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Foreign Policy Fractures within the Trump Coalition

The study examines the differences between the foreign policy factions within the Make America Great Again (MAGA) coalition behind Donald Trump. Trump has extended the voter base of the Republican Party: the coalition that played a key role in his election is broader than the Republican Party and includes a number of actors and groups that have traditionally not been part of this political community. The study reviews the foreign policy factions within the MAGA coalition and their positions on key foreign policy issues, highlighting the role of President Trump in holding the coalition together.

Keywords: Donald Trump, United States, Republican Party, foreign policy, MAGA

Introduction

One of the high points of Donald Trump's 2024 Presidential campaign was the rally held on October 27 in New York City, one of the strongholds of the Democratic Party. The composition of the speakers reflected a remarkable degree of ideological diversity. According to Stephen K. Bannon, who had advised Trump on the 2016 campaign, MAGA could unite "hardscrabble Hispanics in South Texas, tech bros, and economic nationalists".² In fact, many people in the coalition were not previously Republicans, so the MAGA movement extends beyond the Republican Party, just as Trump himself is not a traditional Republican.³ Even though he has strong support among the voting base, Trump has had an adversarial relationship with the "old guard" of the Republican Party. Initially, he was not the favoured candidate of the leadership of the Republican Party, and there are a number of Republicans who are still not members of his coalition, such as those who until today identify as Never Trumpers.⁴

Yet, the diversity of the MAGA coalition also carries the risk of serious internal conflict. While Trump and his supporters attempt to present a unified front of "America First", there are significant, often unacknowledged divisions between the various diverse factions within the movement. These factions compete for the favour of the President, attempting

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² Carlson, Tucker: *Tucker and Steve Bannon Respond to Israel's War on Iran and How It Could Destroy MAGA Forever*. [online], YouTube, 17.06.2025. Source: youtu.be [02.09.2025].

³ Le Miere, Jason: *Is Trump Republican? Timeline of President's Shifting Political Views After He Sides With Democrats*. [online], Newsweek, 07.09.2017. Source: [newsweek.com](https://www.newsweek.com/) [07.09.2025].

⁴ Wren, Adam: *'Why Do They Bend Their Knee?' 6 Never-Trumpers look Back at What Went Wrong*. [online], Politico, 13.03.2024. Source: [politico.com](https://www.politico.com/) [05.09.2025].

to grab his attention and win him over on particular issues. American media and political analysts have devoted special attention to the power relations within the MAGA movement and the Trump administration: *The Washington Post*,⁵ *Politico*,⁶ *The Economist*,⁷ and Nate Silver, political analyst and statistician, founder of *FiveThirtyEight*,⁸ have all published articles discussing this topic. Given their influence on the decision-making in the second Trump presidency, the analyses often discuss the role of people who are not members of the Trump administration or even the Republican Party, such as businessmen, media or online political personalities.

Foreign policy is one of the fields that have increasingly been the source of conflicts inside the Trump coalition since the 2024 election, particularly with regards to topics such as interventionism, alliances, and the global role of the United States. The global order is undergoing a significant transformation, and the United States needs to respond to these changes.⁹ Of course, foreign policy is not the only point of contention within the Trump coalition, various constituencies do not see eye to eye on a number of other issues either, such as economic policy, immigration, the role of intelligence agencies, or the influence of tech moguls. Another factor that contributes to the instability of the MAGA coalition is the importance of personal relationships for Trump. Given that the focus of this study is foreign policy, issues that fall outside of this purview are discussed only in a tangential way, to the extent that they are related.

The study presents the origins of the *MAGA/America First* foreign policy and the various ideological factions that influence the foreign policy of the second Trump administration. It is important to note that this is not an analysis of the Trump cabinet, but rather the factions within the broader coalition that led to his election and influence his administration. Beside members of the administration, politicians, or members of the Republican party, this also includes people who contributed to Trump's campaign and are influential within the MAGA movement. Furthermore, the study examines the key foreign policy issues where these factions clash before concluding with how Trump himself fits into this framework.

The foundations of *America First* foreign policy before 2024

In an earlier interview, Trump claimed to have come up with the phrase “Make America Great Again” himself,¹⁰ but in fact, Ronald Reagan campaigned with a very similar

⁵ Allison, Natalie: *President Molds a Fractious Coalition: The Six Factions of Trumpworld*. [online], *The Washington Post*, 26.08.2025. Source: [02.09.2025].

