute components of media communication strategies that fall within broader international relations concepts.Toxic populism emerging in social media, fake news, and hate speech are becoming an inseparable part of hybrid warfare. This was symbolically yet vividly illustrated by Azerbaijani cartoonist Gunduz Aghayev, when Azerbaijan itself was struggling with Russian hybrid warfare in Karabakh.

Figure 1: A symbolic depiction of social media as elements of warfare. Gunduz Aghayev. Source: https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/heroes-of-the-virtual-world-by-gunduz-aghayev/

Information threats are defined as deliberate, coordinated, manipulative actions, including disinformation, forming part of contemporary hybrid operations.

Propaganda and the Media as Instruments of "Soft Power" and "Sharp Power"

Media and propaganda constitute significant instruments of influence within the international system. From constructivist and liberal perspectives, information shapes perceptions of threats, national identity, and the legitimacy of state action.

The concept of "soft power", developed by Joseph Nye, assumes that a state can achieve its objectives through cultural and narrative attractiveness rather than solely through military

coercion (Nye, 1990). In the context of hybrid warfare, however, propaganda often transforms into "sharp power" — the deliberate manipulation of information aimed at destabilising an opponent.

The media thus becomes a battlefield for:

Such narratives are also frequently encountered in countries that are fundamentally democratic, most often within extreme right-wing and nationalist circles. Toxic populism in right-wing media, with particular emphasis on social media platforms, where creating broadcasting channels is far easier and cheaper, yields tangible results for propagandists and their supporters, as seen in the case of Hungary and the anti-Ukrainian, pro-Russian narrative of the Orbán government (in this case relying on traditional information resources such as TV, radio, or posters), Slovakia, or the far right in Poland (UE zaostrza politykę walki z dezinformacją, 2025) and France, where the use of social media as a tool for disinformation is among the highest in the EU.

Russia's Disinformation Strategy in Latin America and the Caribbean

Since 2014, Russian state media outlets, including Sputnik and RT, have systematically expanded their presence in Latin America, focusing particularly on Spanish-language news content. These activities aim to undermine the position of the United States, whitewash Russia's role in international affairs — particularly in the context of its war against Ukraine — and promote the Russian political model as an alternative to liberal democracy.

A 2023 report entitled "Russian Influence Campaigns in Latin America", supported by the United States Institute of Peace, indicates that Russia effectively employs disinformation, economic pressure, and both overt and covert political activities in the region (Farah &, Ortiz,2023). According to analyses by the Atlantic Council (Farah, & Ortiz, 2023), Russia's strategy also includes tailored communication adapted to the specific characteristics of individual states, as well as the active involvement of ambassadors in promoting Kremlin narratives within domestic media environments.

"Media and propaganda constitute significant instruments of influence. From constructivist and liberal perspectives, information shapes perceptions of threats, national identity, and legitimacy."

The Response of the United States and the European Union to Russian Influence Campaigns

In response to the activities of Russian state media, the United States imposed new sanctions in September 2024, recognising these entities not merely as sources of disinformation but also as elements of the intelligence apparatus of the Russian Federation. These measures form part of broader efforts to limit the impact of Russian propaganda in Latin America and the Caribbean NSD/FARA Registration Unit, 2024).

The European Parliament, in its 2020 resolution concerning foreign disinformation campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic, called for countering aggressive propaganda activities by

Russia and China. In a subsequent resolution of 28 February 2024, the Parliament emphasised the need to strengthen the capacities of EU delegations in the field of public diplomacy and strategic communication in order to combat disinformation more effectively (European Parliament resolution of 9 March 2022 on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation, 2022).

Distribution of Russian Content within the Venezuelan Media System

More than 90 cable television operators in Venezuela, including Inter — the operator with the widest reach — retransmit RT programming, thereby ensuring significant visibility for Russian narratives within the national information space. The channel was also offered by Simple TV (including on channel 709) until March 2022, indicating the institutional entrenchment of Russian content within the country's media infrastructure (Amaya, 2022).

Narrative Symbiosis between Russian and Venezuelan Media

The state broadcaster Venezolana de Televisión regularly retransmits Russian materials during its main news bulletins, granting them fixed broadcasting slots and integrating their narratives into its own information programmes. The joint project launched in 2015 by Telesur and RT, entitled "Venezuela y Rusia en la mira", represents an example of coordinated media cooperation aimed at promoting an alternative interpretation of international events to that presented by Western media outlets (RT, 2015).

Symbiosis, Accomplices in Conspiracy Theories, and "Useful Idiots"Cooperation between totalitarian and authoritarian states in exchanging and supporting propaganda media technologies and strategies is hardly surprising. What may be more striking, however, are the useful idiots (the term is commonly attributed to Vladimir Lenin) from so-called first world countries. One example is cited by Anne Applebaum in her book Autocracy, Inc. (2024), where the spread of fake news about alleged biological laboratories in Ukraine, purportedly sponsored by Kyiv—which was used as part of the justification for Russia's barbaric aggression against a sovereign country—illustrates this phenomenon. The fake news, originally produced by Russia, was disseminated by China, Venezuela, and Iran (Russia's allied countries). However, it also gained significant traction in the United States, where, according to Applebaum, followers of the QAnon movement amplified it, achieving media reach and a substantial following. According to the author, the campaign aimed not only to discourage support for Ukraine but also to weaken and discredit the Joe Biden administration within the American political landscape (Applebaum, 2024, p. 86-87).

Conclusions

In the context of the concept of soft power and its evolution into sharp power, media and propaganda function as key instruments in information warfare, enabling both authoritarian states and political actors within democratic systems to shape narratives, polarise societies, and influence public opinion. This is exemplified by the actions of totalitarian states, but it is also observed in democratic or ostensibly democratic countries, such as Hungary (Applebaum, 2024, p. 77).

Figure 2: Number of articles citing RT and Sputnik in Venezuelan media. Amaya, V. (2022). Russia and Venezuela. Allies in disinformation. Caracas, Venezuela.

Since 2014, Russian state media outlets, such as Sputnik and RT, have systematically expanded their presence in Latin America through Spanish-language content, implementing an information influence strategy that encompasses disinformation, economic pressure, and tailored political messaging (Farah, & Ortiz, 2023). The aim is to weaken the position of the United States and promote Russia's geopolitical narratives, as confirmed by analyses from the United States Institute of Peace and the Atlantic Council.

In response to the increasing activity of Russian information operations, both the United States and the European Parliament, as well as NATO, are implementing coordinated measures encompassing sanctions, the development of strategic communication, and the strengthening of societal resilience, recognising disinformation as an element of hybrid activities used by Russia to influence public opinion and destabilise the international order. However, it can be argued that current efforts to counter disinformation are insufficient, with a lack of widespread public awareness, resilience building, and guidance on how to distinguish falsified information from genuine content and verify it, particularly in an era of rapid AI technological development.

