

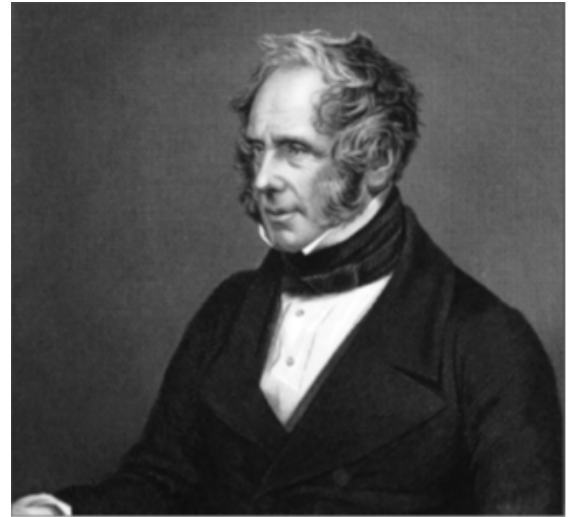
Introduction

The contemporary international system is undergoing a phase of high-conflict density that has reopened classic debates in international relations theory. The Russo-Ukrainian war, the persistence of the Gaza crisis, the strategic centrality of Taiwan, the systemic rivalry between the United States and China, and the growing instability surrounding the Strait of Hormuz —exacerbated by the confrontation involving the United States and Israel against Iran and by the shift toward measures of direct maritime coercion— have eroded confidence in the premise that economic interdependence and multilateral institutions would, by themselves, be sufficient to attenuate competition among states.

In this context, President Trump’s current foreign policy has frequently been described as unilateralist, transactional, sovereigntist, anti-globalist, and profoundly disruptive of the liberal international order. Nevertheless, that interpretation, often permeated by political bias and although partially plausible, remains analytically insufficient and conceptually incomplete. From a theoretical perspective, it is more appropriate to examine whether this foreign-policy orientation falls within a rationale of national interest analogous to that formulated by Lord Palmerston¹, who declared before the House of Commons that Great Britain had no “eternal allies” or “perpetual enemies,” but rather “eternal and perpetual interests,” the protection of which constituted the primary duty of the state (Palmerston, 1848). Palmerston’s words, delivered on 1 March 1848, were not uttered in a minor context, but amid an intense parliamentary debate over British foreign policy, at a time when public opinion and the press were closely following such controversies. Thus, rather than being merely a phrase that later acquired retrospective fame, the expression condensed a diplomatic position that was already embedded in a political debate of broad resonance.

¹ Henry John Temple, 3rd Viscount Palmerston (20 October 1784 – 18 October 1865), was a British statesman who twice served as Prime Minister in the mid-nineteenth century. He held government office almost continuously from 1807 until his death, beginning his parliamentary career as a Tory —a conservative and monarchist political current— and ending it as a Liberal. He served as Secretary at War between 1809 and 1828, but is remembered above all for his conduct of British foreign policy at the height of the United Kingdom’s power, holding office on several occasions as Foreign Secretary and later as Prime Minister. Palmerston contributed to the reconfiguration of the European map by convening conferences that recognised the independence of Greece and Belgium. The treaty concerning Belgian neutrality would have far-reaching consequences, as it later provided the legal basis for Great Britain’s entry into the First World War. In this sense, his legacy also projected effects onto one of the central events of the twentieth century. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/history/past-prime-ministers/henry-john-temple-3rd-viscount-palmerston>).

The hypothesis of this article is that President Trump's foreign policy can be interpreted as selectively Palmerstonian²: it privileges national interests deemed vital, conceives alliances as conditional instruments, and articulates security, trade, technology, and industry within a single strategic logic. This analogy, however, must be handled with caution. In this regard, the reference to Palmerston serves an analytical rather than a strictly historical function: it does not seek to establish a direct equivalence between the two contexts, but rather to highlight an affinity in strategic rationality, whereby alliances appear subordinated to the preservation of national interest. Consequently, realism offers a powerful, though not exhaustive, interpretive key; liberal institutionalism retains explanatory capacity where interdependence and the role of institutions are involved; and constructivism remains useful for understanding the influence of legitimacy, norms, and representations on international conduct (Keohane & Nye, 2011; Wendt, 1992)³.



Lord Palmerston.
Imagen <https://www.museumofpm.org/prime-ministers/the-viscount-palmerston/>

Palmerston as an Interpretive Key to the Present

The analytical usefulness of Palmerston does not lie in turning him into a prophet of the twenty-first century, but in employing him as a conceptual reference for understanding a diplomacy centred on the primacy of national interest. His 1848 formulation condensed a view of foreign policy according to which alliances are neither ontological commitments nor permanent bonds of loyalty, but contingent arrangements subordinated to strategic convenience (Hansard, 1848)⁴.