⁶ Ward, Ian: *The Many Factions Battling for Trump's Attention*. [online], *Politico*, 14.11.2024. Source: politico.com [05.09.2025].

⁷ *The Factions Jostling for Donald Trump's Favour*. [online], *The Economist*, 29.08.2025. Source: economist.com [05.09.2025].

⁸ Silver, Nate: *The 4 Factions of Trump 2.0*. [online], *Silver Bulletin*, 14.04.2025. Source: natesilver.net [02.09.2025].

⁹ Csizmazia, Gábor – Eszterhai, Viktor – Tárnok, Balázs: *The Impact of Trump 2.0 on Europe's Position in the Transforming World Order*. [online], *John Lukacs Analyses on Global Affairs*, 2025/1. Source: uni-nke.hu [02.09.2025], 4.

¹⁰ Engel, Pamela: *How Trump Came Up with His Slogan 'Make America Great Again'*. [online], *Business Insider*, 18.01.2017. Source: businessinsider.com [02.09.2025].

sentence “Let’s Make America Great Again” in 1980.¹¹ Regardless of its origin, Trump’s MAGA slogan became so effective that it eventually lent its name to his whole political movement. The Trump campaign also use the phrase, *America First*, which has a long and complex history in American politics. Appearing first in the 1880s, it was famously used to argue for neutrality in World War I by Woodrow Wilson in 1915. By the 1930’s, however, *America First* came to be primarily associated with isolationists like the America First Committee, as well as a number of far-right groups.¹² After falling out of favour in the post-WWII period, *America First* was revived in the 1990s by paleoconservative politician and commentator Pat Buchanan, who is often cited as a forerunner of Trump, both by their supporters and critics.¹³ The *America First* slogan implies, if not outright isolationism, but most definitely less involvement in global affairs, especially if it does not directly benefit the United States, as well as a strong scepticism of international institutions.

Beyond the paleoconservatives, another influence on Trump’s ideological hinterland and activist base was the libertarian-populist *Tea Party* movement that emerged within the Republican party in the early 2010s. The *Tea Party* movement was largely inspired by the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns of Ron Paul. The former Libertarian presidential candidate attempted to steer the Republicans in a more libertarian-conservative direction, and while he did not manage to obtain nomination, he gathered large and enthusiastic support both within and outside of the party. The *Tea Party* movement advocated for small government and represented anti-interventionist and anti-elitist views. Many of its participants became strong supporters of Trump when he emerged on the political scene.¹⁴ Finally, Bannon also played a key role in shaping *America First* foreign policy as one of the founders of *Breitbart News* and host of the popular *War Room* podcast, as well as chief executive of the Trump campaign in 2016.

In an interview with Tucker Carlson, Bannon described the three core planks of Trump’s coalition as “stop the forever wars, seal the border and deport the illegal alien invaders, and redo the commercial relationships in the world around trade deals and bring high value-added manufacturing jobs back here.”¹⁵ Trump laid out similar priorities in his first inaugural address in 2017, when he spoke against de-industrialisation, criticised foreign military alliances that do not seem to benefit America as well as aid going to foreign countries, and emphasised the importance of defending borders.¹⁶ The same issues were also mentioned in his second inaugural address in 2025, when the president emphasised the importance of border security, bringing back manufacturing jobs,

¹¹ Steinhorn, Leonard: *The Fundamental Flaw in ‘Make America Great Again’*. [online], The Washington Post, 26.07.2022. Source: washingtonpost.com [2025.09.02].

¹² Diamond, Anna: *The Original Meanings of the “American Dream” and “America First” Were Starkly Different From How We Use Them Today*. [online], Smithsonian Magazine, 10.2018. Source: smithsonianmag.com [02.09.2025].

¹³ Greenfield, Jeff: *Trump Is Pat Buchanan with Better Timing*. [online], Politico, 09/10.2016. Source: politico.com [02.09.2025].

¹⁴ Rapoport, Ronald B. – Crossman, Henry W. (2022): *From Tea Party to Trump Party*. In Green, John C. – Cohen, David B. – Miller, Kenneth M. (eds.): *State of the Parties 2022: The Changing Role of American Political Parties*. Bloomsbury Academic, 197–214.

¹⁵ Carlson 2025.