The case of Venezuela demonstrates that media cooperation between authoritarian states can take the form of a durable informational symbiosis, in which Russian narratives—disseminated via RT and local broadcasters—are institutionally integrated into the national media system, reinforcing an alternative message to that of the West.

At the same time, as Anne Applebaum (Applebaum, 2024) notes, the effectiveness of these actions stems from the existence of a transnational disinformation ecosystem, in which narratives created by Russia are amplified both by parts of the population in allied states ("useful idiots") and by social actors in democratic countries (e.g., communities associated with QAnon), enabling them to achieve tangible political influence.

Actions in the field of disinformation and propaganda media, based on the examples mentioned above, can be described in two ways. Russia, which can boldly be described as the mother of propaganda, has been operating in a specialised manner for years. Its actions can be described as twofold: internal propaganda, which has historical foundations and background, influencing the minds of its citizens — which, in light of recent events, such as the blocking of even the Telegram (Ishubul'din, 2026) and messengers and the planned disconnection from global internet access («Isklyuchayet polnuyu izolyatsiyu»: uchonyy — o veroyatnosti otklyucheniya Rossii ot interneta i perspektivakh sputnikovoy svyazi Ob etom soobshchayet, 2026), will be an easy task in the style of Cold War propaganda using only traditional communication methods (radio, press, TV); and an extensive network of propaganda media based on psychological-informational hybrid warfare in countries selected by Russia, mainly through social media, spreading fake news and disinformation in many languages, and using the aforementioned useful idiots as its

tools. Venezuela relied only on domestic messaging, with technological support from its Russian ally; this propaganda aimed solely to maintain the authoritarian power of Nicolás Maduro and his predecessor, Hugo Chávez.

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Toxic populism emerging in social media, fake news, and hate speech are becoming an inseparable part of hybrid warfare.

— **Delfina Ertanowska, From Moscow to Caracas**

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS & DIPLOMACY



Hostage Diplomacy

The return of Coercion in International Relations

Eleonora Crespi

About the Article

Why are foreign nationals increasingly detained not as criminals, but as leverage? Hostage diplomacy endures because it delivers strategic returns often enough to make repetition rational in a fragmented international system. What is taking shape is not simple disorder, but a harder political landscape in which human vulnerability itself becomes a currency of negotiation.

About the Author

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the detention of foreign nationals has re-emerged as a salient feature of contemporary international relations dynamics. Commonly referred to as 'hostage diplomacy', this practice operates at the State level and involves the arrest, detention, or sentencing of individuals to extract political concessions (Declaration Against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations, 2026). These range from sanctions relief to prisoner exchanges for financial gains, diplomatic recognition or broader strategic leverage. In the current international environment, coercion increasingly extends into the physical vulnerability of individuals, whose liberty and security become instruments within geopolitical disputes.

Foreign nationals, dual citizens, political detainees and civilian captives have consequently become both targets and tools of leverage in disputes that range from bilateral negotiations to open armed conflict. This pattern reflects deeper shifts in the structure of the international system: as great-power rivalry intensifies, sanctions regimes expand and large-scale warfare re-enters the geopolitical landscape, incentives for asymmetric forms of pressure growth. Thus, hostage diplomacy represents a coercive strategy that is relatively low-cost yet potentially high impact, particularly in contexts where conventional military or economic escalation carries significant risks.

The recent escalation involving Iran makes this trend even more visible. What had often been treated as a contained pattern of 'judicialized' coercion, such as arrests, politicised trials, and selective releases, now sits within a wider landscape of interstate military confrontation (Global Affairs Canada, 2025; Landay, 2026). The result is the intensification of this phenomena: as conflict deepens, detainees and dual nationals may acquire even greater strategic value.

At the formal level, hostage diplomacy is usually distinguished from classic hostage-taking. The latter is more openly associated with armed groups or wartime abductions, and it is explicitly prohibited under international humanitarian law. Article 34 of the Fourth Geneva Convention is unequivocal:

Judicialized Coercion: A form of State coercion in which legal proceedings and security charges are used to conceal politically motivated detention intended to generate diplomatic leverage.

"The taking of hostages is prohibited." (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 1949/2025, Art. 34)

State hostage diplomacy, by contrast, operates through legal form: the individual is attested, prosecuted, sentenced or held under the language of national security, espionage, or public order, rather than openly 'kidnapped' in the conventional sense. Yet in practice, the moral and strategic distinction is narrower than the legal one. The Initiative Against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations explicitly identifies the arbitrary arrest or sentencing of foreign nationals for diplomatic leverage as a growing abuse, particularly where dual citizens

are used as pawns to extract international concessions (Global Affairs Canada, 2025). When detention is intended to compel another government to change behaviour, it operates according to the same coercive logic, even if presented through judicial procedure: the cell replaces the tunnel, the courtroom replaces the armed raid, and the rhetoric of sovereignty replaces the open threat, but the coercive mechanism remains recognisably similar.

This grey zone is precisely what makes the practice so durable. States that engage in hostage diplomacy benefit from plausible deniability. They can claim that their judiciary is independent, that the detainee violated domestic law, or that foreign criticism amounts to interference in internal affairs. That ambiguity slows collective responses and weakens deterrence. It also creates a policy trap for democratic governments: if they refuse to negotiate, their citizens may remain imprisoned for years; if they do negotiate, they may unintentionally confirm that the tactic works. The result is a perverse incentive structure in which humanitarian urgency is weaponised and the cost of repetition is often lower than the cost of restraint.

The central question, then, is not simply why some regimes detain foreign nationals, but why this tactic has become strategically attractive again in the current international environment. The answer lies in a convergence of structural weaknesses.

• First, enforcement is fragmented. International law condemns both hostage-taking and arbitrary detention, but the mechanisms available to punish violators are slow, politically dependent, and unevenly applied.

• Second, democracies are vulnerable to domestic pressure in ways that more authoritarian systems are not. Public campaigns, press coverage, and the visible suffering of detainees' families generate intense demands for action, making political leaders more likely to seek negotiated solutions even when they know such solutions may produce long-term costs.

• Third, every successful swap creates a 'market signal': it suggests that detaining individuals can yield sanctions relief, financial transfers, prisoner exchanges, or political recognition.

"If this trajectory continues, hostage diplomacy will not remain an aberration. It will become part of the operating logic of a more transactional and more coercive international order."



