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**From Alliance to Contestation:
How Trump's Populist rhetoric reviewed
U.S. Relations with United Kingdom and
the European Union**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis put into question Donald Trump's foreign policy through the constructivist lens of populism, with a specific focus on its implications for transatlantic relations. The thesis first positions populism within the field of international relations, examining how its rhetorical and performative dimensions can shape diplomatic strategies, the framing of international partnerships, and the definition of adversaries. Building on this conceptual grounding, the study explores the distinctive features of Trump's brand of populism, characterized by nationalist appeals, a constant emphasis on sovereignty, and the construction of politics as a struggle between "the people" and "the elites," both in the domestic and international arena. Subsequently, the focus is on the rhetoric and practice of the "America First" doctrine, while assessing its consequences for traditional allies, in particular with regard to the three main case studies, namely the UK, the EU and NATO. Trump's discourse on Brexit is analyzed in light of his broader nationalist narrative, while his confrontational stance toward the EU is examined through disputes over trade and tariffs. Furthermore, NATO becomes a case study of how populist language can recast burden-sharing debates and redefine the categories of allies and adversaries. Finally, the thesis extends the analysis to the second Trump mandate in 2025, taking into consideration how his rhetoric evolved into concrete policy outcomes regarding the UK and the EU, in particular in the fields of commerce, regulation, and security. By combining theoretical reflections on populism with an empirical assessment of Trump's foreign policy discourse and its transatlantic relations, the research highlights the ways in which populist rhetoric not only reframes diplomatic narratives but also reshapes institutional practices and international alignments.

INTRODUCTION

I GENERAL GROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE THESIS

In the last decades, the role of populism in the global arena has changed and reshaped the international relations worldwide. As we know, it has been the focus of discussions related to domestic policy, but also foreign policy that are linked to and influenced by populism.

Indeed, domestic and foreign policy are not only shaped by the rhetoric of populist leaders, but they are also defined by the concrete measure they enact in policies for example. This is illustrated by Donald Trump and his “America First” discourse which redefines his foreign policy priorities, but also the choice of his administration to withdraw from the Paris Agreement demonstrates how rhetoric and action converge in reshaping international relations. Other examples could be Boris Johnson and his nationalist rhetoric applied to the Brexit campaign and its implementation, and consequently the Brexit referendum. As a consequence, this widespread wave of populism has become object of discussion in the academic field.¹

One of the most relevant and prominent examples in terms of global impact of this phenomenon is Donald Trump, 45th and 47th President of United States, whose populist rhetoric and policies implemented during his first and new second mandates has had deep implications and repercussions not only in the U.S. domestic policy, but mostly foreign policy. Since his entry into the political arena, Donald Trump has reshaped the discourse of U.S. foreign policy through a populist lens, emphasizing nationalism, economic protectionism, and skepticism toward multilateral alliances. Trump’s foreign policy agenda and rhetoric, in relation to the United Kingdom and the European Union, encapsulated in the “America First” slogan, has significantly challenged and influenced traditional diplomatic norms, but also transatlantic relations, in particular with these two main traditional allies.²

¹ Mudde C., Kaltwasser C. R. (2017), *Populism, A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press; Laclau E. (2005), *On Populist Reason*, Verso Books

² Clarke M., Ricketts A. (2017), Donald Trump and American foreign policy: The Return of the Jacksonian tradition, *Comparative Strategy*, Volume 36, Issue 4, pp. 366–379; Desmaele L. (2022), Unpacking the Trump

Due to his rhetoric that has framed allies in the past, such as foundational partnerships like NATO, Trump's rhetoric and acts have brought to a shift in the United States role globally there is a discussion about this also. For this reason, a better understanding of the evolution of this rhetoric between Trump's first and second presidential terms is crucial for assessing its consistency and potential shift.

This thesis aims to examine and analyze the progression of populism in Trump's foreign policy, especially concerning how his rhetoric influenced the transatlantic relations, and its impact on U.S.-UK and U.S.-EU relations. The purpose is to assess whether Trump's rhetoric in respect of traditional allies such as the EU and the UK reflected in his concrete foreign policy actions and implemented policies, with a focus on the degree of continuity between discourse and action. Through this perspective, the thesis aims to provide a view on how populist logic influences international diplomacy and foreign policy by highlighting discursive trends, but also policy execution.

The thesis advances the discourse on populism, focusing on Trump's populism by transcending simplistic interpretations that categorize this phenomenon exclusively as anti-establishment and anti-elitist. Therefore, Trump's rhetorical strategies will be investigated, especially concerning the delineation of U.S. allies and adversaries on the global stage. Trump has depicted the EU bureaucracy, NATO and European leaders in a way that helps us to understand his policy positions and rhetorical instruments used to mobilize domestic audiences and targets but also to justify an aggressive foreign policy. This is also due to the fact that Trump across his mandates has frequently depicted the EU as a sort of rival that had an unfair attitude towards the United States, on the other hand, the Brexit UK is seen and perceived as a good ally for the U.S. since it represented the victory of nationalism that is in line with the sentiments of anti-globalism in Trump's perspective.

What will be particularly relevant in this thesis is underscored by its timely contribution to our understanding of the persistence of populist foreign policy. While Trump's first presidential term surprised the global community with its departure from liberal institutionalism, his new last return to

administration's grand strategy in Europe: power maximisation, relative gains and sovereignty, *European Security*, Vol. 31, Issue 2, pp.180-199

power at the beginning of 2025, with his second term as 47th U.S. President has already provided a chance to evaluate and assess whether this populist agenda was merely a temporary disruption or the onset of a new strategic framework of the U.S. foreign relations, in particular taking into consideration the EU and UK. Notably, the transatlantic relations' dynamics present a rich area for exploration, since they embody the rhetorical framing of "us" versus "them", but also the tangible implications of policy shifts that characterize this historical period.³

II RESEARCH QUESTION

For what it concerns the main central research question guiding this thesis examines the evolution of Trump's populist rhetoric on transatlantic relations during his first and second mandates, as well as the degree to which his foreign policy decisions reflect this rhetoric. The central research question guiding the thesis is: to what extent has Donald Trump's populist rhetoric influenced the transatlantic relationship, and how this rhetoric translated into foreign policy practice across his two presidential mandates?

This question is examined through a focus on the foreign policy and its implications, especially with the study of three core case studies, which are the relations of United States with the United Kingdom, mainly after Brexit, its relations with the European Union, and also with NATO.

The central inquiry is further explored through several sub-questions, for instance what key themes emerge in Trump's populist discourse about the EU and the UK? How do these themes relate to or diverge from actual policies implemented by Trump's administration? To what extent do his actions reveal a coherent foreign policy framework grounded in populism, or were they modified in response to practical considerations? Specifically, how did his discourse affect U.S. relations with U.K in the context of Brexit? In what ways did it shape also its relations with the European Union, especially in the realm of trade? But most importantly, how these dynamics reflected in concrete measures such

³ Mudde C., Kaltwasser C.R. (2017), *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 5-19

as tariffs and trade agreements that characterized the transatlantic arena in the late 2010s and the beginning of Trump's second mandate in 2025?

Indeed, to address these questions, the thesis examines the three case studies already specified, they have been selected because they represent the most significant and long-standing pillars of the transatlantic alliance, while also providing clear examples of how Trump's discourse produced rhetorical and policy shifts. The case study concerning United Kingdom illustrates how Trump's populism converged with Brexit nationalism, while the EU one reveals his construction of this supranational institution as an adversarial actor, not only, but also NATO demonstrates how his rhetoric destabilized institutional norms of burden-sharing and collective defense.

Therefore, the general hypothesis guiding this thesis is that Trump's populist and nationalistic rhetoric was not merely symbolic but found partial continuity in the foreign policy choices of his administration towards the EU and the UK, in particular in the field of trade and security.

III METHODOLOGY

In order to answer to these questions, it is also useful to analyze and compare the core case studies within a specific theoretical framework. The thesis adopts a constructivist perspective within International Relations, emphasizing the role of ideas, discourse, and identity in influencing foreign policy, as described by Wendt. Constructivism provides a suitable framework for analyzing populism, since it treats international politics not as fixed structures but as socially constructed through interactions and identities of political actors. Starting from this standpoint, discourse becomes predominant, because it constitutes the identities of allies and adversaries, but it also legitimizes or delegitimizes norms and guides foreign policy choices.⁴

The main methodological tool employed is Critical Discourse Analysis, following Norman Fairclough's "Critical discourse analysis: the critical study of language" (2010), which allows the

⁴Wendt A. (1999), *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge University Press

application of the identity-construction approach in this study in order to show how Trump's rhetoric redefined allies and adversaries, complemented by a historical critical discourse analysis lens that situates his discourse within a long history of American nationalism. The norm contestation perspective is in part employed as well in the thesis with the aim to assess how his language undermined liberal internationalist norms and advances competing policy solutions.⁵

The research design is qualitative and based on three case studies, which have been selected because they represent the central pillars of the transatlantic relationship, where Trump's rhetoric and policies had the most visible and tangible effects, thus providing a ground on which to test the research question of the thesis and to find the concrete continuity in foreign policy practices across his two presidential terms.

Furthermore, primary sources will be used with the aim to evaluate the influence of Trump's rhetoric on actual diplomatic actions and agreements, but also Trump's official speeches, press briefings, interviews and policy documents such as the 2017 National Security Strategy. On the other side, secondary sources consist of scholarly literature on populism and foreign policy, analysis of U.S.-EU, U.S.-UK relations and policy reports, Trump's foreign policy media analysis and academic articles and research, taking into consideration hot topics and issue prevailing nowadays such as the one of tariffs on European goods, UK trade negotiations.⁶

By combining constructivist theory with critical discourse analysis and the study of these three case studies, the methodology enables a comprehensive understanding of how rhetoric and practice intersect in the formulation of Trump's foreign policy, facilitating a comprehensive examination on both language and practice.