¹⁶ Trump, Donald: *The Inaugural Address*. [online], The White House, 20.01.2017. Source: trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov [31.08.2025].

cutting down bureaucracy, and renegotiating trade deals. With regards to wars, Trump declared that he wants to measure success “by the wars that we end – and perhaps most importantly, the wars we never get into”, and made it clear that he wants to be remembered as a “peacemaker and unifier”.¹⁷

Trump’s foreign policy during his first administration largely reflected these ideas in practice as well. His administration adopted a transactional approach to alliances, frequently questioning the value of NATO and other international commitments. He withdrew the U.S. from multilateral institutions and agreements, including the Paris Climate Accords. Trump did not start any new wars, instead, his administration pursued diplomacy with adversaries such as North Korea. At the same time, he engaged in trade wars, most notably with China. His approach was in contrast to what would have been favoured by the establishment of the Republican Party, represented by people like Mitt Romney and Liz Cheney, who became critics of Trump, and represent the “old guard” of interventionist foreign policy. The 2024 campaign, therefore, did not emerge in a vacuum, it built on the foundation of previous movements on the American right, and the policies of Trump’s first presidency.

Ideological factions and conflicts within the MAGA coalition

Understanding the various political factions offers valuable insight into American foreign policy because it reveals the true drivers of national strategy, which are rarely as monolithic as a slogan like *America First* suggests. Foreign policy decision-making is a dynamic process, where competing factions clash, negotiate, and co-opt one another. This is especially true during the presidency of Trump, given his “transactional”¹⁸ outlook. While it is apparent that Trump has some deeply held personal beliefs, he seems to be “devoid of the idealism traditionally characterizing US foreign policy (or at least of the semblance of such idealism)”.¹⁹ Consequently, he is often prone to be persuaded by whoever presents the strongest argument and can convince him that their desired outcome would reap economic, strategic, political, or other types of benefits for the United States, or bring personal prestige to the President.

However, pinning down political factions is an inherently difficult task. Individuals within the administration or in the wider Trump orbit often hold idiosyncratic beliefs, their alliances tend to be fluid, they are based on political calculations or personal relationships as much as ideological convictions. Consequently, the lines between the various foreign policy factions are often blurred, and the categories sometimes overlap, a person might be classified as a member of more than one camp, depending on the particular issue. For example, while Vice President J. D. Vance is usually considered

¹⁷ Trump, Donald: *The Inaugural Address*. [online], The White House, 20.01.2025. Source: whitehouse.gov [31.08.2025].

¹⁸ Csizmazia et al. 2025: 2.

¹⁹ Glant Tibor – Csizmazia Gábor: *First 100 days of Donald Trump’s Second Presidency*. [online], *John Lukacs Analyses on Global Affairs*, 2025/5. Online: uni-nke.hu [02.09.2025], 6.

to be part of the nationalist-populist wing of the party, he can also be associated with the ideology of realism, and has close connections to the tech world, especially tech billionaire Peter Thiel.²⁰

Silver has identified four factions within the Trump White House and the wider MAGA world: 1. “The Chief Executive,” that is, Trump himself; 2. “MAGA 2.0”, people like Vice President Vance; 3. “The Tech Right”; and 4. the “GOP establishment”, that is, the traditional elite of the Republican Party.²¹ In contrast, *The Economist* discusses five categories: 1. the “Isolationists”; 2. the “Moderates”; 3. the “Neocons”; 4. the “Economic Populists”; and 5. the “Culture Warriors”.²² In *The Washington Post*, White House reporter Natalie Allison writes about six such groups: 1. “MAGA populists”; 2. “Traditional Republicans”; 3. “Small-government conservatives and fiscal hawks”; 4. the “Religious right”; (5) the “Tech Right”; and 6. “MAHA (Make America Healthy Again) and other converted Democrats”.²³ These analyses categorise political groups that influence the policy of the Trump administration based on a wide range of issues. The classification can be different, if we only focus on one aspect – it is quite possible that there is a wide agreement between two people in the administration on most issues, but take opposing sides on a single issue. Altogether, from an exclusively foreign policy perspective, we have identified six groups, some of which overlap with the ones found in the previously mentioned articles.