Figure 2: Numerical data of recent hostage-taking cases, source: https://hostageaid.org/hostage-metrics-engine/

"Hostage diplomacy is now a low-risk form of asymmetric warfare" (Briggs, 2021).



Main Nationality	
USA	17.50%
United Kingdom	7.59%
France	6.13%
Germany	5.30%
Italy	3.85%
India	3.67%
China	3.30%
Canada	3.19%
Turkey	3.09%

Country of arrest	
Iraq	12.38%
Iran	9.87%
Somalia	6.79%
Afghanistan	5.41%
Gaza	4.46%
Nigeria	4.21%
Lebanon	3.88%
Syria	3.74%
Sudan	3.45%

Breakdown of Hostages and Unlawfully Detained taken by entity

Entity of Arrest	
ISIS/ISIL	5.26%
Iran Ministry of Intelligence	4.79%
Somali Pirates	4.65%
Hamas Militant Group	4.46%
Taliban	4.43%
Insurgents	2.72%
Nigerian Assailants	2.72%
Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line	2.43%

Figure 3: Map overview of the main nationality of hostages and unlawfully detained (shown as colours and shades) and the Country where they are held (shown through dots), source: https://hostageaid.org/hostage-metrics-engine/

2. The Case of Iran: current escalation and detainees' risks

Among contemporary cases, Iran remains one of the clearest and most consequential examples of state hostage diplomacy. For years, the Islamic Republic has detained foreign nationals and dual citizens (especially those with Western ties) under charges such as espionage, collaboration with hostile governments, or threats to national security (Global Affairs Canada, 2025; Reuters, 2025). The major example related to Iran's use of human beings as leverage and its deep historical roots in U.S.-Iran relations is the 1979-1981 Iran hostage crisis, when Iranian students seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and held American diplomats hostage for 444 days (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, n.d.). The pattern is well established: arrest, opaque legal proceedings, restricted consular access, prolonged detention, and eventual release only when wider diplomatic incentives align. Iran's refusal to recognise dual nationality further deepens the vulnerability of detainees, because it allows Tehran to deny outside governments a fuller protective role while preserving maximum leverage over the individual case. Reuters reported on March 3, 2026, that at least six American citizens or legal permanent residents were being held in Iran, while advocacy groups warned that thousands of dual U.S.-Iranian nationals in the country could be exposed to heightened danger in the context of the widening conflict.

Iran's significance lies in the way detention is framed and institutionalised. Through formal legal procedure and security-based prosecutions, the State embeds coercion within a judicial framework that allows it to deny political intent while still deriving diplomatic leverage from those held in custody. The result is a system in which the judiciary does not merely punish alleged wrongdoing but becomes part of a broader coercive architecture. This is why Iran has become a paradigmatic case: it shows how hostage logic can be embedded within legal procedure rather than outside it.

The September 2023 U.S.-Iran detainee deal captured this logic with unusual clarity. Five Americans were released from Iranian detention as part of an arrangement that also involved the transfer of roughly $6 billion in Iranian funds from South Korea to Qatar and the release of Iranians held in the United States (The Iran Primer, 2023). the political lesson was difficult to miss: detention had bargaining value. From a humanitarian standpoint, the deal secured the release of prisoners. From a strategic standpoint, however, it also reinforced the perception that holding foreign nationals can

produce meaningful concessions. That is the central dilemma of hostage diplomacy: the immediate moral imperative to bring people home can coexist with the longer-term risk of making future detentions more likely.

If the pre-2025 pattern showed how Iran used detention as calibrated leverage in a tense but still open negotiating environment, the events of 2025 and 2026 suggest something even more troubling: military escalation does not necessarily weaken hostage diplomacy; it may strengthen it. On June 21, 2025, U.S. forces struck Iran's three main nuclear sites, directly joining Israel's campaign against Iranian targets. As the confrontation widened in 2025-2026, detention did not recede into the background. On the contrary, as diplomatic channels narrowed and the conflict expanded regionally, the strategic value of detainees increased. Advocates warned that foreign and dual nationals in Iran faced heightened risk, underscoring a crucial dynamic: escalation does not displace hostage diplomacy. It can amplify it. Once coercive diplomacy shifts into open confrontation, individuals in custody may become even more politically significant within an increasingly volatile bargaining environment.

For this reason, Iran should not be treated merely as one case among several. It is indeed the pivot as it illustrates the full continuum of contemporary coercion: legal ambiguity, diplomatic bargaining, sanctions pressure, military escalation, and the persistent political utility of human captives. It shows that hostage diplomacy persists across phases of conflict, adjusting to changing levels of confrontation and serving as a durable instrument of coercive adaptation.

The Iranian case matters beyond its immediate regional context because it illustrates how leverage is being reimagined in contemporary geopolitics. In a truly rules-based system, detaining foreign nationals for political gain would carry prohibitive diplomatic costs. Today, such costs exist but are often manageable, as deterrence remains limited when releases are still tied to concessions. Iran's experience is not unique in kind, but it is unusually clear, making visible the coercive logic that appears in various forms in Russia, Venezuela and conflict settings, such as Gaza.

The broader lesson is stark: hostage diplomacy is increasingly embedded within a harsher political normality, where weak enforcement and fragmented multilateralism converge to reward coercive behaviour.

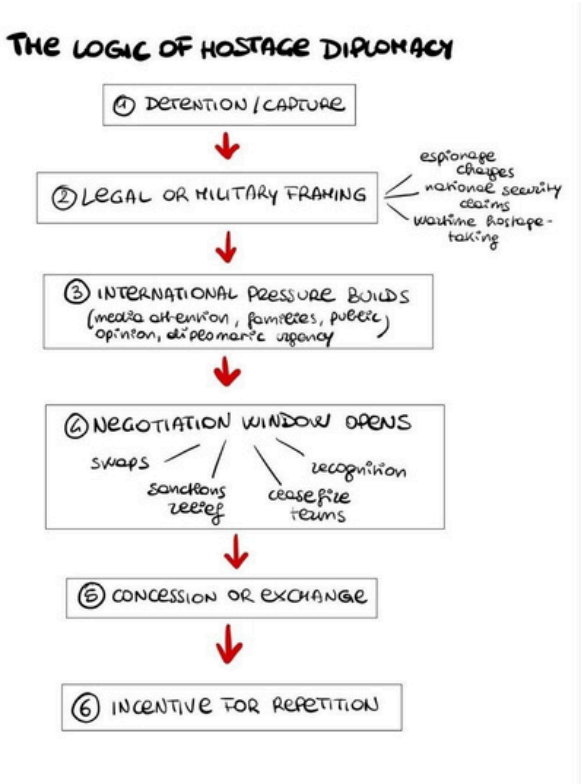

Figure 4: The phases of the logic of hostage diplomacy

3. Other international recurrences and correlated evidence

Taken together, these cases show that hostage diplomacy has become a recurring instrument of coercive bargaining across diverse political and conflict settings. UN human rights experts describe hostage-taking and politically motivated detention as practices "on the rise," involving both state and non-state actors and including situations such as Russia, Venezuela, and the mass abductions linked to the October 7, 2023 attacks (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2025).