⁵ Fairclough, N. (2010), *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (2nd edition), Routledge

⁶ The White House official document, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, *National Archive White House website*, December 2017 ; Laclau E. (2005), *On Populist Reason*

IV STATE OF LITERATURE

The scholarly debate on populism has expanded considerably in the last decades, however it remains divided on how to interpret its implication for international relations. The majority of the earlier literature approached to populism primarily as a domestic phenomenon and an example are Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) that describe populism as “thin-centered ideology”, or authors such as Moffitt (2016) highlight the function of populism as a distinct political style characterized by crisis narration and appeal to “the people” against the corrupt elites. However, in contrast to this position there are ideologies that follow Laclau’s (2005) one, that conceptualizes populism as a discursive logic that constructs political identities through antagonistic binaries.⁷

Nevertheless, applied to foreign policy, some scholarship reveals such as Lacatus (2021) or Chryssogelos (2017) how populist rhetoric actively reshapes alliance, undermines international trust and also transforms the tone and content of diplomatic engagement; similarly Friedman and Shapiro (2017) emphasize Trump’s approach as signal of a break with the liberal internationalist consensus, while Görden (2021) highlights how Trump’s policies pushed the European Union towards greater strategic autonomy.⁸

On the whole, within the transatlantic context, the literature on populism and foreign policy reflects a complex and sometimes contradictory landscape, since while some scholars interpret it as primary rhetorical and domestically oriented, other stress its capacity to transform international alignments and institutions. Notwithstanding this, these perspectives are not mutually exclusive, but rather they highlight the difficulty to capture a phenomenon that operates at the same time on both levels, the discursive and the practical ones. However, the thesis adopts an approach that aims to connect rhetoric with policy outcomes, showing how Trump’s rhetoric frames allies and adversaries, but it

⁷ Mudde C., Kaltwasser C.R. (2017), *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*; Moffitt, B. (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford University Press;

⁸ Lacatus C. (2021), Populism and President Trump’s approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches, *Politics*, Vol. 41, Issue 1; Chryssogelos A. (2017), Populism in Foreign Policy, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, Oxford University Press; Friedman G., Shapiro J.L., The Limits of the Trump Doctrine, *Horizons*, Autumn 2017, Issue no.9, pp.12-19; Görden A., (2021), US-EU Relations in the Trump Era: Quest for Autonomy in Europe, *Atatürk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 1373-1395

also reveals his tangible foreign policy outcomes. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how populist leaders like Trump alter and modify the meaning of alliances and challenge the stability of international norms.

V THESIS STRUCTURE

The first part of this thesis will provide an overview on populism through different perspectives and populism theories, especially concerning the strategy of foreign policy of Trump. Indeed, the first chapter provides the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the thesis, taking into consideration the scholarly debates on populism, clarifying the distinction between populism as a “thin-centered ideology” by Mudde and Kaltwasser, and populism as a political style by Moffitt. This discussion locates populism within the wider field of International Relations (IR), which has only recently begun to integrate populism as a transnational phenomenon. Moreover, this chapter further explores the relevance of constructivism as the overarching theoretical framework, emphasizing how ideas, discourse and identity shape international politics.

The second chapter applies this theoretical framework to the case of U.S. President Donald J. Trump, examining in depth the rise of the “America First” doctrine during his first mandate and its implications for U.S. relations with United Kingdom, European Union and NATO, which are the three core case studies of this thesis. Using critical discourse analysis to Trump’s speeches, press conferences, interviews and social media communications, the chapter highlights the recurring populist themes that are sovereignty, distrust of elites and nationalism. The case studies demonstrate how the United Kingdom was discursively elevated as a model ally aligned with populist values (in particular in the context of Brexit), while the European Union was framed as an adversarial, trade rival and bureaucratic elite undermining the U.S. interests. In contrast, NATO was depicted as an oppressive institution wakened by its member states that fail in contributing equally and adequately. Beyond the rhetorical sphere, the chapter also explains the policy consequences of these narratives, for instance the beginning of trade disputes with the European Union, the support

for a bilateral trade agreement with the United Kingdom and the disruptive summit performances within NATO. Therefore, the chapter illustrates the constitutive power of Trump's rhetoric in reshaping the tone and practice of transatlantic relations.

Finally, the third chapter extends this analysis by evaluating the degree of continuity between Trump's populist rhetoric and his foreign policy actions across his first mandate (2017-2021) and the beginning of his second one in 2025, the one to which the chapter mainly focuses on in relation with the three core case studies. The chapter also examines key areas of continuity, such as trade relation with the United Kingdom officially following Brexit, tariff and regulatory disputes with the European Union, and the persistent burden-sharing debates with NATO. This part addresses particular attention to the second mandate, which, despite it is still in progress, it has already revealed the persistence of the same rhetorical and policy patterns first established during the first presidential mandate, and by combining discourse analysis with policy evaluation, the chapter highlights how Trump's populist worldview has remained consistent over time.

These three chapters, taken into consideration together, provide a comprehensive analysis of Trump's populist foreign policy from theory to application. Indeed, by progressing from theoretical debates to empirical case studies and finally to an evaluation of Trump's continuity, the thesis helps for a better understanding of populism as a discursive and practical force as well, that redefines alliances and reorient the transatlantic relationships. Therefore, the thesis not only contributes to the study of U.S. foreign relations during Trump's presidencies, but it also highlights how generally populist leaders challenge the strength and flexibility of multilateral institutions and reshape the dynamics of global politics.

1. UNDERSTANDING TRUMP IN FOREIGN POLICY THROUGH POPULISM

1.1 THE CONCEPT OF POPULISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

This chapter aims to analyze and explore the theoretical foundation of populism in the field of foreign policy in order to understand more efficiently the focal point of this thesis. In the last decades, populism has gained much attention worldwide. In the past, and still today, it has been a dynamic, but mostly a polarizing force in domestic politics. Populism is a complex phenomenon that transcends traditional borders between left and right wing, indeed, both experienced populism in different forms with different backgrounds, However, populism is known to be characterized by its anti-elitist stance, accentuating and bringing into focus the will of the people, and its deep skepticism towards established institutions.⁹ In this way, populism has transformed and reorganized traditional party structures, moreover it has also challenged the group of elite authority.¹⁰

1.1.1 POPULISM BEYOND DOMESTIC POLITICS

in recent years, populism has overspread beyond domestic borders, and it has expanded, achieving more and more space into the international arena. To this extent, at most in the past few years, populism has gained significant awareness and recognition as well. This recognition of populism all over the world is also a consequence due to the key role of many populist leaders from different part of the planet, who have reshaped the domestic policy and the dimension of their own countries. Not only, but they have also changed the manner in which these nations interact with global system overall. Some examples of these populist leaders can be Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Donald Trump in the United States, but also Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Pablo

⁹ Mudde C. (2004), *The Populist Zeitgeist*, *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 39, Issue 4, pp. 541–563; Laclau E. (2005), *On Populist Reason*, pp.6-7

¹⁰ Moffitt, B. (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Chapter 3, pp.37-58

Iglesias in Spain or Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico. Furthermore, these leaders have also brought in their countries a distinctive point of view of the world that somehow redefines by what means their nations engage with the outside world and play a crucial role in the international arena. Indeed, nowadays it is possible to assert that populism is no longer confined and limited to domestic politics. On the contrary, it has become a lens through which nations connect each other, but mostly to a large extent with the international community, this is due to the fact that as previously mentioned, populism is a global phenomenon since it transcends all kinds of borders, physical and ideological.¹¹

1.1.2 POPULISM AS A POLITICAL STYLE

The emergence of populism disrupts the conventional diplomatic frameworks by presenting unpredictable and unstable actors, whose behavior is shaped by a political style that emphasizes conflict, crisis and direct appeals to “the people”. These actors consistently refuse and deny established diplomatic norms and multilateralism, indeed, following Benjamin Moffitt (2016), in his analysis that focuses on populism viewed as a political style, he assumes that populist leaders engage in a form of political performance that emphasizes crisis, integrity and fairness engagement. The application of this performative style in the international contexts fundamentally reshapes and leads to a profound transformation in diplomatic practices and the associated expectations surrounding them.¹²

The phenomenon of populist foreign policy transcends the mere characteristics and peculiarities of individual leadership styles; it is anchored in a more profound ideological critique of the existing global governance structures. Generally, populist figures and leaders depict international institutions and agreements as instruments through which unaccountable elites exert control and their authority over independent, sovereign states. This rhetoric echoes with domestic audiences who perceive themselves as marginalized and alienated by the forces of globalization and undermined by expert-

¹¹ Chrysogelos A. (2017), *Populism in Foreign Policy*, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*

¹² Moffitt, B. (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, pp. 37-58

led governance and decision-making processes. Chrysosgelos (2017) asserts that populist leaders frequently tend to reinterpret the international order and landscape in moralistic terms, drawing a distinction between the virtuous, sovereign populace and the corrupt, cosmopolitan elite. Consequently, in this framework, international cooperation is viewed with skepticism, and foreign policy is transformed as a struggle to restore national dignity and sovereignty.¹³

Indeed, the communication approaches employed by populist leaders play a crucial role in this process of transformation. Populist discourse typically relies on clear dichotomies, some of them, which are well-known are “us versus them”, “good versus evil”, “insiders versus outsiders”.¹⁴ As a consequence, on the global stage, these dichotomies are projected onto foreign entities and institutions. This can be seen, for example in figures like political leaders such as Trump and Bolsonaro, who have consistently characterized international treaties, organizations, and even allies as threats to national own interests. This rhetorical framing allows them to justify significant deviations from traditional foreign policy practices, including the withdrawal from international agreements, the intensification of trade disputes and tensions, or the unilateral alteration of security framework. As Lacatus (2021) illustrates in her examination of Trump’s foreign policy rhetoric, this type of discourse is not merely incidental; as a matter of fact, it serves as a crucial tool for legitimizing populist shifts in policy.¹⁵

Throughout history, aspects of populism have emerged in foreign policy, especially during times of significant and substantial national change or international instability and turmoil. A notable example is the American isolationist attitude of the early 20th century, which was influenced by a distrust and skepticism towards foreign involvements and the actions of the elite in diplomatic matters. In contrast, the present-day wave of populism is characterized by its widespread influence and its manifestation into the foreign policy framework of various nations.

¹³ Chrysosgelos A. (2017), *Populism in Foreign Policy*, pp. 13-14

¹⁴ Mudde C., Kaltwasser C. R. (2017), *Populism, A Very Short Introduction*, pp.7, 82, 116.