Nationalist-populists

Nationalist-populists form the core of the Trump coalition, they are the most dedicated and loyal part of the president’s base. They are anti-globalist, sceptical of foreign wars as well as foreign aid, and against participation in international institutions, including NATO, which they see as foreign entanglements that threaten American sovereignty. Nationalist-populists support economic protectionism and view immigration as the central issue in both foreign and domestic policy: they emphasise strong border security and the deportation of illegal immigrants, as well as curbing legal immigration. Their distrust of the “deep state elites” extends to international institutions, and contributes to the popularity of conspiracy theories among them (for example, based on the activity of Alex Jones or Laura Loomer). Figures associated with nationalist-populists within the administration include Vice President Vance and Senior Advisor Stephen Miller. In the wider MAGA world, the most important voices are the recently resigned Marjorie Taylor Greene in the House of Representatives, and in the media, Carlson, Bannon, and Charlie Kirk, who tragically fell victim to an assassination in September 2025.

²⁰ Pequeño, Antonio IV: *JD Vance And Peter Thiel: What To Know About The Relationship Between Trump’s VP Pick And The Billionaire*. [online], Forbes, 16.07.2024. Source: forbes.com [02.09.2025].

²¹ Silver 2025.

²² The Economist 2025.

²³ Allison 2025. The slogan MAHA was used by the former Democrat Robert F. Kennedy, Sr., the Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Neoconservative holdovers

In the 1960s, a group of former leftists became disillusioned with New Left, turned against counterculture, and called for an anti-communist foreign policy. This movement later came to be known as neoconservatism.²⁴ After the end of the Cold War, a new generation of neoconservatives was less concerned with domestic issues and focused almost exclusively on foreign policy, advocating for an active U.S. role in global politics, and the promotion of democracy and liberal values worldwide.²⁵ Today, the main priorities for neoconservatives include maintaining global American leadership, they are pro-interventionists, they agree with the use of pre-emptive force to neutralise threats abroad, and they are strongly committed to traditional U.S. alliances, especially with Israel. Neoconservatives are present in both major political parties, Victoria Nuland, for example, played a major role in the formulation of the Ukraine policy of the Biden administration.²⁶ Neoconservatives were especially influential in the Republican Party during the Reagan administration, the George W. Bush presidency, and the candidacy of John McCain. Many of them opposed Trump in 2016, but others, such as Mike Pompeo and John Bolton, eventually ended up becoming members of his administration. Bolton later became a prominent critic of Trump, and at the time of the writing, he is under investigation by the FBI over mishandling classified information.²⁷ Currently Lindsey Graham and Tom Cotton are seen as representatives of the neoconservatism, but earlier, Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Marco Rubio was also grouped here.²⁸ Trump is more suspicious of neoconservatives during his second presidency: there have been speculations that National Security Advisor Mike Waltz had to leave his position primarily not because he mistakenly added a journalist of *The Atlantic* to a group chat of national security leaders on the *Signal* messaging app, but because of his supposed close ties to neoconservatives.²⁹

Conservative realists

Conservative realists are fundamentally different from the neoconservatives: their foreign policy is not driven by a mission to spread democracy or American values, but it is rooted in a pragmatic calculation of national interest. Realism draws from a long tradition of

²⁴ Ehrman, John (1996): *The Rise of Neoconservatism. Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs, 1945–1995*. Yale University Press. For more on the Neoconservatives, see Békés, Márton (2008): *Amerikai neokonzervativizmus. Egy kisiklott ellenforradalom*. Budapest: Századvég.

²⁵ Awale, Rasha (2022): *The 1990s and the Remaking of the Neoconservative Foreign Policy Paradigm*. *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 28(1), 121–146.

²⁶ Isackson, Peter: *The Curious Reign of the New Queen Victoria (Nuland)*. [online], Fair Observer, 12.04.2023. Source: fairobserver.com [15.10.2025].

²⁷ Goudsward, Andrew: *Trump Critic Bolton under Investigation over Classified Information, Documents Show*. [online], Reuters, 04.09.2025. Source: reuters.com [05.09.2025].

²⁸ DePetris, Daniel R.: *Tom Cotton's Neocon Recklessness*. [online], The National Interest, 11.03.2025. Source: nationalinterest.org [15.10.2025].

²⁹ Burns, Dasha – Cai, Sophia – Gramer, Robbie: *Waltz was in Danger before Signalgate*. [online], Politico, 01.05.2025. Source: politico.com [04.09.2025].