What changes across contexts is the form, spacing between opaque judicial proceedings and wartime captivity. On the other side, the function remains constant: captivity becomes the leverage. In policy terms, the United States' 'Wrongful Detention' risk indicator captures this logic in a functional language (U.S. Department of State, n.d.): linking different contexts without collapsing their political distinctions.

As previously stated, in the Russian case wrongful detention functions as a low-visibility but high-impact tool of strategic pressure, turning individual prisoners into assets within a wider confrontation with the West. As evidence of this, The March 2023 arrest of journalist Evan Gershkovich on espionage charges immediately securitised the case and elevated its political value (Reuters, 2023). His closed-door trial in 2024 reinforced the perception that detention could generate leverage under conditions of legal opacity (Reuters, 2024a).

Main Nationality	
USA	17.50%
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Figure 5: Data overview of the main nationality of hostages and unlawfully detained, the Country where they are held, and the entity that detained them, source: https://hostageaid.org/hostage-metrics-engine/

U.S. officials framed the case as overtly political, describing it as "the Kremlin using American citizens to achieve its political objectives" (Reuters, 2024a). Within great-power rivalry, detention thus operates below the threshold of open military escalation while still producing strategic pressure that governments must address.

Venezuela illustrates a more transactional form of coercion in which detained foreigners are interwoven into negotiated exchanges between states. In December 2023, the United States granted clemency to Alex Saab, a close ally of President Nicolás Maduro, and released him to Caracas in return for the freedom of ten Americans held in Venezuelan detention, including several whom the U.S. considered wrongfully detained (Reuters, 2023), highlighting how detention can be traded for political concessions. U.S. officials continued to describe multiple Americans as wrongfully detained in

2025 and called for their release, underscoring that individuals remain negotiable assets beyond a single swap (Reuters, 2025a). This pattern shows how hostage logic persists as a pragmatic instrument in negotiations shaped by sanctions, legitimacy, and diplomatic engagement.

The Gaza case makes the coercive logic unmistakable: human beings are embedded directly in war diplomacy. After October 7, 2023, when 251 hostages were seized, captivity became central to ceasefire negotiations and exchange arrangements (Reuters, 2025b). Truces were extended in connection with phased releases, placing hostages at the core of both negotiation terms and timing (Reuters, 2023c).

Despite the clear prohibition under international law, later ceasefire phases continued to link releases to large-scale exchanges, confirming the enduring bargaining value of captives (Salem et al., 2025). The case reinforces this article's central argument: coercion through individuals remains politically effective, and negotiated releases, while lifesaving, can sustain the incentive structure that enables it (OHCHR, 2025).

4. International Responses: Recognition Without Deterrence?

If hostage diplomacy has become a recurring instrument of coercion, international responses over the past five years suggest that governments increasingly recognise it as a distinct and growing policy problem. What is less clear is whether recognition has translated into effective deterrence.

At the multilateral level, Canada's 2021 Declaration Against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations marked a significant normative step (Global Affairs Canada, 2021). By explicitly condemning the use of detention for diplomatic leverage and framing it as a structural problem rather than a series of isolated consular disputes, the initiative sought to move the issue from bilateral crisis management toward coordinated resistance. Over time, dozens of states have endorsed the declaration, signalling broad normative alignment. Yet the declaration is politically binding rather than legally enforceable, and its deterrent capacity ultimately depends on sustained collective action.

Parallel discussions within the G7 and the European Union have reinforced the idea that wrongful detention is embedded in wider geopolitical competition. The language has hardened, and awareness has grown. Governments no longer treat such cases as unfortunate anomalies; they increasingly recognise them as deliberate coercive tactics.

At the national level, the United States has developed one of the most institutionalised responses. The formal designation of a case as "wrongful detention" activates a specialised

interagency process coordinated by the Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs. In 2025, an executive order introduced additional tools to sanction and restrict foreign actors involved in politically motivated detentions. As the White House declared, "No American should fear being taken as a political pawn" (The White House, 2025). In February 2026, the United States formally designated Iran a state sponsor of wrongful detention, reinforcing the intention to attach reputational and material costs to systematic coercive practices. Targeted sanctions have also been imposed on specific Russian and Iranian officials linked to wrongful detention (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Collectively, these initiatives reflect a shift from reactive crisis management toward institutionalised deterrence. Governments now explicitly name the practice and attempt to price it. Yet hostage diplomacy persists, and in some contexts appears to be expanding.

The reasons lie less in rhetorical weakness than in structural constraints. Enforcement mechanisms operate slowly and remain politically mediated, while detention produces immediate bargaining leverage. Coordination across states is uneven, as strategic interests diverge and collective signalling lacks consistency. Humanitarian urgency further complicates deterrence: democratic governments face intense domestic pressure to secure releases, often under public scrutiny and compressed timelines. Each successful exchange, though lifesaving, can also reinforce the perception that detention yields tangible results.

This asymmetry limits deterrence effectiveness. Sanctions, designations and joint statements impose reputational and economic costs, but they function indirectly and incrementally. The leverage created by holding an individual in custody is immediate, personal and politically visible. Where those gains are perceived as manageable relative to imposed costs, the incentive structure endures.

International responses today are more developed than a decade ago. Norms have been clarified, frameworks established and targeted tools expanded. Yet these mechanisms primarily manage consequences and mitigate harm. They do not consistently alter the calculus that makes detention usable as leverage in a fragmented international system.

Recognition has advanced. Structural deterrence remains incomplete. And hostage diplomacy thrives in this precise space between legal clarity and political fragmentation.

5. Conclusion

What is emerging from the cases previously examined is not merely a breakdown of international order, but it is something more unsettling – the consolidation of a harsher one: an environment in which coercion works often enough to be repeated, and in which human beings themselves are increasingly turned into instruments of negotiation.

Hostage diplomacy is often described as a symptom of disorder; moreover, like an erosion of norms, a failure of enforcement, a regression to coercive politics. Yet the persistence of this practice suggests a different reading. It is not chaos that sustains it, but calculation. Detentions

are repeated because they produce results often enough to justify repetition. The logic survives because it remains politically usable.