¹⁵ Lacatus C. (2021), *Populism and President Trump’s approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches*, pp. 31-47

In addition, the ideological aspects deep-rooted in populism are not uniform and subject to alterations based on the surrounding contexts, and these aspects contribute to its characterization since populism results in a flexible, dynamic analytical construct. For example, right-wing populism often places a strong emphasis and importance on cultural protectionism, it advocates for restrictive anti-immigration policies and adopts a militarized approach to external threats as well. On the other hand, left-wing populism is more likely to prioritize issues such as anti-imperialist sentiments, advocate for economic fairness, and fostering solidarity among regions. Despite the differences, both forms of populism express and disclose a shared tendency to portray international relations as a constant situation characterized by conflict between the populace and the global elites. This recurrent ideological foundation allows for comparative analysis across different regional frameworks and contexts, as discussed by scholars like Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), who in this regard point out the flexibility of populist narratives in relation to local political circumstances.¹⁶

The effects of populist foreign policy on institutional structures are substantial, and this can be seen in leaders who tend to adopt a populist attitude, they also regularly are more likely to ignore and to bypass conventional diplomatic frameworks, choosing instead a direct and often exaggerated form of interactions at the international level. This variety of approach led to a diminution of the role of bureaucratic institutions, moreover it weakens the historical knowledge that foreign ministries have; indeed, about this regard, it compromises the credibility, the consistency and predictability that are required for effective international collaboration worldwide.¹⁷ Populist diplomacy may achieve short-term success and immediate results by prioritizing dramatic displays over meaningful dialogue, but it also compromises and jeopardizes the possibility of an enduring stability over time.

Back to what was previously written, populism has been traditionally regarded as a phenomenon confined mainly to domestic political arenas; however, the arrival of populist leaders and movements across various regions (such as the United States, Latin America, Europe and Asia) had significantly modified the perceptions and interactions of state actors with regards to the international order and

¹⁶ Mudde C., Kaltwasser C. R. (2017), *Populism, A Very Short Introduction*, pp.7, 82, 116

¹⁷ Mudde C., Kaltwasser C. R. (2017), *Populism, A Very Short Introduction*, pp.4, 17, 59

system. Notwithstanding this, these populist leaders get political support by people by framing political debate as a moral battle between an honorable citizenry and a corrupt ruling class. These populist figures attract political support. This binary perspective inevitably spreads to the international level, affecting in this way diplomatic relations, cooperation between countries, and consequently strategic alliances.

As a matter of fact, in his work, Cas Mudde (2017) provides a critical examination of populism, by establishing a basic definition of it as a “thin-centered ideology” that simplifies societal divisions into two homogeneous and opposing factions: the pure populace and the corrupt elite. This conceptual dichotomy is important in understanding the manner and the rhetoric employed by populist leaders, who frequently depict international institutions and global elites as components of the challenges they seek to address, providing insight into their foreign policy strategies.¹⁸

In the moment in which this perspective of the world is applied to the realm of foreign policy, as a consequence, it generates a relevant sense of distrust towards multilateralism, prioritizing in this way the principle of national sovereignty over cooperative engagement.¹⁹ This often leads to a confrontational approach towards traditional allies and the structures of global governance, thereby the result is a reductionist, straightforward and potent framework that challenges the legitimacy of established diplomatic practices, international institutions, and long-standing alliances. Mudde articulates that “it is not overly contentious to state that populism always involves a critique of the establishment and an adulation of the common people”, and in terms of foreign policy, this perspective emphasizes the importance of a focus on national sovereignty, a tendency towards unilateralism, and a critical stance towards international agreements that are perceived as compromising and undermining the will of the domestic population.²⁰

To what it concerns the notion of populism, in particular as it relates to the field of international relations, over the past few decades, scholars have given significant academic attention, shifting its

¹⁸ Mudde C., Kaltwasser C. R. (2017), *Populism, A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 6-8;19-20

¹⁹ Lacatus C. (2021), *Populism and President Trump’s approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches*, pp. 31-47

²⁰ Mudde C., Kaltwasser C. R. (2017), *Populism, A Very Short Introduction*, p. 5

primary focus from the national politics, within its context to the increasingly captivating field of international relations (IR). The rise of populist movements globally, as demonstrated by the electoral achievements of figures like Donald Trump in the United States, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Jai Bolsonaro in Brazil, has brought attention to the significance and need for a more thorough investigation and exploration of the ways in which populist ideologies and practices interact with the international political environment.²¹ Populism and its expansion entail and poses troubling, critical challenges concerning the pillars and foundational principles on which the liberal international order is built. This order is indeed characterized by multilateral cooperation, global governance frameworks, and the institutionalization of liberal democratic values.

1.1.3 INSTITUTIONAL AND ALLIANCE IMPLICATIONS

As the authors in *New Directions in the Study of Populism in International Relations* (2023) provide one of the earliest and most detailed theoretical frameworks for analyzing populism in the context of International Relations, and he highlights the fact that populist frequently perceive international politics through a moralistic point of view. As a matter of fact, they apply this perspective to domestic affairs, in addition, they write that populist foreign policy is characterized by a strong feeling of distrust towards multilateral institutions, along with a predilection to bilateral, transactional, and often individualized diplomatic relations. This type of approach pursues certain international alliances, relations and treaties with significant prudence and caution, reaching in some cases the point of revealing a strong and direct opposition to international organizations. Furthermore, populism is asserted to cause an important conflict between the ideals and values that belong to the liberal international order and the populist tendency to prioritize the national sovereignty alongside the direct representation of the citizenry. However, this specific difference of opinion leads to a disagreement between the two factions, influencing in this way populist leaders to regard international institutions,

²¹ Mudde C., Kaltwasser C. R. (2017), *Populism, A Very Short Introduction*; Chryssogelos A. (2017) *Populism in Foreign Policy*

for instance the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and European Union, as elitist frameworks that jeopardize and threaten democratic responsibility.²²

In addition, the authors of this forum distinguish two main and predominant mechanisms by which populism influences foreign policy; the first one concern institutional disruption, which means the way in which populist leaders frequently undermine established foreign policy institutions, which can be expert advisory bodies and governmental ministries. This can lead to a meaningful change in the manners in which foreign policy is perceived, formulated and also executed, as traditional channel of knowledge and diplomacy are recognized as subsidiary in favor of more populist-driven agendas.²³

Cas Mudde, a prominent figure in the field of populism research affirms that populism is characterized as a thin-centered ideology that perceives society as divided into two opposing factions: the pure people and the corrupt elite.²⁴

In this context, the application of populist reasoning creates a clear division between the common people and the global elite, it also implicates global entities such as the European Union, the United Nations, and multinational corporations to be perceived as members of a globalist framework and system that threatens the autonomy of national sovereignty. In fact, according to the author, the populist reasoning against globalization transcends mere economic concerns, and it fundamentally seeks to restore authority over decision-making processes.²⁵

The theoretical contributions of Ernesto Laclau provide profound insights into the dynamics of populism. In his work, *On populist Reason* (2005), he argues that populism transcends the boundaries of a simple ideology, since it functions as a discursive strategy that aims to form political identities. On this matter, Laclau asserts that populism arises from the establishment of equivalent chains, which are coalitions of different demands and grievances that combine each other in

²² Chryssogelos A. et. Al. (2023), *New Directions in the Study of Populism in International Relations*, *International Studies Review*, Vol. 25, Issue 4, pp. 3-15

²³ Chryssogelos A. et. Al. (2023), *New Directions in the Study of Populism in International Relations*, p.11

²⁴ Mudde C., Kaltwasser C. R. (2017), *Populism, A Very Short Introduction*, pp.5-8

²⁵ Mudde C., Kaltwasser C. R. (2017), *Populism, A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 13-14; 18-19

opposition to a shared adversary.²⁶ This conceptual framework enables a subtle understanding of populism as fundamentally relational and characterized by antagonism, for this reason Laclau emphasizes that the formation of “a people” depends always on the existence of an adversary, which is essential as a necessary counterpart for the construction of a collective identity.²⁷ This argumentation has direct repercussions for international relations; indeed, the international landscape becomes a domain into a context where the collective will of people must compete against powerful opponents, including transnational elites, globalist ideologies, and institutional norms that are thought to undermine national identity. As a result, foreign policy is not simply a matter of pragmatic strategic interests, but it becomes an extension of domestic political conflicts, which is an arena where sovereignty, autonomy, and identity are emphatically reestablished.

In his work, Laclau provides a perspective on populism, conceptualizing it as a political framework that delineates identity by establishing a dichotomy between “the people” and “the other”, indeed he affirms that the formation of popular identities involves complex societal demands into a singular collective will.²⁸ This approach that might be perceived as simplistic is particularly perceptible in the domain of foreign policy, where populist leaders often reject pluralistic and multilateral approaches in order to favor a more exclusionary tactic, and consequently, this predisposition of populists not only influences the behavior of individual states, but it also has effects on the dynamics of international cooperation, since these populist figures attempt to align their external policies with domestic version that emphasize exclusion and a return to their domestic values.

The theoretical understanding and perspective provided by Laclau significantly deepen this examination of populism applied to foreign policy and the context of international relations; indeed, he reinterprets populism, conveying the suggestion that it should not be perceived as a rigid ideology, but rather as a flexible political logic or discursive strategy that helps to facilitate the creation of popular identities. Furthermore, he argues that populism is the result of the development of what he refers to as “equivalential chains”, which is the integration of heterogeneous social demands through

²⁶ Laclau E. (2005), *On Populist Reason*

²⁷ Laclau E. (2005), *On Populist Reason*, pp. 230-232

²⁸ Laclau E. (2005), *On Populist Reason*, pp. 50-52

a common explanation, which is often formulated in opposition to a perceived elite or establishment.²⁹ Laclau famously states "the emergence of the 'people' requires the passage —via equivalences — from isolated, heterogeneous demands to a 'global' demand which involves the formation of political frontiers and the discursive construction of power as an antagonistic force " and this theoretical framework is crucial for the field of International Relation because it reveals the mechanism through which populism works, emphasizing the role of symbolic construction and antagonistic logic, both of which are critical for reconceptualize foreign policy as a landscape characterized by conflict based on identity.³⁰

The symbolic and antagonistic aspect of populist foreign policy discourse is clearly perceptible, since it frequently characterizes international relations in terms of existential threats, and this perspective transforms foreign policy from a mere consideration of economic or strategic interests into a moral struggle which aim is to combat globalist elites, international technocrats, and foreign entities that are seen and perceived as jeopardizing the sovereignty of nation and identity. As a consequence, populist foreign policy can be interpreted as a projection of domestic discontent, with the purpose of sustain the internal populist agenda by identifying enemies outside the borders of the own nation.³¹