American foreign policy (for example, based on the work of George F. Kennan or Henry Kissinger), and it gained new momentum as a response to the War on Terror. Realists believe that the U.S. should focus on major threats and avoid unnecessary conflicts, considering that decades of regime change attempts and “forever wars” have drained American strength. They are sceptical of foreign alliances and international institutions that they feel do not directly benefit the United States. Their number one priority is great-power competition, they see China as a long-term threat, and want to focus on military and technological superiority, as well as securing supply chains. They advocate for shifting away from ideologically motivated wars and claim that American strength abroad depends on strength at home. Important figures within this faction include Rubio (although earlier, he showed more hawkish tendencies), former National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien, under secretary of defense Eldridge Colby, and to a certain extent, Vice President Vance. The most influential conservative think tanks behind the Trump administration, such as the Heritage Foundation³⁰ and the Claremont Institute,³¹ also advocate for a realist foreign policy.

Christian nationalists/Evangelicals

Christian Nationalists view American foreign policy not just through the lens of national interest, but as a moral and spiritual imperative. Their political engagement is driven by the desire to restore traditional, Biblical values at home, and to use the nation’s power to support what they see as righteous causes abroad. The political rise of Christian Evangelicals began in the late 1970s with the so-called “Moral Majority”, referring to which they became particularly influential within the Republican Party, focusing primarily on domestic issues like abortion. In foreign policy, they aim to implement religious and cultural values, such as combating what they see anti-Christian and anti-Semitic trends in the world. One of the main priorities for Christian Evangelicals is unconditional support of Israel, often rooted in dispensationalist theology,³² commonly adopted by many American Evangelical Protestant churches. They also advocate for using American power to protect persecuted Christians abroad and support combating “woke” ideology abroad and in international institutions. Key figures include former Vice President Mike Pence, Senator Ted Cruz, and Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, but Christian Evangelical ideas influence people in a number of other factions.

³⁰ Roberts, Kevin D.: *A Foreign Policy for America’s Golden Age*. [online], The American Mind, 03.07.2025. Source: americanmind.org [06.09.2025].

³¹ Peterson, Matthew J.: *Claremont vs. Foreign Policy Establishment*. [online], The American Mind, 18.01.2019. Source: americanmind.org [06.09.2025].

³² Dispensationalist theology, originating in the 19th century, teaches that God reveals himself in distinct ways for distinct people over distinct periods of time, and it is often used as a foundation for Christian Zionism. See Newman, John: *Ted Cruz, Dispensationalism, and the State of Israel*. [online], Mises Institute, 20.06.2025. Source: mises.org [06.09.2025].

Libertarian-leaning non-interventionists

Even though the Libertarian Party has existed since 1971, it has seen little electoral success, thus many libertarians have found their home in the Republican Party or have supported Republican candidates. The most influential figure has been former Congressman Ron Paul, whose presidential campaigns have brought a dedicated and passionate following, and laid the intellectual framework for libertarians within the MAGA movement. Trump even spoke at the Libertarian Party National Convention in 2024, and in return for the votes of the members of the party, promised to appoint a libertarian to his cabinet.³³ Libertarian non-interventionists are probably the ideologically most principled and consistent faction within the MAGA movement, and their main goal is the radical reduction of military spending and foreign entanglements. They oppose wars, want to end foreign aid, and advocate for re-evaluating military alliances like NATO. Another priority for libertarians is limited government; they claim that military spending and foreign aid largely contribute to the rising national debt. They are also highly critical of the national security state and the operation of the intelligence agencies. Important representatives are Senator Rand Paul and Congressman Thomas Massie, but to a certain extent, former Democrats who have aligned with the MAGA movement can also be associated with the libertarian faction. Tulsi Gabbard, former Democratic presidential candidate and current Director of National Intelligence, is popular among libertarians. After he was forced out of the Democratic primaries in 2024, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. even joined the Libertarian Party and unsuccessfully ran for nomination.³⁴

Tech/Business nationalists

Trump may have been popular on social media for years, but in 2016 and 2020, the vast majority of campaign donations from the tech world went to the Democrats.³⁵ In 2020, there was a concerted effort by social media companies to suppress the Hunter Biden laptop scandal,³⁶ and Trump was banned from Twitter and other social media in the aftermath of 6 January 2021. In 2022, Elon Musk acquired Twitter (which he later renamed X), and reinstated Trump's account. By 2024, a number of tech billionaires became significant donors to Trump's campaign and the Republican Party,³⁷ and became influential in determining policy as well – as evidenced by the establishment of the “Department of Government Efficiency”, headed by Musk, which has since then been disbanded. Tech nationalists see

³³ Goettler, Peter: *Trump Is Hardly Libertarian. But Neither Is Today's Libertarian Party*. [online], The Washington Post, 23.05.2024. Source: washingtonpost.com [06.09.2025].