Across such diverse actors and contexts – regimes, conflicts and ideological divides – the mechanism is strikingly similar. Whether cloaked in judicial procedure or executed through armed capture, the deprivation of liberty still becomes leverage. In this logic, courts, prisons and conflict zones serve the same strategic function, which is transforming human vulnerability into bargaining power.

The real danger is therefore not only that hostage diplomacy violates established rules. It is that it works often enough to begin reshaping expectations. In this view, when coercive detention yields concessions (even sporadically), it risks normalising itself as an accepted bargaining tool within geopolitical competition.

What we are witnessing is not simply disorder, but adaptation: a system in which coercion, calibrated below the threshold of open war, becomes embedded in diplomatic practice. And more, a system in which legal condemnation coexists with strategic repetition. If this trajectory continues, hostage diplomacy will not remain an aberration. It will become part of the operating logic of a more transactional and more coercive international order. One in which human beings themselves are increasingly treated not as protected subjects of law, but as instruments of negotiation.

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It is not chaos that sustains it, but calculation. Detentions are repeated because they produce results often enough to justify repetition.

— **Eleonora Crespi, Hostage Diplomacy**

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS & DIPLOMACY



China's Reactions to US Belligerence under Trump

How China has behaved in face of the US's renewed hostility towards ally and adversary alike

Diogo Albuquerque Nascimento

About the Article

Main question: How has China reacted, both "on paper" (diplomatically) and in practice (strategically), to recent US belligerence in Greenland, Venezuela and Iran?
Argument: The recent international political upheaval many might have thought would benefit China's own ambitions, but this has not been as clear-cut as it seemed.
Conclusion: Instead of expanding its own hard power and ambition through force and coercion, China has shown signs of wishing to be the new leader of a peace-desiring.

About the Author

Diogo Albuquerque Nascimento is a Master in International Relations through the University of Coimbra's School of Economics. He specialises in European Affairs with added interest in the Asia-Pacific Region, and International Defence and Security. Currently engaged in policy writing and analysis, he has also participated in civil society through volunteering in several NGOs. He strives to be a meaningful actor in policy & diplomacy, and wishes to pursue a PhD in International Studies.

The international order is being rapidly destabilised by US actions under Trump. The kidnapping of Nicolás Maduro, the open threats against Greenland and the US-Israeli attacks on Iran have caused tremendous shockwaves in the international rules-based order.

For China, this upheaval presents both challenges and opportunities. Beijing has long sought to erode US dominance over East Asian-Pacific security and the global financial system (Nye, 2023). As the unipolar world order visibly fractures into a multipolar one, understanding Chinese ambitions becomes increasingly urgent.

This article analyses Chinese reactions to US aggression toward Venezuela, Greenland and Iran, drawing on official Chinese communications, statements and state-run media, supplemented by secondary sources for strategic analysis. Due to the recency of events, reliance on academic sources will be limited. Most of the underlying and resulting conclusions will be drawn from the construction of logical arguments based on concrete occurrences. This presents a limitation to the academic validity of this article, but it also gives it heightened operational utility.

The article examines two dimensions of Chinese foreign policy: its 'forward-facing diplomacy', meaning statements by government officials and positions at international fora, and the strategic implications which might be understood as either 'between the lines' or drawn from operational reactions to analysed events. An example of a diplomatic reaction might be, for instance, a condemnation or diplomatic protest at the UN level, while an operational reaction might, hypothetically, consist of more assertive posturing toward Taiwan or efforts to strengthen alternative financial networks like BRICS.

The central research question is: what implications do recent actions and statements by the United States have for China? To understand this, it will be necessary to interpret Chinese reactions to these events. There is, undoubtedly, a high degree of uncertainty, but several analysts and commentators have provided a range of possibilities to be analysed.

Jingoism: Extreme chauvinism or nationalism marked especially by a belligerent foreign policy. It results in an approach to IR marked by aggression rooted in irrational fanaticism for one's nation.

Contextualising China's geopolitical situation

Unlike the United States, whose foreign policy under Trump has taken on an increasingly global and unilateral character (Böller & Wiedekind, 2025), China's strategic priorities remain anchored in the Indo-Pacific. The Question of Taiwan sits at the top of Beijing's agenda, driven by a combination of economic imperatives, power-projection logic, and ideological conviction. Taiwan hosts the world's most advanced semiconductor manufacturing facilities, controls critical access points along the first island chain, and represents, in Beijing's view, an unresolved wound to Chinese national unity (Chen, 2022). In the South China Sea, the PRC is engaged in complex geopolitics often dominated

by both tension and economic dependency. In this vein, it holds several maritime disputes, particularly with the Philippines and Vietnam (Amer & Li, 2018; Zhang, 2018). Its international political friction with Japan is permanently present given the Senkaku/Diaoyudao Islands disputes as well as its fierce opposition to the country's remilitarisation (Sato, 2019), and finally, its odd (though now cooled down) contestations with India in the Himalayas (Verma, 2024).

This regional preoccupation provides an important context for understanding how Beijing has responded to US aggression in Venezuela, Greenland, and Iran. Each of these theatres is geographically remote from China's core security perimeter, yet each touches on interests that matter deeply to Beijing: the prevention of regime changes favourable to American interests, the integrity of the global rules-based order that China increasingly invokes in its own favour (Williams, 2020), and the long-term contest for influence across the Global South (Murphy, 2024). Beijing may therefore calibrate its responses not primarily around the immediate crises themselves, but around the broader signal each sends about American behaviour, and the opportunities that behaviour creates for Beijing to present itself as a more reliable and law-abiding alternative to US leadership.

Summarising recent American belligerency

Following Donald Trump's reelection as President of the USA in 2025, US foreign relations and policy became unpredictable and rash (Böller & Wiedekind, 2025), testing the structural strength of the international order based on rules.

In early January 2026, the US military conducted a lightning operation to remove Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro from his residence and transport him to the US to stand trial for alleged organised narcotraffic crime accusations (Curtis, 2026). Experts have deemed this move to be a sharp break in the status quo of a rules-based international order (Nasrat, 2026; Ahmed, 2026; Okplewu, 2026), positing that such acts hold no legal legitimacy and could set an example for other countries to act on. In an interview, US head of policy Stephen Miller claimed he accepted a new world order based on strength and power (Rogers, 2026), echoing the jingoism of the 19th century.

Following the attack on Venezuela, the Trump administration went on to press its own allies further on the Question of Greenland. In 2025, Trump repeatedly stated the US required Greenland for its own security, saying the island nation was a crucial strategic location for Arctic defence against Russia and China (Fitzgerald, 2026). European allies remained assertive on Greenland's right to self-determination, as well as its status as an extension or dominion of the Kingdom of Denmark (Jack, 2026). Eventually, and after many unsuccessful attempts at wooing the Greenlandic and Danish governments into conceding, negotiations between NATO head Mark Rutte and the Trump administration were held so that NATO recognised the US's right to access Greenlandic resources, station troops and develop defence systems there (id.). Later, during the Munich Conference, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio addressed European allies with softer rhetoric, speaking about common roots and ideology,

signifying a possible effort of reconciliation (Lee et al., 2026).