The role of populism in International Relations is becoming more uniformly acknowledged and recognized, leaving in this way its previous status as a minor or insignificant element; thus, academics are increasingly conscious about the fact that populism not only affects the establishment of foreign policy, but the ways in which such policies are articulated, justified, and perceived by various stakeholders as well. In the introduction to *Populism and Foreign Policy: A Research Agenda* (2021), Sandra Destradi, David Cadier, and Johannes Plagemann assert that the influence of populism on foreign policy has often been underestimated, however, its implications for diplomacy, multilateralism, and strategic partnership are significant and too profound to dismiss.³²

²⁹ Laclau E. (2005), *On Populist Reason*, pp. 74-85

³⁰ Laclau E. (2005), *On Populist Reason*, p. 110

³¹ Laclau E. (2005), *On Populist Reason*; Chryssogelos A. (2017) *Populism in Foreign Policy*

³² Destradi S., Cadier D., Plageman J. (2021), *Populism and Foreign Policy: A Research Agenda* (Introduction), *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 19, Issue 6, pp. 663–669

Nevertheless, leaders who adopt a populist approach in International Relations, frequently leave conventional diplomatic practices in favor of direct and often dramatic interactions with other global figures. Indeed, in his work, *The Global Rise of Populism* (2016), Benjamin Moffitt emphasizes the performative nature of populism, arguing that it prospers and develop through the dramatization of crises and the perpetuation of a constant sense of danger; consequently, this theatrical approach extends also into the realm of foreign policy, where populist leaders employ media events, proactive language, and unilateral measures to project an image of strength and determination. The result to this is that such a shift not only transforms the essence of foreign policy, but it also influences its tone and manner of presentation.³³

In addition, an important aspect to take into consideration is the way in which populist narratives transform the structures of alliances and also question ideological connections, for these reasons, leaders who adopt a populist rhetoric often create symbolic distinctions between national and global contexts, describing the international governance as an extension of the dominance they oppose domestically with elites. Similarly, Chrysosgelos further investigates this phenomenon in his publication, *Undermining the West from Within: European populist, the U.S. and Russia* (2010), suggesting that this reasoning clarifies the grounds why some European populists have the tendency to ally with authoritarian regimes like Russia; and this orientation is not just a simple matter of conventional geopolitical strategy and interests; but rather, it has origin from a reciprocal opposition to liberalism, multiculturalism and the principles of Western cosmopolitanism. Generally, such relationships challenge and provoke established perceptions and interpretations of alliance behavior in the realm of international relations, and as a consequence, this imply that the concepts of identity and ideology may play a more critical role than previously recognized.³⁴

The notion of populism in International Relations requires a more comprehensive analytical approach that takes into consideration the ways in which domestic political identities and discourses are projected on the international stage, and this perspective needs scholars to examine critically and

³³ Moffitt B. (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, p. 130

³⁴ Chrysosgelos A. (2010), *Undermining the West from Within: European Populists, European populist, the US and Russia*, *European View*, Vol. 9, Issue 2, pp. 267-277

reevaluate traditional assumptions with respect to rational actor models, institutionalism, and the liberal international order. Vedi R. Hadiz and Angelos Chrysosgelos articulate this concept and challenge in their publication, *Populism in World Politics: A comparative cross-regional perspective* (2017), affirming that *“Reactions arise as a response to two distinct but intertwined processes: frustration with the nature of political representation and participation, and the emergence of new kinds of social marginalization, growing precarious existence and disenchantment with the broken promises of liberal modernity.”*³⁵

The different expressions of populism within foreign policy demands a complete investigation, with the necessity of contextualizing the study of populism in international relations instead of the domestic arena, taking into account the unique political cultures, historical contexts, and institutional frameworks that shape it. Despite the evident diversity, there is a recognizable trend that can be acknowledged in the manner in which populist leaders contend their sovereignty, challenge globalist principles, and boost the moral authority of their national communities. Nowadays, populist leaders are increasingly modifying the dynamics of the international system, and it is crucial to fully understand their motivations and strategies, making this interpretation an urgent intellectual pursuit.³⁶

The study of populism within International Relations transcends the simple cataloguing of anomalies, indeed, it involves a deeper and critical investigation of a significant transformation in the conceptualization of power, legitimacy, and international collaboration, above all in an era that is increasingly characterized by identity politics, societal polarization, and the disintegration of a unified global consensus. Since populism progressively influences the geopolitical dynamics of the twenty-first century, it is essential for both scholars and policymakers to address its consequences, not only for domestic democratic processes but also for the maintenance of international peace and stability. Indeed, within this thesis, the constructivist and discourse-centered framework provide the

³⁵ Hadiz V.R., Chrysosgelos A. (2017), *Populism in World Politics: A comparative cross-regional perspective*, *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 38, Issue 4, p.400

³⁶ Hadiz V.R., Chrysosgelos A. (2017), *Populism in World Politics: A comparative cross-regional perspective*, pp. 399-411

necessary tools to assess whether Trump's populist rhetoric towards the UK and the EU was reflected in his administration's concrete foreign policy actions, and to evaluate how this rhetoric shaped bilateral relations. In order to analyze the transformations occurring in the field of foreign policy under the authority of populist regimes, it is fundamental the understanding of the impact of populist rhetoric, and to do so, it is required not only the involvement of specific policies that are implemented, but also the strategies that leaders adopt to present these policies in a way that let them to connect with their domestic audience. The populist discourse in the realm of international relations is characterized by a remarkable feature, which is the representation of global elites and institutions as their antagonists, and this redefinition of international entities as domestic adversaries enables populist leaders to extend their narrative across national boundaries. As several scholars argue, populism is not only about what is said, but also about how it is said and the effects it generates; and in the context of foreign policy, this approach implies international interactions to be a preservation of the domestic battle between the populace and the elite. Moreover, in this case, it creates a communicative framework where any foreign disagreements or global conflict that can occur are quickly contextualized and permeated with moral significance.³⁷

The individualization of diplomatic practices demonstrates a wider populist skepticism towards international institutions at national and global levels. This populist trend can be observed in various political movements that prioritize personal connections over established protocols; furthermore, such a shift raises questions about the efficacy and legitimacy of traditional diplomatic frameworks. For instance, as illustrated by Donald Trump and his employment of the motto "America First", which has emerged as a fundamental element of his approach applied to foreign relations, since it results to be a rhetorical device and mean that mixes and links nationalist ideals with a critical perspective on the current existing international system. The implications of this slogan into practice extend beyond the simple political rhetoric, through the influence of the engagement of the United States with other nations worldwide. Indeed, during his time in office (first presidential term 2017-2021), Trump frequently criticized NATO, questioning the real effectiveness of United Nations, and he also

³⁷ Moffitt, B. (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism : Performance, Political Style, and Representation* ; Laclau E. (2005), *On Populist Reason*

withdrew from key multilateral agreements such as the Paris Climate Agreement as previously mentioned, but also the Iran Nuclear Deal.³⁸ These kinds of decisions were articulated not only in strategic or economic contexts but they were also presented through a populist lens that characterized these institutions as mechanism of elite control that undermined the will and interests of the general populace; moreover, Trump's speeches at the United Nations, notably the 2018 General Assembly address, were infused with a sense of nationalist defiance and a clear disregard for the principles of global cooperation.³⁹

Indeed, it is clear that the influence of populism on foreign policy is significant and complex since it alters the manner in which nations identify threats, manage diplomatic relations, and interact with global entities as well. In other words, key characteristics of populist approaches to international relations include the focus on individual leaders, a rejection of elite consensus, and a general distrust of multilateral agreements.⁴⁰

1.2 KEY FEATURES OF TRUMP'S BRAND OF POPULISM

1.2.1 POPULISM AS A GUIDING LOGIC IN FOREIGN POLICY

Donald Trump's political rise and first presidency (2017–2021) marked a paradigmatic case of application of populism to foreign policy. Provided that Trump's populism did not merely manifest as a domestic political phenomenon, it became a defining logic of his engagement with the international order. For the most part, his foreign policy approach was characterized by nationalism, anti-globalism, rhetorical aggression, and a personalistic style of leadership that turned upside down

³⁸ Public record from Trump administration (2017–2021), *National Archive White House website*, available at : <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/> last consulted: 4 June 2025

³⁹ Remarks by President Trump to the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, *National Archive White House website*, 25 September 2018, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-73rd-session-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-ny/> last consulted: 25 August 2025

⁴⁰ Moffitt, B. (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, pp. 15-21; pp. 50-52

traditional norms of diplomacy, however, each of these features illustrates how Trump's populism performed rhetorically and materially in reshaping the role of U.S. in the world.⁴¹

The rhetorical strategies of Donald Trump illustrate how he has framed various groups, such as China, Iran, and undocumented immigrants, as adversaries that presents significant threats to the American life; this not only creates a narrative of conflict but it also reveals Trump as the singular protector of national interests in a turbulent global landscape; for this reason, he effectively transforms the debate concerning international relations into a theatrical struggle, where interests are portrayed as existential for his own nation.⁴²

In particular, Lacatus' analysis (2021) aligns with this perspective through the study of Trump's tweets and public addresses; this research specifies that the communication strategies employed by Trump regarding foreign policy were focused on notions of national victimization, perceived betrayal and disloyalty by global elites, and the glorification of a self-confident leadership. The rhetoric employed by Trump consistently depicted the United States as a nation exploited by allies and adversaries, thereby rationalizing a confrontational and unilateral approach to foreign relations.⁴³ Specifically, still according to Lacatus (2021), Trump's populism can be broken down into several key elements. The first is anti-globalism, which is a fundamental distrust of international institutions and agreements, described as means for elite agendas that undermined American interests. Bilateralism over multilateralism is another important element that Trump frequently criticizes, arguing that they limit U.S. sovereignty, preferring in this way bilateral negotiations where he has the possibility to exercise personal control. Charismatic personalization is the third important aspect since foreign policy under Trump often reflected his personal relationships with other leaders, and an example of this has been noticed in the past whether praising Vladimir Putin or exchanging threats with Kim Jong-un. Finally, protectionism and economic nationalism are crucial, because trade

⁴¹ Lacatus C. (2021), *Populism and President Trump's approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches*; Chryssogelos A. (2017) *Populism in Foreign Policy*, pp.10-17; Moffitt, B. (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, pp. 49-50

⁴² Lacatus C. (2021), *Populism and President Trump's approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches*, pp. 39-44