³⁴ Pellish, Aaron: *RFK Jr. Loses in First Round of Libertarian Party's Presidential Nomination Vote. Trump Didn't File Paperwork to Qualify*. [online], CNN, 27.05.2024. Source: edition.cnn.com [07.09.2025].

³⁵ Levy, Ari: *Here's the Final Tally of Where Tech Billionaires Donated for the 2020 Election*. [online], 2020.11.06. Source: CNBC.com [2025.09.07.]

³⁶ Nelson, Steven: *Facebook Execs Suppressed Hunter Biden Laptop Scandal to Curry Favor with Biden-Harris Admin: Bombshell Report*. [online], New York Post, 30.10.2024. Source: nypost.com [07.09.2025].

³⁷ Mahler, Jonathan – Mac, Ryan – Schleifer, Theodore: *How Tech Billionaires Became the G.O.P.'s New Donor Class*. [online], The New York Times Magazine, 18.10.2024. Source: nytimes.com [07.09.2025].

foreign policy as a way to advance private interests. They believe that the key to American strength is winning the global technology race, particularly against China, especially in fields like AI. They are pragmatic and push for tariffs and export controls to protect U.S. innovation, but at the same time, they realise the interconnectedness of the economies of the two countries.³⁸ Tech nationalists are sceptical of globalist alliances, criticise “endless wars” and foreign aid. At the same time, they favour involvement where they see business benefits (e.g. Musk’s Starlink provides battlefield communications for Ukraine). With regards to immigration, they advocate for a targeted approach, claiming that in order to achieve tech supremacy, the U.S. needs skilled workers. Beside Musk, other important figures in the tech/business nationalist faction include Vivek Ramaswamy, Thiel, as well as Marc Andreessen, and Vice President Vance is also close to this group.

Key policy battlegrounds and emerging rifts

Foreign policy debates within the Trump coalition are more than academic, they are fierce, often public conflicts for the president’s attention and for influence over the direction of American foreign policy. While *America First* provides a broad umbrella for the movement, the ideological divides, fractures between the various factions within the MAGA movement become apparent when we examine specific issues, or policy decisions.

Israel and the Middle East

The issue of support for Israel is often seen as the crucial fault line that most deeply divides the MAGA movement.³⁹ The United States has supported Israel since the founding of the country in 1948, and the Israel lobby has a strong influence on American foreign policy.⁴⁰ Traditionally, Republicans have been strong supporters of Israel, and neoconservatives and Christian Nationalists are united in their advocacy for unconditional support for Israel, their stance rooted in ideology and theology. Conversely, libertarian non-interventionists and nationalist populists are critical of military aid to Israel and, broadly speaking, involvement in the region. Conservative realists see the U.S.–Israel relationship as a strategic partnership which should not be unconditional but be maintained to the extent that it serves America’s goal of securing its own interests. There is also a controversy over the involvement of Israel in American politics – with some going so far as to accuse Israeli intelligence of having ties to disgraced financier, alleged paedophile and

³⁸ Cheng, Selina – Strumpf, Dan: *Beijing Says Musk Opposes Decoupling of U.S., China*. [online], The Wall Street Journal, 30.05.2023. Source: [wsj.com](https://www.wsj.com) [07.09.2025].

³⁹ Bazail-Eimil, Eric – O’Brien, Connor – Traylor, Jake: *MAGA is Turning on Israel over Gaza, but Trump is Unmoved*. [online], Politico, 29.07.2025. Source: [politico.com](https://www.politico.com) [08.09.2025]; Carlson 2025.