Applied to the present, this interpretive key is suggestive because the Trump

² The term *Palmerstonian* functions as a relational adjective derived from the foreign personal name *Palmerston*, denoting association, affinity, or conceptual proximity to Lord Palmerston's political and diplomatic Outlook.

³ Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S., Jr. (2011). *Power and interdependence* (4th ed.). Pearson.

⁴ Hansard. (1848). *Treaty of Adrianople—Charges against Viscount Palmerston*.

administration did not abolish alliances or institutions; rather, it has sought to reorder them according to criteria of utility, burden-sharing, economic advantage, and geostrategic priority. In this sense, the notion of a Palmerstonian foreign policy is more precise than the generic accusation of isolationism: Trump did not withdraw from the world but has attempted to renegotiate the terms of American presence within it.

Nevertheless, caricature must be avoided. Palmerston operated within an international system radically different from the present one, lacking the degree of institutionalisation, economic interdependence, normative density, and nuclear deterrence that characterise the twenty-first century. For this reason, speaking of a Palmerstonian rationality is valid only in analogical terms: it helps explain the centrality of national interest and the relativisation of alliances, but it does not replace empirical analysis or theoretical mediation.

Three Explanatory Lenses as a Theoretical Framework

Hans J. Morgenthau (1904–1980)⁵, from the perspective of classical realism, interpreted international politics as a struggle for power, linked to human nature and to the prudence of the statesman. Kenneth N. Waltz (1924–2013)⁶, by contrast, writing from the standpoint of neorealism, shifted the explanation toward the anarchic structure of the international system, particularly the role of anarchy and the distribution of capabilities among states. In both formulations, however, national interest, security, and self-help appear as fundamental categories for understanding state behaviour (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979).

This framework helps explain why great powers condition support, redistribute burdens among allies, employ diplomatic, economic, or military coercion, and subordinate normative principles to strategic calculations. From this perspective, the international

⁵ German-American political scientist, regarded as one of the leading exponents of classical realism. His most influential work, *Politics Among Nations* (1948), argued that international politics should be understood through the concept of interest defined in terms of power, and that states act within an environment marked by conflict, prudence, and the pursuit of power. In his approach, human nature, ambition, and the struggle for power occupy a central place. Morgenthau, H. J. (1948). *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*. Alfred A. Knopf.

⁶ American political scientist and the principal theorist of neorealism, or structural realism. In *Theory of International Politics* (1979), he shifted the explanation of international politics away from human nature and toward the anarchic structure of the international system. For Waltz, the decisive factor is not so much that leaders “want power”, but that states, in the absence of a world government, must act according to a logic of survival, self-help, and balance of power. Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Addison-Wesley.

order is not an autonomous moral end, but rather a configuration always dependent on the distribution of power (Waltz, 1979).

Liberal institutionalism introduces a decisive corrective. Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr. (2011)⁷ do not deny the persistence of power or conflict; rather, they argue that, in an interdependent world, competition among states coexists with institutions, shared costs, and forms of influence that cannot be reduced to the use of force. Within this framework, the increasing density of economic, technological, and institutional ties modifies the mechanisms through which international rivalry is expressed. Even a great power with a nationalist orientation must operate within supply chains, regulatory regimes, and coordination frameworks that constrain pure unilateralism. Interdependence does not guarantee automatic harmony, but it remains a central variable in explaining international politics.

From a constructivist perspective, Alexander Wendt (1992)⁸ argued that anarchy does not, by itself, impose an invariable logic of self-help, since the interests, identities, and perceptions of states are socially constructed through interaction. Consequently, international politics cannot be explained solely by the material distribution of power, but also by the ideas, norms, and meanings that mediate state behaviour. From this standpoint, the language of America First, distrust toward permanent commitments, and the redefinition of allies according to utilitarian criteria generate real effects on trust, legitimacy, and political cohesion.

Taken together, these three approaches offer a complementary analytical framework for interpreting President Trump's foreign policy. Realism captures the primacy of national interest, the weight of great-power competition, and the instrumental character of alliances; liberal institutionalism helps identify the limits that interdependence and institutions impose even on outwardly nationalist strategies; and constructivism highlights how discourses, identities, and frameworks of legitimacy shape international conduct. On this basis, it becomes possible to examine more precisely the relationship between the

⁷ Both authors are central figures in liberal institutionalism. Together, they developed the concept of complex interdependence, while Nye also gained wide recognition for his later formulation of the concept of "soft power."

⁸ He is one of the central figures of constructivism in international relations. The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes him as one of the most influential theorists of the social-constructivist approach and notes that his 1992 essay, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," established him as a leading reference within that school of thought. Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics. *International Organization*, 46(2), 391–425

Trump administration, multilateralism, and international institutions.