⁴³ Lacatus C. (2021), *Populism and President Trump's approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches*, pp. 39-40

policies are formulated as tools to restore American manufacturing and jobs, with tariffs and renegotiated deals functioning as proof of his devotion and responsibility towards the American worker.⁴⁴

1.2.2 CORE FEATURES AND POLICY EXPRESSIONS

Cas Mudde identifies one of the core features of right-wing populism as the defense of national sovereignty against both internal and external elites, and Trump operationalized this through his withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, criticism of NATO, and trade wars with China and the European Union.⁴⁵ Probably, for this reason, his speeches often depicted the U.S. as a victim of unfair global practices, echoing Laclau's idea of constructing a collective identity through antagonism; for example, Trump proclaimed at the 2018 UN General Assembly: "We will never surrender America's sovereignty to an unelected, unaccountable, global bureaucracy."⁴⁶ Consequently, as it has been written in the previous paragraphs, in most cases populist rhetoric carries substantial implications in the real world, undoubtedly Trump's rhetoric has had and still has this important role in the international arena. In this case, on the whole, under the leadership of Trump, the United States made the decision to withdraw from pivotal international treaties, such as the Iran nuclear deal; not only, but there was also it was strongly put into question the importance of NATO, alongside the beginning of trade disputes with established partners.⁴⁷ These choices transcended simple policy changes, since they were intricately linked to a Trump's narrative that depicted international engagement as a threat to the sovereignty and the prosperity of the United States. Moreover, his foreign policy style mirrored Moffitt's "perpetual crisis" framework, that expect to address immigration, trade, or global health, and crises were framed in apocalyptic terms that justified exceptional policy shifts, and this is evident by analyzing how Trump framed and is still

⁴⁴ Lacatus C. (2021), *Populism and President Trump's approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches*; pp. 40-44

⁴⁵ Mudde C., Kaltwasser C.R. (2017), *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*

⁴⁶ Laclau E. (2005), *Populism: What's in a Name?*, *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, edited by F. Panizza, London, Verso, pp.32-49; Remarks by President Trump to the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, *National Archive White House website*, 25 September 2018, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-73rd-session-United-nations-general-assembly-new-york-ny/> last consulted: 25 August 2025

⁴⁷ Moffitt, B. (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, pp. 118-136

framing every issue as extremely urgent, for instance China trade and border crisis. The performative aspect was central, therefore major decisions such as relocating the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem or meeting with North Korea's Kim Jong-un were presented as disruptive acts meant to reaffirm U.S. power.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, it is noteworthy to mention that the foreign policy of Donald Trump is not an isolated phenomenon, still it is the external expression of a broader political ideology grounded in populism, nationalism, and anti-elitism.⁴⁹

In other words, what makes his approach especially significant is how deeply he integrated populist themes into the substance of foreign policy. The "America First" doctrine and most iconic foreign policy slogans became the cornerstone of the international engagement of Trump, which exemplifies his nationalist-populist ideology and encloses a vision of the world where each country should fend for itself, where multilateralism is viewed with suspicion, and where foreign policy is essentially transactional. Indeed, Trump used populist rhetoric to delegitimize international institutions, reframe global alliances, and prioritize transactional over normative diplomacy.⁵⁰ The promise of Trump with this motto is to reverse perceived negative effects of globalization American workers and sovereignty; as a matter of fact, Chryssogelos (2017) notes in *Populism in Foreign Policy*, that the rejection of multilateralism and internationalism by Trump is not merely pragmatic, but a performative declaration of moral superiority on behalf of the American people. Namely, Trump's foreign policy was marked by a personalistic style, nationalist rhetoric, and the rejection of expert-driven policymaking.⁵¹ As follows, his inaugural address in 2017 captured this sentiment explicitly: "We assembled here today our issuing a new decree to be heard in every city, in every foreign capital, and in every hall of power, from this day forward: a new vision will govern our land, from this day forward, it's going to be only America first. America first", and this slogan subsequently became a

⁴⁸ Moffitt, B. (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, pp. 118-136

⁴⁹ Chryssogelos A. (2017) *Populism in Foreign Policy*; Destradi S., Cadier D., Plageman J. (2021), *Populism and Foreign Policy: A Research Agenda*

⁵⁰ Lacatus C. (2021), *Populism and President Trump's approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches*, pp. 31-33; 39-44; Clarke M., Ricketts A. (2017), *Donald Trump and America foreign policy: The return of the Jacksonian tradition*, pp. 366-379

⁵¹ Chryssogelos A. (2017) *Populism in Foreign Policy*

guiding principle through which he reassessed and often rejected global commitments, arguing that they no longer served ordinary Americans.⁵²

As we know, Trump often framed foreign relations in terms of deals and balance sheets, viewing allies and adversaries alike through the lens of cost-benefit analysis. The *Foreign Affairs* article *Trump and American Populism* (2016) written by Kazin places Trump within a longer American tradition of anti-establishment politics, and it also highlights the ways in which Trump's populism forged ahead by breaking long-standing norms, openly antagonizing allies, and recasting diplomacy as a stage for domestic political performance.⁵³

Apart from this, a further foundational characteristic of Trump's populism is evident in his invocation of the populist binary division between "the real people" and "the corrupt elite," a classic marker of populist discourse, and in the international arena, this was extended to include transnational elites and global institutions, such as NATO, the United Nations, and the World Trade Organization, which Trump frequently depicted as corrupt or ineffective.⁵⁴ Through time, Trump framed these entities as exploiters of American goodwill and resources, reflecting what Benjamin Moffitt (2016) described as the populist performance of crisis, where constant disruptions and conflicts are emphasized to legitimate radical policy shifts. The consequence of this is that speeches delivered by Trump often employ this motif to emphasize the need to protect the United States from external exploitative forces.⁵⁵

Trump's foreign policy style also embodies a high degree of personalization, a feature common in populist leadership, and he applies it by concentrating decision-making power within a tight and dense circle of loyalists and technocratic experts. Indeed, Sandra Destradi et al. (2021) argue that generally populist foreign policy tends to be more volatile and less institutionalized, driven by the

⁵² Full text: 2017 Donald Trump inauguration speech transcript, *Politico website*, 20 January 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/full-text-donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript-233907> last consulted: 5 June 2025

⁵³ Kazin M., *Trump and American Populism: Old Whine, New Bottles*, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2016, Vol. 95, No. 6, pp.17-24

⁵⁴ Mudde C., Kaltwasser C.R. (2017), *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 6-8; pp. 19-20

⁵⁵ Moffitt, B. (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, pp. 118-136

leader's moral vision rather than strategic calculations, and this approach created unpredictable and frequently reactive diplomacy, as illustrated by Trump's Twitter-based international announcements that bypassed conventional channels.⁵⁶

Another fundamental aspect of Trump's populist foreign policy was his antagonism towards migration and open borders, for this reason he decided to Trump construct immigration as a threat to American identity and security, linking foreign policy with domestic nationalist agendas. The practical demonstration of this is the creation of a border wall with Mexico, his travel bans targeting Muslim-majority countries, and the rhetoric around "invasions".⁵⁷ These marked populist traits belonging to Trump exemplify what Laclau (2005) calls the "empty signifier" strategy, which expect to turn complex problems into simplified symbolic targets that gather support across different part of the population.⁵⁸ The speech of Trump in 2018 at the Oval Office on immigration crisis portrayed the border as a place of national emergency, more specifically Trump stated that "At this very moment, large, well-organized caravans of migrants are marching towards our southern border. Some people call it an "invasion." It's like an invasion. They have violently overrun the Mexican border", it represents a classic populist rhetorical device aimed at generating a sense of urgency and moral clarity.⁵⁹ Moreover, Trump weaponized economic nationalism as part of his foreign policy toolkit: Trade wars with China and the renegotiation of NAFTA into the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) were represented as acts aimed at reclaiming sovereignty. In these instances, Trump represents the United States as a victim of unfair global trade practices arranged by foreign powers and enabled by domestic elites. In fact, generally speaking, he frequently affirmed that the U.S. had been cheated by other countries that took advantage of the U.S., again in this case, still invoking the victimization narrative central to populism.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Destradi S., Cadier D., Plageman J. (2021), *Populism and Foreign Policy: A Research Agenda*, pp. 668-669; Moffitt, B. (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, pp. 69-70

⁵⁷ Lacatus C. (2021), *Populism and President Trump's approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches*, p. 41

⁵⁸ Laclau E. (2005), *On Populist Reason*, pp. 69-72

⁵⁹ Remarks by President Trump on the Illegal Immigration Crisis and Border security, 1 November 2018, *National Archive White House website*, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-illegal-immigration-crisis-border-security/> last consulted: 10 July 2025

⁶⁰ Lacatus C. (2021), *Populism and President Trump's approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches*, pp. 40, 43-44

Besides, another notable rhetorical feature of Trump's foreign policy is his use of moralistic and often theatrical language, for instance there have been cases in which he referred to allies as "delinquent", specifically taking into consideration the case of NATO members who did not meet spending targets, but also enemies with nicknames like "Rocket Man" for North Korea's Kim Jong-un.⁶¹ This discrepancy from diplomatic norms contributed to reinforce his populist image as a truth-teller, namely, "who says it like it is"; and the moral rhetoric of populists often disrupts international cooperation, because it reduces foreign policy to a moral binary of good vs. evil, patriot vs. traitor. Alternatively, Trump's UN speeches were widespread, filled with such moralistic declarations, elevating national pride while denouncing adversaries straightforward, sometimes using incendiary terms.