Starting in 2025, and in support of the Israeli Air Force, the US launched precision strikes on Iranian strategic and symbolic targets, including military and government infrastructure, causing the deaths of over 200 people (Al-Jazeera, 2026b). Later, in February 2026 and following mass protests in Iran, Trump threatened the country with military action if it cracked down violently on protesters (Wilson, 2026). The Iranian government repressed manifestations violently, allegedly leading to a death toll in the tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands injured (UNHROHC, 2026). On the 28th of February, the US launched Operation Epic Fury, beginning the first-ever direct conflict between it and Iran; shortly after, the Israeli military, in one of its many strikes on Tehran, assassinated the country's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei (Burke, 2026).

Reactions by the People's Republic of China to American operations in Venezuela

To understand Beijing's reaction to the US seizure of Nicolás Maduro, it is first necessary to situate China within the broader bilateral relationship. Venezuela and the PRC have maintained diplomatic relations since 1974, but these ties deepened dramatically following Hugo Chávez's election in 1999. Chinese policy banks loaned more to Venezuela than any other Latin American country; at least $10 billion in Chinese bank loans is outstanding (Federici et al., 2026). Beyond financial assistance, the relationship rests primarily on oil. Chinese imports of Venezuelan crude allegedly reached more than 150,000 barrels per day in 2024, representing roughly 3 percent of China's total seaborne crude imports (Downs & Palacios, 2026).

Against this backdrop, China's reaction to the US operation was swift and sharp in tone. Within hours of Trump's announcement that Maduro and his wife had been "flown out of the country, Beijing issued its first formal statement. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson declared that China was "deeply shocked by and strongly condemns the US's blatant use of force against a sovereign state and action against its president" (Global Times, 2026), adding that such "hegemonic acts seriously violate international law and Venezuela's sovereignty, and threaten peace and security in Latin America and the Caribbean region" (id.).

A follow-up statement the next day by Lin Jian of the Chinese Foreign Ministry called on Washington to "ensure the personal safety of Maduro and his wife, release them at once, stop toppling the government of Venezuela, and resolve issues through dialogue and negotiation" (PRCMFA, 2026a). The rapidity of the dual-statement response is notable. By contrast, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's remarks, delivered during a visit to Pakistan, reinforced the rhetorical offensive: Wang stated that China "never believed that any country can play the role of world policeman," adding that no country had the right to "claim itself to be an international judge" (PRC, 2026).

PRC Reactions to US Rhetoric on Greenland

Even considering the severity of the capture of another nation's head of state, Beijing's response to the Greenland crisis was notably

more measured than its reaction to the seizure of Maduro. This reflected a key asymmetry: while China has deep material and strategic stakes in Venezuela, its relationship with Greenland is primarily one of economic aspiration rather than established interest. China has, since 2018, officially designated itself a "near-Arctic state," integrating the region into its Belt and Road Initiative under the banner of a "Polar Silk Road," and becoming involved in resource extraction ventures (Descamps, 2019).

Trump's repeated framing of Greenland as a bulwark against Chinese and Russian encroachment drew swift but carefully worded rebukes from the Foreign Ministry. Spokesperson Mao Ning stated that China's Arctic activities "are aimed at promoting peace, stability, and sustainable development in the region and are in accordance with international law," and that "the United States should not pursue its own interests by using other countries as a pretext" (PRCMFA, 2026b).

PRC Reactions to US attacks on Iran

China and Iran's relationship rests on a formal "comprehensive strategic partnership" established in 2021 (Ayres et al., 2026) and deepened through a 25-year cooperation agreement signed in 2021, covering economic, security, and technological collaboration. The relationship is structurally asymmetric: Iran depends on China far more than China depends on Iran (García-Herrero, 2026), not least because Beijing maintains parallel commercial ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, each accounting for roughly $108 billion with each country in two-way trade in 2025, compared to $41.2 billion with Iran (Ayres et al., 2026). This asymmetry goes some way toward explaining Beijing's mellow response when US and Israeli forces launched Operation Epic Fury on 28th of February 2026.

China's initial reaction was notably hesitant and restrained (Ghiselli, 2026). Two days into the war, during a regular Foreign Ministry press conference, business continued as normal, as though the US and Israel had not just attacked one of China's comprehensive strategic partners. Only when an Iranian journalist protested directly did the ministry spokesperson reluctantly issue a condemnation (Yang, 2026). Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that the "blatant attack and killing of a leader of a sovereign state and incitement to regime change are unacceptable" (Reuters, 2026a), and that the strikes, launched while US-Iran negotiations were ongoing, violated international law. Wang also told his Israeli counterpart directly that China "opposes any military strikes launched by Israel and the US against Iran" and that "force cannot truly solve problems" (Reuters, 2026b). On March 2, the Foreign Ministry issued its first explicit condemnation in relation to the killing of Ali Khamenei, stating it "firmly opposes and strongly condemns" the attack (PRCMFA, 2026c).

Trump's second term has wrought untold chaos like the world has not seen in decades, but China has not exploited that chaos in the way an emerging realist might.

Chinese Strategic Reactions: Beneath the Surface

On Venezuela:

For all the vigour of Beijing's rhetoric, analysts were largely in agreement that China's response would remain confined to the diplomatic domain. China Market Research Group founder Shaun Rein told Al Jazeera that Beijing is "deeply alarmed but constrained," noting that China "doesn't have the military power" to act beyond proclamations, maintains only two overseas military bases compared to America's approximately 800, and is "historically not warlike" (Al-Jazeera, 2026a). Scholarly analysis points to a more calculating dimension behind the public condemnations. Experts cited by NBC News argued that Beijing was less concerned about any direct parallel to Taiwan and more focused on exploiting the episode to undermine US global leadership (Frayer & Jett, 2026), casting itself as the authentic champion of the rules-based international order at a moment when Washington was visibly dismantling it. The Soufan Centre noted that Beijing would likely continue to frame US actions in Venezuela as proof that the Western 'rules-based order' serves only American interests, using this narrative to consolidate political support across the Global South (Soufan Center, 2026). Carnegie Endowment scholar Tong Zhao, meanwhile, offered a more sobering reading of China's internal calculus: Chinese analysts were drawing the lesson that "the United States may often appear a paper tiger, but its fangs can still bite" (Zhao, 2026), noting that "in a world where major powers more openly operate on the principle that might makes right, China must further prioritise the accumulation and readiness of hard power" (id.).