⁴⁰ Mearsheimer, John J. – Walt, Stephen M (2008): *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

blackmailer Jeffery Epstein.⁴¹ Meanwhile, the base is becoming even more divided on the issue as younger Republican voters tend to be less favourable towards Israel.⁴²

Ukraine

With regards to Ukraine, neoconservatives call for unwavering support for Kyiv, they consider the conflict to be a test of Western resolve against Russian aggression. Beside financial help, politicians such as Senator Graham also support sending offensive weapons and sanctioning countries that trade with Russia.⁴³ National-populists and libertarian-leaning non-interventionists see Ukraine as another “endless war”, argue for resolving the conflict as quickly as possible by completely ending military and financial support, and they push for a negotiated settlement. Most conservative realists also call for an end to the war, which they see as a distraction from the competition with China, and believe that aid should be conditioned on a clear objective – and even then, it should preferably be financed by Europe.

At the same time, there are those even inside the realist camp who believe that the real interest of the United States is not ending the war as soon as possible, but Russia's military defeat.⁴⁴ In recent decades, China has become the number one geopolitical rival of the United States, but regardless, Russia is also present on the international stage, and in many ways continues to pose a challenge to America, which many are particularly sensitive to after forty years of Cold War. Some technological and business nationalists see opportunities in the conflict, for example for the oil industry, if Russian energy sources subject to sanctions are replaced by American liquefied natural gas (LNG). Related to Ukraine is the issue of the relationship between the United States and Europe, European security, as well as the role of NATO, which are all sources of disagreements. The Russian–Ukrainian war is a complex issue that in many cases causes divisions within the interest groups discussed here. In the summer of 2025, the United States temporarily suspended arms deliveries to Ukraine, but after fierce protests from Trump's allies, they resumed a few days later. According to press reports, the decision to halt arms deliveries was made by Elbridge Colby, under secretary of defense.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Croucher, Shane: *Israeli Ex-Leader Answers Tucker Carlson's Epstein Mossad Question*. [online], Newsweek, 14.07.2025. Source: newsweek.com [09.09.2025].

⁴² Galston, William A. – Muchnick, Jordan: *Support for Israel Continues to Deteriorate, Especially among Democrats and Young People*. [online], Brookings, 06.08.2025. Source: brookings.edu [09.09.2025].

⁴³ Hubbard, Klaia – Brennan, Margaret: *Sen. Lindsey Graham Says Sanctions Bill Would Give Trump a “Sledgehammer” against Russia amid “Turning Point” in War with Ukraine*. [online], CBS News, 13.07.2025. Source: cbsnews.com [16.10.2025].

⁴⁴ Mankoff, Jeffrey: *The Realist Case for Ukraine*. [online], Foreign Policy Research Institute, 25.01.2023. Source: fpri.org [16.10.2025].

⁴⁵ Detsch, Jack – McLeary, Paul – Schwartz, Felicia – Stokols, Eli: *Trump Allies Caught Off Guard by Pentagon's Ukraine Weapons Freeze*. [online], Politico, 03.07.2025. Source: politico.com [16.10.2025].

China

There is a general agreement within the Trump coalition that China is a strategic competitor, but the various factions diverge on the approach. Nationalist populists favour economic protectionism through tariffs that they believe would protect American industries, “bring the jobs back”, and contribute to the re-industrialisation of America. Tech nationalists frame the competition between the two countries as a “tech cold war”, and while they acknowledge for the interconnectedness of the two economies, they push for targeted tariffs and export controls to ensure the security of supply chains and ensure supremacy in key technologies. Conservative realists consider China to be the main adversary, and advocate for military, political, and economic steps to counter its influence, while neo-conservatives see the struggle in ideological terms, as a struggle between democracy and autocracy. These ideological differences lead to completely different policy approaches, for example in the areas of tariff policy and maintaining the dominance of the dollar.

International institutions

National populists and libertarians are deeply sceptical of international institutions like the World Health Organization, the United Nations, or NATO, and call for a serious reduction in U.S. involvement, or even complete withdrawal from these commitments. Conversely, neoconservatives see some of the international institutions as essential for maintaining the rules-based international order and global American leadership, while others they consider to be outright harmful. Conservative realists take a pragmatic approach, and wish to engage with international institutions on a transactional basis, as long as it serves American interests.

There is some agreement among the various factions on this issue: for different reasons, but in certain respects, they are all sceptical of international institutions. From the outside, this may seem to be one of the defining characteristics of Trump’s foreign policy, but in reality, there is no true unity on this issue.