1.2.3 PERSONALIZED AND PERFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

On the whole, the populist style of Trump also involved a strong anti-media attitude; by regularly accusing mainstream news of being "fake news" and he portrayed critical journalists as enemies of the people as well. Regarding this aggressive relationship extended internationally, Trump has criticized foreign press and delegitimized multilateral forums such as the G7 and the UN when they contradicted his positions and declarations. Furthermore, about this, Moffitt underscores that populist leaders often present themselves as the only authentic voice in a world of distortion and manipulation and the combative stance of Trump with global media channels reflected his domestic media wars and reinforced his anti-elite persona.⁶² In addition, in this perspective Trump inspired and is supported by other populist movements abroad, therefore, his rhetoric has been repeated with leaders like Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Matteo Salvini in Italy.⁶³ As a consequence, this transnational diffusion of populist styles supports Chrysosgelos's (2010) thesis in

⁶¹ Walters J., Trump mocks "Rocket Man" Kim Jong-un as advisers issue warnings, 17th September 2017, *The Guardian website*, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/17/trump-north-korea-rocket-man-tweet> last consulted: 10 July 2025

⁶² Moffitt, B. (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, pp.86-87

⁶³ Destradi S., Cadier D., Plageman J. (2021), *Populism and Foreign Policy: A Research Agenda*, pp. 666-668

Undermining the West from Within, that populists often build rhetorical solidarities that cut across national boundaries, even when formal alliances are absent.⁶⁴

1.2.4 IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS

Critically, Trump's populist foreign policy also exposed contradictions; indeed, while advocating for non-interventionism and criticizing endless wars, his administration escalated tensions with Iran (also during his second term), increased arms sales, and maintained a strong military presence globally. Inevitably, this framework suggests that populist rhetoric does not always translate into consistent policy outcomes, and this is essentially argued by Hadiz and Chryssogelos (2017) in *Populism in World Politics*, since populism in foreign policy is less about ideology and more about political style and narrative framing.⁶⁵ Apart from this, Trump should be contextualized within a broader pattern of global populist leadership, and while his rhetoric was distinctly American, his tactics resonated with populist movements elsewhere, such as bypassing institutional checks, using social media for direct communication, and decrying international elites.⁶⁶

In connection with this, Trump's brand of populism in foreign policy was defined by a combination of nationalist rhetoric, anti-elite discourse, moral polarization, and a personalized leadership style, all elements that disrupted traditional alliances, challenged multilateralism, and recast America's global posture in terms aligned with populist values. Apart from this, understanding these features is essential not only to interpreting his presidency but also to anticipate how future populist leaders may engage with the international system. Notably, populism in foreign policy is as much about how politics is conducted as it is about what is being done, and with respect to the case of Trump, it is a rich and complex illustration of how populism reshapes not only domestic governance but also the broader landscape of international relations.

⁶⁴ Chryssogelos A. (2010) *Undermining the West from Within*, pp.267-277

⁶⁵ Hadiz V.R., Chryssogelos A. (2017), *Populism in World Politics: A comparative cross-regional perspective*, p. 15

⁶⁶ Destradi S., Cadier D., Plageman J. (2021), *Populism and Foreign Policy: A Research Agenda*, p. 667; Lacatus C. (2021), *Populism and President Trump's approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches*

To conclude, Trump's foreign policy exemplifies how populism displayed by a powerful state actor, can radically alter international dynamics; specifically, his administration blurred the lines between domestic populist performance and strategic global engagement, offering a framework that other populist leaders may seek to reproduce or adapt. On the whole, the global diffusion of populism is redefining the contours of international relations, and as shown through the works of Mudde, Laclau, Moffitt, Chrysosgelos, Destradi, and others, populism is not merely a domestic political style but a force that reshapes the substance, tone, and trajectory of foreign policy. Clearly though, throughout rhetorical shifts, institutional transformations, or new geopolitical alignments, populist leaders are redrawing the map of global engagement; so, populism in foreign policy is more than a change in tone or style; it represents a fundamental shift in how international engagement is understood and pursued. In other words, populist leaders bring with them a unique set of values, narratives, and priorities that often clash with the principles of liberal internationalism: their emphasis on national sovereignty, elite skepticism, and emotional resonance reshapes not just the content of foreign policy, but also its process and purpose.

As follows, the presidency of Donald Trump offers a vivid example of how populism can redefine a country's role on the global stage; his foreign policy was not a random collection of controversial decisions, but the coherent expression of a populist worldview that saw the international system as adversarial and in need of disruption.

Finally, this chapter has examined populism in IR theory, its rhetorical dimensions, and the particular case of Donald Trump, showing that populism's impact is both systemic and symbolic. As populist figures continue to rise around the world, at this point, understanding these dynamics becomes critical not just for scholars, but for policymakers navigating a rapidly changing international order

2. TRUMP'S POPULIST RHETORIC ON TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

The 2016 election of Donald J. Trump represents the starting point of an extreme change in the United States' foreign policy, which is still today characterized by a populist and nationalist agenda that challenges long-standing norms of multilateralism. In the last decade, the rhetoric and policies adopted by Trump created a sort of fracture towards traditional transatlantic relations, in particular with the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK); essentially, his presidency corresponded with the historic withdrawal of the UK from the EU through Brexit, and this significant geopolitical change provided fertile ground for him to promote and to pave the way to his populist discourse. In these years, Trump placed himself in a position similar to a champion of national sovereignty against what he delineated as globalist and bureaucratic elites, consequently, Trump embraced Brexit as a form of exoneration to his anti-establishment worldview. Indeed, as mentioned in the previous chapter, populism in the field of foreign policy often analyzes international relations through the lens of sovereignty and the will of the people, portraying supranational entities as illegitimate; therefore, this approach applied to the foreign policy adopted by Trump brings the example of how the roles and position of the EU and the UK after Brexit represents practically this dynamic.⁶⁷

This chapter aim is to examine Trump's post-Brexit relations with the EU and the UK, focusing more on his rhetorical strategies and policy actions, and in this context, the analysis highlights how his populist communication style shaped diplomatic relations, accentuating his use of moralized language, antagonistic framing, and binary narratives. All the works that have already characterized the theoretical framework background such as the ones of Moffitt, Chryssogelos, Lacatus, Mudde and Kaltwasser provide the instruments to recognize and interpret Trump's own speeches, interviews, and tweets; for this reason, this study shows how Trump instrumentalized foreign policy to reinforce his domestic populist agenda. The chapter argues the representation of the EU provided

⁶⁷ Chryssogelos A. (2017), *Populism in Foreign Policy*

by Trump in these decades, which is as an antagonistic, exploitative, and undemocratic entity since the EU differ firmly from his enthusiastic support towards a bilateral partnership with the UK, which he delineates as a sovereign ally reclaiming its independence through Brexit.⁶⁸

In this context, the ascendance of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States characterized by an intense shift in American foreign policy, which is encapsulated in his “America First” doctrine. In particular, this well-known approach not only redefined the diplomatic posture but of Washington, but it also modified its relations with traditional allies, especially in the context of Brexit and the evolving dynamics between the United States, the European Union (EU), and the United Kingdom (UK). In connection with this, the following part of the chapter critically examines the development of “America First” diplomacy in relation to the EU and UK post-Brexit, with particular attention to Trump’s public discourse, policy decisions, and the strategies especially the rhetorical ones that he employed to justify and promote his agenda.⁶⁹

2.1 THE RISE OF “AMERICA FIRST” DIPLOMACY AND ALLIES’ IMPLICATIONS

The notorious slogan “America First” results historically resonant in U.S. politics and it employed a peculiar form under the administration of Donald Trump, identifying its principles and itself as the ideological foundation of his foreign policy. Essentially, the rhetoric of Trump accentuates some fundamental elements like the economic protectionism, national sovereignty, and a transactional approach to international relation; consequently, his vision has often delineated the United States as a victim of unjust global deals and alliances that unsuccessfully prioritized American interests.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Moffitt, B. (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*; Chrysogelos A. (2017), *Populism in Foreign Policy*; Mudde C., Kaltwasser C. R. (2017), *Populism, A Very Short Introduction*; Lacatus C. (2021), *Populism and President Trump’s approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches*

⁶⁹ Ettinger A. (2018), Trump’s National Security Strategy: “America First” meets the establishment, *International Journal: Canada’s Journal of Global Policy Analysis*, Volume 73, Issue 3, pp. 474–483

⁷⁰ Friedman G., Shapiro J.L., The Limits of the Trump Doctrine, *Horizons*, Autumn 2017, Issue no.9, pp.12-19

2.1.1 ECONOMIC PROTECTIONISM AND BILATERALISM

For this reason, it is important to report a portion of speech that Trump pronounced in his 2017 address to Congress: “We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength”. It was inevitable that this message reinforced the protectionist worldview, discussing the fact that traditional alliances, particularly those involving the EU, had eroded American economic strength; moreover, Trump’s emphasis on bilateralism over multilateralism challenged the post-World War II liberal international order, advocating for a readjustment and orientation towards self-reliance and selective engagement.⁷¹

The 2016 election of Donald J. Trump can be considered the meaningful starting point for the established norms of U.S. foreign policy since he embodied his slogan “America First” which marked a rhetorical development and a fundamental transformation in the international engagement strategy of the United States. The “America First” policy is rooted in nationalist and populist discourse, and it brought into play several historical isolationist concerns while responding to contemporary perturbations with respect to globalization, immigration, and the perceived decline of American power; in the same way, this slogan is expression of the perception of international cooperation which is conceived as subordinated to the self-interest of the nation, and a place where alliances are evaluated through a cost-benefit analysis rather than shared values or mutual defense commitments.⁷²

⁷¹ Remarks of President Donald J. Trump, The Inaugural Address, *National Archive White House website*, 20 January 2017, available at : <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/> last consulted: 15 September 2025

⁷² Desmaele L. (2022), *Unpacking the Trump administration’s grand strategy in Europe: power maximisation, relative gains and sovereignty*, 180-199; Friedman G., Shapiro J.L., *The Limits of the Trump Doctrine*, *Horizons*, Autumn 2017, Issue no.9, pp.12-19

2.1.2 REASSESSING ALLIANCES AND NATO

Taking into consideration the historical situation, World-War II lead to a worldview characterized by the consensus that had governed the engagement of the U.S. with allies, especially across the Atlantic, and in this context, nowadays, the rhetoric and policies of Trump interfere with institutional relationships and connections, some examples can be his bond with NATO and the European Union (EU), but also with long-standing diplomatic norms of predictability and multilateralism. Therefore, within this political framework of Donald Trump, it is important to know that the most formal and official formulation of the America First doctrine is encapsulated in the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), which presents a vision of global affairs defined by interstate competition and national sovereignty. The NSS identified four key pillars, which are to protect the American population, to promote American wealth and prosperity, to preserve peace through strength, and to encourage and elevate American influence worldwide; moreover, provided that each of these elements reflected a refusal of the liberal internationalist frameworks that dominated the international order initially, they aim to prioritize foreign policy aspects that lead to hard power, unilateral action, and economic nationalism. As a matter of fact, the NSS provided a description about the role of allies, which are perceives as less co-equal partners and keener on strategic assets that necessitate to be directed and supervised in order to gain an optimal national dominance and advantage. Inevitably, this redefinition of partnership decreased the emphasis that is present on collective defense, which had been and still should be the foundation of the strong transatlantic alliance since the end of World-War II.⁷³

In this perspective, among the most affected institutions by the America First policy there is NATO, which Trump repeatedly criticized its member states because he considered them as

⁷³ The White House official document, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, *National Archive White House website*, December 2017

representatives that were not meeting their 2% defense spending commitments, asserting that the U.S. had endured an inequitable and intolerant burden for European security.⁷⁴

Trump since his first electoral campaign for his first presidential term delivered his rhetoric in public forums such as the NATO Brussels Summit and in private diplomatic interactions, and this fostered uncertainty about the U.S. responsibility and obligations towards collective defense. Nevertheless, the economic aspect that characterizes the America First diplomacy has been clearly revealed in the conflicting approach that Trump adopted with regard to the European Union that will be analyzed afterwards, for instance he introduced a series of tariff threats targeting European manufactures in the automotive field, agricultural exports and many others.⁷⁵

Concerning this economic dimension of the “America First” diplomacy, the declaration that the United States had been systematically disadvantaged by existing global trade frameworks, specifically those involving the EU, brought to important trade conflicts and negotiation, by pursuing an aggressively protectionist agenda, with the aim to renegotiate trade deals, impose tariffs, and recalibrate economic partnerships to prioritize American workers and industries.