On Greenland:

What is analytically significant about China's Greenland response is what it reveals about Beijing's broader posture amid US aggression. Rather than issuing the kind of sharp, multi-statement condemnation reserved for Venezuela, China treated the Greenland crisis primarily as an opportunity to reinforce its image as a defender of international law and sovereignty norms, while allowing the fractures within NATO to deepen on their own.

On Iran:

The gap between rhetoric and action is impossible to ignore. China called for restraint (Khaliq, 2026), evacuated its 3,000 citizens from Iranian territory (Y. Zhao, 2026), but undertook no action that would disrupt the United States' ability to operate militarily in Iran. MERICS analyst Claus Soong noted that China's geopolitical and economic stakes in Iran "are simply not high enough for Beijing to risk jeopardising manageable relations with Washington and Gulf states," adding that Beijing's muted response shows "the limits of its influence and ideological convictions in the face of its economic and geopolitical calculations" (MERICS, 2026). The timing of the now rescheduled Trump-Xi summit in Beijing (Macao News, 2026) might have provided an additional structural disincentive to escalation.

On the nuclear dimension, Beijing's position reflects a longstanding tension. Chinese officials publicly oppose Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, viewing a nuclear-armed Iran as a potential trigger for regional war that would risk blocking vital shipping lanes and threatening Gulf states where China's commercial

interests far outweigh its ties with Tehran (Ayres et al., 2026). This concern had pre-existing institutional expression: China had supported the JCPOA framework and, alongside Russia, resisted the snapback of UN sanctions triggered by France, Germany, and the UK in August 2025 over Iran's non-compliance (Loft & Mills, 2025), arguing the mechanism had not been legally activated. The strikes thus placed Beijing in the uncomfortable position of defending a partner whose nuclear behaviour it privately found destabilising.

What the US's military ventures mean strategically for China

The cumulative picture that emerges from China's reactions to Venezuela, Greenland, and Iran is one of a power that has chosen patience over provocation and narrative over action. Each episode of US belligerence has handed Beijing a ready-made argument: that Washington is an unreliable, law-breaking hegemon, while China offers a stable and principled alternative. The more consistently the US acts unilaterally, the more credibly China can position itself as the defender of the multilateral order it once viewed with suspicion.

Scholars have posited that, amid the chaos, Beijing may try to position itself as a trusty mediator, as it did during disputes between Iran and Saudi Arabia, or Cambodia and Thailand. As the US pushes towards chaos and unpredictability, China accelerates its domestic strength through technology, industry and military investment (Miller & Clark, 2026). Further, there has been a noticeable shift in the relations between Europe and China, which, although not by any means amiable, have seen considerable improvements; the US's belligerence under Trump is undoubtedly doing much to push Europe towards China as a more reliable superpower partner (Wei, 2026).

This is not simply the case for Europe, either. As Washington embraces a jingoist approach to International Politics, its image as a reliable pillar of international peace is fading. China is now closer than ever to a US which is only rich enough to hold the international markets and supply chains away from collapse, but too unstable and unreliable to truly prevent China's consolidation as a major player – and perhaps the major player – on the international stage (Zongyuan, 2026).

Conclusion

To some, China's reactions to the recent belligerency of the United States might come as a surprise. After all, Beijing has no shortage of diplomatic points of tension on its own turf, so it would make sense to expect a country typically opposed to the Western-led international order to capitalise more sharply on its collapse. However, the exact opposite seems to be taking place. Instead of utilising the smoke and confusion caused by the US's unpredictable foreign policy under Donald Trump, the PRC has instead chosen to remain loyal to restraint and diplomacy. Despite experts' predictions that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan has been imminent for years, it has kept relatively 'still' as the US has conducted offensive after offensive since Trump took office.

The likely assumption to be drawn from China's analysed reactions in this paper is that it hopes to replace Washington as the world leader in diplomacy and trade. Undoubtedly, American efforts will hardly help in making friends.

The US has shown itself to be erratic and unreliable, not necessarily and simply because of Trump, but because its promises can turn out to mean very little every four years. This is not to say the 'Middle Kingdom' will have it easy from here on out: after all, the US has struck some of its most valuable partners regarding energy and fuel trade. As the world moves towards battery-powered energy sources, which require many of the rare earth minerals profusely found in China, only time will decidedly tell whether recent American efforts will destabilise China or crown it as the new leader of the peace-desiring world.



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The US has shown itself to be erratic and unreliable, not necessarily and simply because of Trump, but because its promises can turn out to mean very little every four years.

— Diogo Albuquerque Nascimento, China’s Reactions to US Belligerence under Trump

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS & DIPLOMACY



Policy Paper: The Cost of Unpredictability

How Credibility Erosion Forces States to Adapt

Sophie Lohosha

About the Article

Main question: how can policymakers address and navigate current geopolitical situation?
Argument: Due to the absence of a central authority in the international system, states must rely on self-help.
Conclusion: Policymakers should therefore adopt a hedging strategy by diversifying sector-specific partnerships in critical domains such as energy security, supply chains, and digital infrastructure, as heavy dependence on a single actor in these areas may be harmful in the long term.

About the Author

Sophie Lohosha is a Master's student in International Relations at Charles University in Prague and currently serves as Personal Secretary to the Ambassador at the Embassy of Egypt. Their focus spans Czech foreign policy, Middle Eastern relations and Egyptian diplomacy within an international environment. Alongside traditional statecraft, they research artificial intelligence, focusing on AI literacy, societal resilience and the safe, ethical navigation of AI-generated content.

We live in an era of intensified great-power rivalry, in which major powers possessing both hard and soft power shape the behaviour of other actors in the international system. Their actions increasingly send shockwaves across the global community, generating destabilising signals that suggest the rules-based order can no longer be reliably upheld. This dynamic operates through a credibility mechanism: when major powers behave inconsistently, their signals become less reliable, increasing uncertainty about future actions. As a result, the credibility of commitments is undermined, trust between states erodes, and incentives for cooperation weaken. At the same time, such behaviour creates strategic opportunities for other major powers to position themselves as credible alternatives to norm-breaking actors.

In this context, great power competition is not only material but also reputational. States seek to present themselves as more stable, predictable, and legitimate actors in order to gain influence within the international system. However, the global system lacks a central authority capable of consistently punishing violators and rewarding compliance. The absence of a central authority above states in international relations is traditionally understood as anarchy in the international system. This idea was first proposed by Kenneth Waltz, who defines anarchy as the absence of a centralised authority or hierarchical governing body capable of regulating the behaviour of sovereign states (Waltz, 1979). Thus, states' behaviour is not formally constrained.