Trade policy and immigration

One of the main campaign promises of Trump was to cut illegal immigration to the United States. For Trump’s base, especially the nationalist populists, the issue of trade and immigration are closely related, the claim being that both uncontrolled mass immigration and unfavourable trade deals lead to the loss of manufacturing jobs, declining wages, and the erosion of national sovereignty. For this reason, national populists are in favour of broad protectionist measures to defend American industries and call for a complete halt to illegal immigration which they see as an existential threat, and serious restrictions to legal immigration. Tech/business nationalists have a more nuanced approach, they advocate for targeted tariffs and export controls to protect strategic industries and also support immigration for skilled workers to maintain a technological edge, which leads to

conflict between them and the nationalist populists.⁴⁶ Libertarians strongly oppose tariffs, which they see as an obstacle to free markets, and also criticise government overreach in surveillance and border security.

Conclusion

In the American constitutional system, the President has wide-reaching authority when it comes to foreign affairs.⁴⁷ While the various factions within the MAGA coalition provide a number of options, the ultimate decision rests on the shoulder of Trump. The President himself does not belong to any of the factions described above, he does not follow any school of thought, and his priorities often transcend ideological categories. The MAGA coalition is not held together by a well-defined, coherent, shared ideology, but by personal loyalty to the president.

Although Trump's foreign policy is best understood as transactional,⁴⁸ but it is guided by a number of deeply held core principles. First and foremost, he sees himself as a peacemaker, a unifier and dealmaker, who is capable of avoiding unnecessary wars and conflicts. He often points out that he did not start any new wars during his first presidency and emphasises the value of human life when it comes to issues such as the Russia–Ukraine war.⁴⁹ Trump's second priority is protecting American sovereignty, which manifests in his strong border policy, scepticism towards international institutions, and demands that the allies of the United States pay their fair share of defence costs. Eventually, every decision is measured by its impact on American national and economic interests, as he perceives them.

Trump's personal, transactional approach means that he will usually listen to advisors, but his decisions are often hard to predict – which has been frustrating for many in the administration and the various factions within the MAGA movement.⁵⁰ For example, in his previous term, neoconservatives were able to convince him to push for a more aggressive policy towards Iran,⁵¹ whereas the national populist and non-interventionists could persuade him to withdraw troops from Syria.⁵² Personal relationships frequently influence Trump's decision-making, his perspective is often shaped by who had his ear in a given moment.

⁴⁶ Picchi, Aimee: *Musk and Ramaswamy are Sparking a Debate over the H-1B Visa. Here's What to Know about the Visa.* [online], CBS News, 30.12.2024. Source: cbsnews.com [09.09.2025].

⁴⁷ Bomboy, Scott: *Explaining the President's Foreign Affairs Powers.* [online], National Constitution Center, 06.03.2025. Source: constitutioncenter.org [09.09.2025]

⁴⁸ Cszimazia et al. 2025: 2.

⁴⁹ *Trump Calls Discussions with Putin 'Productive', Urges Him to Spare Ukrainian Troops.* [online], Reuters, 14.03.2025. Source: reuters.com [09.09.2025].

⁵⁰ Bade, Rachael – Desrochers, Daniel – Guida, Victoria: *Trump Officials, Allies Grow Anxious about April 2 Tariffs.* [online], Politico, 29.03.2025. Source: politico.com [09.09.2025].

⁵¹ Miller, Zeke – Peoples, Steve: *US-Iran Tensions Test Trump's 'America First' Pledge.* [online], 18.05.2019. Source: The Times of Israel [online, 2025.09.09].

⁵² Boaz, David: *Did Rand Paul Persuade Trump to Withdraw from Syria?* [online], CATO Institute, 28.12.2018. Source: cato.org [09.09.2025].

Overall, the competition between the factions within the MAGA movement is less about winning an ideological debate and more about shaping foreign policy and influencing the president's final decision. To some extent, the divisions within the MAGA coalition represent a wider ongoing debate about the nature of the international system, and America's role in this rapidly changing world. While Trump's leadership is seemingly impulsive and often unpredictable, it reflects these competing visions. To a large extent, the future of U.S. foreign policy will depend on which one of these factions proves the most convincing to the man in the Oval Office. Meanwhile, the various factions also enter into confrontations with each other, good examples are the previously mentioned *Signalgate* that led to the firing of National Security Adviser Waltz, or the case of the weapons deliveries to Ukraine. These examples show that conflicts between different interest groups can, in certain cases, even put the president in a difficult position.

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