Indeed, Trump regularly portrayed, and he still does it today, the EU as a “trade enemy”, accusing it of imposing “massive tariffs” on American goods while benefiting from the U.S. market without mutually compensating the conditions and the advantages. For instance, in a 2018 interview, he affirmed: *“The European Union has treated the United States very unfairly when it came to trade [...] I've had a lot of problems with (the) European Union, and it may morph into something very big from that standpoint -- from a trade standpoint”*.⁷⁶ This narrative

⁷⁴ Boffey D., Rankin J., Trump rebukes Nato leader for not paying defence bills, *The Guardian website*, 25 May 2017, available at : <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/25/trump-rebukes-nato-leaders-for-not-paying-defence-bills> last consulted: 25 July 2025

⁷⁵ Reid J., Trump slams trade relationship with European Union: “We have some very big complaints”, *CNBC website*, 23 January 2025, available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/01/23/trump-slams-trade-relationship-with-european-union-we-have-some-very-big-complaints.html> last consulted: 15 September 2025

⁷⁶ News Wires, Trump blasts “vert unfair” EU over trade, *France 24 website*, 29 January 2018, available at : <https://www.france24.com/en/20180129-trump-blasts-very-unfair-eu-over-trade> last consulted: 25 July 2025

designed trade relations as a zero-sum game where his nation had been exploited, justifying the imposition of tariffs and tough negotiation stances based on the “America First” agenda.

The reasoning of Trump’s administration beyond the decision of imposing tariffs to the EU was that European regulatory frameworks disadvantaged American exporters, and at the time, some European leaders, which include Jean-Claude Juncker and Donald Tusk challenged these allegations by emphasizing the historically cooperative nature of transatlantic trade. Subsequently, a temporary break was reached during Juncker’s visit to Washington in 2018, however, some tensions remained unresolved during that period.

Thus, it is important to analyze the statements made by Trump that helped to strengthen his populist narrative since they depicted international trade agreements as zero-sum arrangements rather than instruments of mutual benefit, as shown by the representation of the EU as “worse than China” for what it concerns trade.⁷⁷

With respect to Trump’s foreign policy preferences, he tried to pursue bilateral deals at the expense of broader institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the United Nations, and NATO. Furthermore, this transition had a chain reaction on allies, particularly in Europe, where diplomatic uncertainty grew exponentially, and in the meantime, the transactional nature of Trump’s diplomacy implied that alliances were viewed through a cost-benefit lens, with loyalty judged by economic and military contributions instead of shared values.⁷⁸ On the other hand, concerning European allies, these changes undermined decades of alliance institutionalization and questioned the significance of normative foundations of the international order. Notwithstanding this, multilateral agreements were portrayed as limitations

⁷⁷ Smith D., Rushe D., Trump and EU official agree to work toward “zero tariff” deal, *The Guardian website*, 25 July 2018, available at : <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/25/trump-juncker-trade-war-eu-zero-tariff-deal> last consulted: 27 July 2025; Korade M., Labott E., Trump told Macron EU worse than China on trade, *CNN Politics website*, 11 June 2018, available at : <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/10/politics/trump-macron-european-union-china-trade> last consulted: 27 July 2025

⁷⁸ Remarks by President Trump to the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, *National Archive White House website*, 19 September 2017, available at : <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-72nd-session-united-nations-general-assembly/> last consulted : 27 July 2025

on U.S. sovereignty, since they were considered to be the pillars of liberal internationalism; as a consequence, the U.S. withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) further conveyed the American intention to avoid from multilateral commitments, often to the consternation owing to the fact that European allies remained parties to those agreements.⁷⁹

Inevitably, the America First provoked ideological and institutional long-term implications for U.S. allies, and from a political perspective, Trump's rhetoric encouraged populist movements in Europe as well, stimulating Eurosceptic leaders and undermining pro-EU consensus in countries like Italy, Hungary, and Poland. From an institutional point of view, the deterioration of American reliability and reputation throughout time brought to attention the issue concerning the security autonomy of the European Union, and in this case, leaders like Emmanuel Macron suggested to organize a "true European army" in order to reduce their subordination to U.S. defense assurances. In fact, within EU policymaking circles the concept of strategic autonomy gained particular adhesion, and Trump's presidency became an incentive for European debates concerning self-reliance, especially regarding defense and technological fields.⁸⁰

2.1.3 BREXIT AND THE UK AS A STRATEGIC PARTNER

Moving on to the context of Brexit, the U.S. attempted to benefit from the UK's departure from the EU by negotiating a bilateral trade agreement, therefore Trump and his administration were enthusiastic for such a deal, for this reason it has been exhibit as a new opportunity to establish

⁷⁹ The White House official document, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, *National Archive White House website*, December 2017; Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord, *National Archive White House website*, 1 June 2017, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-paris-climate-accord/> last consulted: 27 July 2025; Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, *National Archive White House website*, 8 May 2018, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-paris-climate-accord/> last consulted: 27 July 2025

⁸⁰ Brown D., Trump fights Macron's European army over words, not weapons, *Politico.eu website*, 17 November 2018, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-fights-macrons-european-army-over-words-not-weapons-nato/> last consulted: 27 July 2025

a better and fairer partnership with Britain.⁸¹ However, this was moderated by a transactional mentality, for example, the U.S. insisted that any agreement must be advantageous to America, demanding for compromises. The result has been that the economic rhetoric surrounding these negotiations often emphasized mutual benefit but it was clearly anchored in the “America First” principle aiming at protecting domestic industries, but as it can be guessed, this context and these agreements worsened UK’s efforts to quickly secure a trade deal that would have made easier the economic transition post-Brexit.⁸²

That bring us to address to the topic of the rhetorical construction of Allies Under “America First”, in fact the rhetoric of Trump developed a dualism between the United States and its allies, and in this respect, the EU was frequently portrayed as an adversary, and on the other hand, the United Kingdom was described as a more trustworthy partner which is also ideologically compatible with the United States. The rhetorical style of Trump was marked by straightforwardness, populist appeals, and the frequent use of social media platforms, particularly Twitter and Truth Social, which are still used to communicate directly with domestic and international audiences, bypassing in this manner the traditional diplomatic channels, moreover, this contributes to the unpredictability of U.S. foreign policy under the presidential term of Trump.⁸³

Typically, the speeches and tweets conveyed by Trump employ a nationalist and protectionist terminology, capitalizing on domestic apprehensions regarding globalization and immigration while leaving the idea of cooperative multilateralism that had characterized U.S. foreign relations for decades.

However, the rhetoric of Trump, while reflecting the America First mindset, it also brings to a substantial impact on transatlantic relations, among the consequences it led to a period of

⁸¹ Fact Sheet: U.S.-UK Reach Historic, Trade Deal, *National Archive White House website*, 8 May 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/05/fact-sheet-u-s-uk-reach-historic-trade-deal/> last consulted: 9 September 2025

⁸² Sanfuentes A., Dewan A., Trump : UK trade deal expected “very quickly”, confirms London visit, *CNN World website*, 8 July 2017, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/08/europe/trump-may-trade-deal-g20> last consulted: 29 July 2025

⁸³ Ott, Brian L., The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, January 2017, pp. 59-66

uncertainty in transatlantic relations, marked by eroded alliances and increased protectionism, for instance, Trump criticism of NATO and the EU's trade policies mined the economic cooperation. Moreover, the situation has been worsened by Trump's alignment with Brexit Britain, aggravating the dynamics and relations with the European Union, which was facing the loss of one of its utmost members while facing U.S. policies. Trump's choice to stress on bilateral agreements over multilateral frameworks manifested a potential rearrangement of global power structures, privileging national interests instead of international multilateral cooperation.

As a consequence, beyond trade, Trump's America First diplomacy brought substantial pressure to the organization of transatlantic security, in particular NATO and European allies who have been portrayed as parasites who failed to meet their defense spending obligations, thereby forcing the U.S. to endure a disproportionate share of the collective security, questioning in this way traditional commitments concerning the security and defense spheres. Indeed, there have been several occasions in which Trump periodically condemned NATO members, in fact in July 2018 at the Press Conference after NATO summit in Brussels, he asserted "We're paying for far too much of NATO. NATO is very important. But NATO is helping Europe more than it's helping us. At the same time, it's very good for us.", and this public reproval was not commonly observed in diplomatic discourses and so, this marked a shift toward a more transactional conception of alliances, where the devotion and faithfulness were connected to financial support.⁸⁴

Specifically, in the post-Brexit conditions, the UK pursued the role of one of the principal NATO members, building an important partnership and relation with the United States as well, in this regard Trump also blessed and exposed his admiration towards the British military expenditure, and he reinforced the idea that the "America First" diplomacy appreciate allies who are concordant with American priorities and who demonstrate concrete and substantial contributions to collective security. However, this led to tensions within the alliance, and European leaders expressed worry

⁸⁴ Remarks by President Trump at Press Conference After NATO Summit, Brussels, *National Archive White House website*, 12 July 2018, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-press-conference-nato-summit-brussels-belgium/> last consulted: 15 September 2025

about the fact that the U.S. was undermining the unity, peace and mutual trust that is fundamental to the accomplishment of NATO.