Trump: National Interest, Geoeconomics, and Conditional Alliances

The strategic vision of the Trump administration was codified with particular clarity in the *2025 National Security Strategy*, in continuity with the *America First Policy Directive to the Secretary of State* and the *America First Trade Policy*, both issued in January of that same year. This body of documents asserts that United States foreign policy should focus on the defence of fundamental national interests, moving away from universalist aspirations and privileging sovereignty, security, prosperity, technological primacy, and strategic freedom of action under the logic of *America First* (The White House, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c)⁹.

In its hemispheric dimension, the *2025 National Security Strategy* also incorporates a “Trump Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine, thereby reaffirming the Western Hemisphere as a priority space for strategic protection against the economic, technological, and political penetration of rival powers, particularly China. In this way, the strategy articulates a vision in which security, trade, technology, strategic geography, and alliances are subordinated to a hierarchical and instrumental logic.

This orientation did not remain confined to the doctrinal level. The White House promoted the *America First Priorities*, advanced the *America First Investment Policy*, justified reciprocal tariffs and extraordinary trade measures in the name of national security, and moved forward with the securitisation of semiconductors, critical minerals, and strategic industrial supply chains. In the same vein, the *America First Arms Transfer Strategy* subordinated arms transfers, the defence industrial base, and part of the relationship with allies and partners to criteria of strategic utility and the strengthening of national productive capacity (The White House, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c).

Within this framework, the relationship with the United Nations and other multilateral institutions appears not as an absolute rupture, but as a selective, instrumental, and hierarchical engagement. Although the Charter assigns the Security Council primary

⁹ Reuters. (2025a). Reporting on NATO burden-sharing and the Hague summit commitment.

Reuters. (2025b). Reporting on the suspension of U.S. military aid and intelligence support to Ukraine.

Reuters. (2025c). Reporting on the Jeddah talks and the resumption of aid and intelligence sharing.

responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, the Trump administration tended to assess international institutions according to their functionality for United States interests, even reviewing, withdrawing, or restricting support for various international organisations. Rather than a complete abandonment of the multilateral system, what can be observed is the subordination of its political and institutional value to strict criteria of national interest.

NATO, Ukraine, Taiwan, Gaza, and Hormuz as Empirical Evidence

The cases examined make it possible to observe how this strategic rationality operates across distinct yet convergent domains. First, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Ukraine illustrate the functioning of conditional alliances; second, Taiwan reveals the geoeconomic dimension of competition; finally, Gaza and the Strait of Hormuz introduce the practical limits of unilateralism in an environment of intense interdependence.

Within NATO, the Trump administration did not proceed toward a formal withdrawal, but rather toward an explicit renegotiation of burden-sharing. The 2025 Hague Summit culminated in an allied commitment to raise defence and security spending to 5% per cent of GDP by 2035. This makes it possible to argue that Trump did not abandon the Atlantic Alliance but sought to reconfigure it according to a logic of burden distribution and reciprocity, challenging an arrangement that Washington considered disproportionately disadvantageous to its own interests. Along the same lines, Trump repeatedly argued that the United States could no longer continue to bear the principal burden of Alliance security on its own and warned that allied commitment had to operate in both directions, rather than merely as a unilateral American guarantee.

The crisis triggered by the war with Iran deepened that logic. Faced with the refusal of several European partners to contribute to the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz and, in some cases, to facilitate bases or airspace for United States operations, Trump and members of his administration argued that Washington should reassess NATO's strategic value for United States interests. Rather than a completed rupture, this reveals a conception of the Alliance as a strictly conditional bond, subordinated to criteria of utility, reciprocity, and strategic freedom of action. In this sense, the conduct of the Trump administration appears to confirm, in contemporary terms, the logic attributed

to Lord Palmerston: neither allies nor adversaries constitute permanent categories, since it is national interest —and not the stability of commitments— that ultimately orders the state's external action (Reuters, 2025a; NATO, 2025)¹⁰.

The Ukrainian case offers an even more direct example of conditional alliance behaviour. In March 2025, Washington suspended military aid and intelligence-sharing with Ukraine and, a few days later, following talks held in Jeddah —the Saudi city located on the Red Sea coast— resumed both forms of support in parallel with a ceasefire proposal and renewed negotiations (Reuters, 2025b, 2025c). From a realist perspective, this illustrates the use of strategic backing as an instrument of pressure and negotiation; at the same time, it shows that the viability of any settlement continues to depend on allies, implementation partners, and political legitimacy.