In periods of heightened rivalry, this absence becomes more visible, amplifying the effects of unpredictability and accelerating the erosion of shared norms. Consequently, the international order is gradually transforming from one based on relative stability and predictability into one characterised by uncertainty and strategic competition. Articles featured in this report suggest that a primary driver of shifts in the global order is the unpredictable and rule-breaking foreign policy behaviour of the United States. These actions serve as a catalyst for responses from other actors in the international community, which vary widely from deploying hybrid warfare tactics and increasing military capabilities to adopting less viable, yet still strategic, positions.

Anarchy in the international system is the absence of a central governing authority above sovereign states, forcing them to rely on self-help to ensure survival.

Recent U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration illustrates this shift. Rather than being inherently irrational, it can be characterised by increased unpredictability and inconsistent signalling, which complicates other actors' ability to interpret intentions and anticipate future behaviour. In cases such as Venezuela, Greenland, and Iran, U.S. actions appeared difficult to reconcile within a coherent strategic framework. This ambiguity weakens the reliability of U.S. commitments and encourages other actors to adjust their strategies accordingly. At a broader level, great power rivalry is driven by the pursuit of influence, resources, and legitimacy, as states compete to shape both material outcomes and global perceptions.

Delfina Ertanowska's article argues that Russia, for instance, relies heavily on instruments of information warfare, including propaganda and disinformation, alongside conventional military tools. It operates simultaneously in physical and informational domains, strategically amplifying narratives that serve its interests. These narratives are often aimed at delegitimising the United States as a rule-breaking actor and questioning the legitimacy of Western dominance. This strategy exploits informational asymmetries and weakens the normative authority of the rules-based order by reinforcing perceptions of inconsistency and hypocrisy. Its effectiveness is amplified by the relative weakness of current efforts to counter disinformation.

Diogo Albuquerque Nascimento's article argues that China, by contrast, adopts a more restrained and long-term approach. It seeks to present itself as a reliable and law-abiding alternative to U.S. leadership, emphasising principles such as non-interference and diplomatic restraint. By positioning itself as a global stabiliser and advocate of peaceful cooperation, China attempts to fill the credibility gap created by U.S. unpredictability and expand its strategic influence. This approach allows China to gradually reshape perceptions of leadership and legitimacy within the international system without resorting to overt confrontation.

Amid increasing great-power rivalry, small states occupy a particularly precarious position. As rule-takers rather than rule-makers, they are structurally constrained in their foreign policy choices and are more vulnerable to shifts in the global order. However, they are not entirely powerless. Under conditions of uncertainty, smaller states often adopt hedging strategies, seeking to minimise risk by avoiding overdependence on a single partner while maintaining flexibility. Rather than abandoning existing alliances, they pursue strategic autonomy through diversification of partnerships. As Lauren McHugh argues in the case of Ireland, smaller states can still exercise influence through relational, institutional, and normative channels, even within asymmetric power structures.

An article by Sophie Lohosha and Pedro Lima suggests that the European Union provides a clear example of this adaptive behaviour. While it continues to rely on transatlantic partnerships, particularly through NATO, abandoning these alliances would be strategically irrational. Instead, the EU has sought to diversify its external relations, for instance through trade agreements with partners such as India and Mercosur. This diversification reduces strategic vulnerability by spreading risk across multiple partnerships while maintaining core security guarantees. In response to U.S. unpredictability, the EU has thus pursued a strategy of limited strategic autonomy across defence, energy, technological, and industrial domains, without fully disengaging from existing alliances.

Taken together, these developments indicate that the transformation of the global order is not driven solely by shifts in material power, but also by changing perceptions of credibility and reliability among key actors. Credible commitments remain central to international relations because they reassure allies and provide predictability regarding future behaviour. When credibility erodes, uncertainty increases,

and states are compelled to adapt their strategies accordingly (Lohosha, Lima).

The central policy problem emerging from this dynamic is that growing unpredictability among major powers forces states to reconsider their strategic positioning within an increasingly uncertain international environment. Traditional reliance on stable alliances is no longer sufficient on its own. Instead, states are likely to combine alliance commitments with flexible, multi-vector strategies that enhance resilience and reduce vulnerability. As the international system continues to evolve, strategic autonomy and adaptive capacity will become essential components of state behaviour in navigating an increasingly complex and contested global order.

"The central policy problem emerging from this dynamic is that growing unpredictability among major powers forces states to reconsider their strategic positioning."

Based on these findings, policymakers should place strong emphasis on prevention at both the international and domestic levels. Prevention should focus on protecting the core values of the rules-based order from erosion, as well as on educating citizens to think critically in an age of intensified hybrid warfare.

Due to the absence of a central authority in the international system, states must rely on self-help. Policymakers should therefore adopt a hedging strategy by diversifying sector-specific partnerships in critical domains such as energy security, supply chains, and digital infrastructure, as heavy dependence on a single actor in these areas may be harmful in the long term.

Moreover, to ensure strategic survival in a changing global order, states should remain open to cooperation with a wide range of actors. The rise of multipolarity creates new opportunities for such diversification. To support this process, policymakers should increase engagement with other actors in order to build closer diplomatic ties.

At the same time, states must remain committed to the core values of the international liberal order (ILO). It is important to remain anchored in shared principles, such as international law, and to be vocal in defending these norms. Policymakers should adopt a more proactive stance in defending the rules of the ILO. In a time of increasing norm erosion, upholding these principles should be a key priority. Even if major powers act in ways that violate these norms, the international community should not follow their example. Key actors should use all available channels to communicate and highlight violations of the ILO and demonstrate how such actions affect both international and domestic stability.

Another important task for policymakers is to educate citizens on how to recognise false or misleading information in the online environment. We live in an era in which states actively deploy hybrid warfare tactics to promote strategic narratives, undermine credibility, and mobilise public opinion. Moreover, disinformation weakens the core values of the international rules-based order, contributing to its gradual erosion. Therefore, it is in governments' interest not only to counter disinformation, but also to

provide citizens with credible knowledge about the fundamental principles of the rules-based order and instances of their violation. When citizens develop the ability to filter disinformation and understand how the international liberal order functions, they gain significant resilience against attempts to manipulate public opinion. Change often begins from the bottom, as collective action by informed citizens can have substantial influence.

Overall, states should uphold the fundamental values of the international liberal order. At the same time, they must remain adaptive in order to survive in increasingly turbulent conditions. This includes maintaining close relationships with other actors and strategically diversifying partnerships. However, when the core principles of the international liberal order are contested, states should prioritise their protection. The ultimate goal should be the preservation and revitalisation of the international liberal order.

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