In the Indo-Pacific, Taiwan occupies a position of dual centrality: because of its geostrategic value and because of its role in semiconductor production. The 2025 *National Security Strategy* underscores both the importance of Taiwan and the relevance of the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. Semiconductor policy confirms, in this regard, that United States security is also expressed in terms of advanced manufacturing, technological nodes, and the resilience of supply chains (The White House, 2025; CSIS, 2024).

The crises in Gaza and the Strait of Hormuz, however, introduce a decisive corrective. In Gaza, reports by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)¹¹ show that, even amid military logic, humanitarian access, civilian protection, and international legitimacy continue to operate as relevant strategic variables. In Hormuz, the International Energy Agency (IEA)¹² documented that the



The NATO Military Committee (MC) constitutes the highest military authority of the Alliance and serves as NATO's principal source of military advice, playing a central role in the formulation of military policy, strategy, and operational guidance. <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/organization/nato-structure/nato-military-committee>

¹⁰ Reuters. (2025a). Reporting on NATO burden-sharing and the Hague summit commitment. North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (2025). The Hague Summit Declaration.

¹¹ It corresponds to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, a body of the UN Secretariat responsible for coordinating humanitarian response in emergencies and disasters.

¹² It is an international organisation specialising in energy security, energy markets, and energy policy, with the capacity

hostilities of early 2026 severely disrupted global energy flows and required coordinated emergency measures, highlighting the extent to which military coercion over a critical node of the international system can produce immediate economic and geopolitical effects. Both cases reveal that power politics today unfolds within an environment marked by dense interdependence, reputational exposure, and shared transnational costs.

The End of Multilateralism or Strategic Subordination?

To assert that multilateralism has collapsed would be excessive. The cases examined do not point to the disappearance of institutions, but rather to the loss of their autonomous normative centrality. NATO has not collapsed; it has been renegotiated. The IEA has not ceased to operate; it coordinated an emergency response. OCHA remained an indispensable actor in Gaza. The United Nations itself retains primary legal responsibility for matters of peace and security, although its effectiveness continues to be constrained by the structure of the Security Council and by the collision of interests among the great powers. In this sense, the problem does not lie in the non-existence of institutions, but in their growing subordination to the strategic logic of the most powerful states.

From this perspective, President Trump's foreign policy does not amount to a total demolition of the liberal order, but rather to its reordering around sovereignty, reciprocity, relative advantage, and strategic primacy. Realism explains this operation with considerable force. However, liberal institutionalism remains indispensable for understanding that interdependence has not disappeared but has ceased to be interpreted as a spontaneous guarantee of harmony. Constructivism, in turn, remains useful for understanding how discourses, identities, and perceptions affect allied cohesion, the legitimacy of international action, and the very way in which order is understood and contested. The most persuasive interpretation of the phenomenon, therefore, is not monocausal, but combined: a predominantly realist logic prevails, though it remains conditioned by the persistence of interdependence, institutions, and legitimacy as still decisive variables.

to monitor supply disruptions and coordinate emergency responses among its member countries.

Conclusions

The evidence examined supports the argument that Donald J. Trump's foreign policy can be interpreted, in analytical terms, as selectively Palmerstonian and, therefore, less as an unprecedented rupture than as the contemporary updating of a persistent strategic rationality in the history of international relations. Indeed, it privileges national interests defined as vital, subjects' alliances to criteria of utility and reciprocity, articulates security, trade, industry, and technology within a single strategic logic, and redefines multilateralism in predominantly instrumental terms. Within this framework, the reference to Palmerston is useful not as a strict historical equivalence, but as an interpretive category for understanding a foreign policy in which external commitments are subordinated to the national interest (Hansard, 1848).

Nevertheless, this analogy does not exhaust the complexity of the phenomenon. The persistence of interdependence, the need for legitimacy, the weight of institutions, and the systemic costs of war indicate that twenty-first-century international politics cannot be explained through an exclusive realism. The Trump case shows, rather, a combination of sovereigntists claims, instrumentalization of multilateralism, and the permanence of cooperation structures that, although strained, continue to be relevant for crisis management and for the stability of the international system.

Consequently, Palmerston's principal usefulness does not lie in his value as a simple historical parallel, but in his capacity to illuminate the persistence of a strategic rationality that reappears, under new conditions, in contexts of great-power competition. In this sense, his relevance does not rest on mechanically anticipating the present, but on reminding us that, when systemic pressure intensifies, states once again order their external action not according to permanent loyalties, but according to interests they deem essential for their security, position, and survival. Two centuries later, the lesson endures: when order falters, nations return, time and again, to the hard grammar of interest.

*José Ignacio Álvarez Chaigneau**

Captain (Marine) (Ret.)
PhD Candidate in Geography and History
Professor, Chilean Naval War College