Focusing on the populist and nationalist tone that is present in Trump's discourse, especially regarding foreign policy, it is permeated with populist and nationalist requests, and it is a style that ensures a direct connection with the American public by conveying the message that international relations are a battle to fight for American sovereignty and prosperity. It is no coincidence that the language employed by Trump often revolves around the juxtaposition of "the pure American people" against elites, foreign bureaucracies in the domestic and international spheres, such as globalist institutions that are recognized as threatening U.S. interests. A clear example of this is the assertion of Trump in the annual debate of the UN General Assembly in 2018 when he stated "We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism. Around the world, responsible nations must defend against threats to sovereignty not just from global governance, but also from other, new forms of coercion and domination", enclosing in this statement the core concepts of the ideology characterizing his administration, marked by national pride and distrust of multilateralism.⁸⁵

His communicative approach is also marked by repetitions, clearness, with attention to sentimentalism and emotional appeal, thus making easier and accessible the understanding of difficult foreign policy issues to a broad audience, and in addition to this, Trump used social media platforms like Twitter to persuade the masses and overcome traditional diplomatic channels, creating a direct narrative that aimed at modify the public opinion and international perceptions.⁸⁶ This strategy further fortified the domestic political base of Trump, but it also gave a clear signal in the international area on the fact that the U.S. would no longer subordinate its interests to alliance obligations or global governance structures. Moreover, the consequence was that both the EU and UK were dealing with a partner whose foreign policy was progressively unpredictable.

⁸⁵ US President Trump rejects globalism in speech to UN General Assembly's annual debate, *UN News website*, 28 September 2018, available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/09/1020472> last consulted: 30 July 2025

⁸⁶ Lacatus C. (2021), *Populism and President Trump's approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches*

2.1.4 COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES

Not only this, but long-term diplomatic consequences of the “America First” diplomacy remain a subject of scholarly debate, especially on U.S. relations with the European Union. For instance, some analysts argue that the approach used by Trump brought to structural weaknesses in alliances, while others highlight the undermined trust and cooperation. Inevitably, the EU answered to U.S. pressure by improving internal cohesion and pursue strategic autonomy, a progress that could reshape transatlantic relations. Meanwhile, the relationship between post-Brexit UK and the U.S. remained challenging due to the transactional nature of negotiations that highlights the limits of their relationship under nationalist directions.⁸⁷ Today, it is clear that the result of Trump’s “America First” diplomacy is a situation of tensions between nationalist foreign policy and the requests of global leadership, and this lead the U.S. and its allies to reevaluate the cornerstones of their partnerships in a period characterized by continuous changes and shifts in the geopolitical arena.

2.1.5 LONG-TERM DIPLOMATIC CONSEQUENCES AND EU/UK RESPONSES

Therefore, the election of Donald J. Trump in 2016 marked a powerful shift in U.S. foreign policy, and at the heart of this transformation was the slogan “America First,” which more than a campaign catchphrase, it is a doctrine that challenged the liberal internationalist consensus.⁸⁸ The implications of this shift were instant and widespread, particularly for U.S. traditional allies, for instance NATO has been subject of questioning due to its utility, and the EU regarding economic policy. Despite this, the U.S. defense budget advanced under Trump administration, and some allies increased their defense spending; however, the performative nature of Trump’s diplomacy undermined the trust that sustained alliance solidarity.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Xu R., Rees W. (2022), America and the special relationship: the impact of the Trump administration on relations with the UK, *British Politics*, Vol. 17, pp. 62-80

⁸⁸ Ettinger A. (2018), *Trump’s National Security Strategy: “America First” meets the establishment*, pp. 474–483

⁸⁹ Sperling J., Webber M. (2019), Trump’s foreign policy and NATO: Exit and voice, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 45, Issue 3, pp. 511–526

In addition, the America First diplomacy embodied the unification of domestic populist complaints and the international realpolitik, and while some of Trump's requests brought to persistent worries regarding U.S., the method he employed in his rhetorics and ideological framing lead them to result legitimately controversial. In response to this, Trump reclassified allies as competitors and pictured global institutions as threats to national sovereignty. Therefore, the America First disrupted decades of alliance-building worldwide.⁹⁰

In sum, the rise of "America First" diplomacy under Donald Trump represents a significant fracture in U.S. foreign policy, particularly concerning the EU and UK in the aftermath of Brexit. The rhetoric of Trump distinguishes itself because of its nationalist and protectionist themes, remodeling traditional alliances as transactional relationships that are subject to American interests.

2.2 TRUMP AND BREXIT UK

This part of the chapter delves into the rhetorical engagement of Trump with the United Kingdom in the context of Brexit, focusing more on the methods and techniques exercised by him, which is distinguishable thanks to his reinforced populist style that in this occasion can also be reinterpreted. Therefore, through the adoption of a constructivist perspective, the approach embraced by Trump for its relations with the UK can be fully acknowledged in terms of voluntary process of construction of identity, shared nationalist narratives, and the fact that the relationship between populist leaders enhanced fundamental elements of bilateral connections and ties, but also in respect of material interests and geopolitical strategy. Trump's foreign policy regarding the UK post-Brexit was not only the result of economic estimations or military alliances, but it was the consequence of discursive techniques that conceived Britain in a new way as a supporter or comrade in a context that saw the revolt of global populist worldwide. However, in the context of U.S.–UK relations under President Trump, they both aimed to reconceive the positions of their two nations in the world environment, namely, the United States

⁹⁰ Görgen A., (2021), *US-EU Relations in the Trump Era: Quest for Autonomy in Europe*, pp. 1373-1395

by estranging and detaching itself from the perceived globalist complications and involvements, and the United Kingdom by relocating itself outside the EU framework; for this reason Trump's discourse described the UK as a natural partner in a wide-range sovereigntist coalition, with which he could maintain a profitable bilateral relation.

2.2.1 CONTEXT AND THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

Preliminary to the analysis of the ties concerning Trump's U.S. and UK, it is important to delineate the conventional "Special Relationship" before Brexit. Traditionally, the term "Special Relationship" has long designated the close diplomatic, cultural, and security relationship between the U.S. and UK, and it became popular thanks to Winston Churchill in 1946 during his Iron Curtain Speech. Generally, this alliance has been supported by shared language, legal traditions, and common military campaigns, yet its power and strength differed due to the divergent personalities and policies of leaders on both sides.⁹¹

Historically, in the post-Cold War era, the cooperation between U.S. and UK was often formulated in terms of liberal internationalist values, for instance taking into account joint promotion of democracy, free markets, and multilateral institutions as well. Especially, under the power of George W. Bush and Tony Blair, the situation arrived close to a military cooperation in Iraq and Afghanistan; moreover, during the terms of Barack Obama, the relations between the U.S. and UK saw a peaceful period. Notwithstanding the broad historical background of this crucial relation, the rise of Trump as U.S. president is perceived as the starting point of an era characterized by a discursive fracture. Indeed, going back to the presidency of Obama, the value of the United Kingdom has been emphasized in its position of EU member, on the other side, Trump honored the decision taken by UK to leave the EU community, proclaiming its

⁹¹ Transcript "Iron curtain" speech, *National Archives of UK government website*, available at: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/cold-war-on-file/iron-curtain-speech/> last consulted: 31 July 2025

position as an affirmation of self-sovereignty, and this was done thanks to some rhetorical choices such as a change in tone.⁹²

2.2.2 BREXIT AS A CONSTRUCTIVIST OPPORTUNITY

Furthermore, Brexit represented not only a geopolitical realignment but also a notorious and important turning point concerning the UK-U.S. relations from a constructivist perspective, and it is a moment that could help to reconstruct the identity of the UK, its partners and allies as well. Not only, Brexit was recognized as a discursive act that reconceived British national identity, sovereignty, and its position in the world geopolitical arena too. This is the reason why, for Trump, this occasion was more than a political event, but a symbolic victory in the cultural transatlantic war that according to constructivists sees as protagonists “the people” and “the elite” in the global context. Therefore, retracing the steps of the U.S. relations with the UK in the last decades, after the first election of Donald J. Trump followed a series of repercussions that affected the transatlantic axis. Analyzing the situation from a constructivist perspective, by emphasizing the role of ideas, identities, and social interactions in the construction and configuration of state interests and foreign policy, the approach adopted by Trump towards the UK cannot be thoroughly comprehended without the awareness and acknowledgement of how his rhetoric plays an important role in redefining national identities and shared understanding throughout the time that the UK was living, characterized by the political instability that Brexit brought to the nation. In stark contrast to his position regarding the EU, Trump’s discourse appreciated and recognized the United Kingdom as a main strategic partner in the post-Brexit landscape.⁹³

⁹² Heather S., Donald Trump praises “brave and brilliant” Brexit vote: “They took back control of their country”, *The Independent UK website*, 24 June 2016, available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/donald-trump-praises-brexit-they-took-back-control-of-their-country-a7100201.html> last consulted: 4 August 2025

⁹³ Xu R., Rees W. (2022), *America and the special relationship: the impact of the Trump administration on relations with the UK*, pp. 62-80; De Ville F., Siles-Brügge G. (2019), The Impact of Brexit on EU Trade Policy, *Politics and Governance*, Volume 7, Issue 3, pp. 7–18

Beyond this important relationship, the admiration of Trump towards the UK often call attention to shared ties in the cultural and historical sphere, but also to common values, reinforcing the narrative of a “special relationship” that transcended formal alliances. For instance, President Trump in a 2018 press conference stated *“The United Kingdom and the United States are bound together by a common historic heritage, language, and heroes. The traditions of freedom, sovereignty, and the true rule of law were our shared gift to the world. They are now our priceless inheritance to a civilization. We must never cease to be united in their defense and in their renewal.”* However, his nationalism was also exclusive and antagonistic, for instance, he criticized immigration policies and multiculturalism, and this was matched and reproduced by the British right-wing populists, thus reinforcing a narrative that went against cosmopolitan European liberalism.⁹⁴

It is recognizable the fact that the rhetoric employed by Trump regarding the UK accentuated the concept that Brexit had located the country in a position that let it to engage with the U.S. in a more flexible way, especially for what it concerns the topics of trade and defense. However, this framework met some complications during its path, for example, the strategy and the purpose adopted by the administration persisted in transactional activities, associated with requests for significant and major concessions or adjustments regarding trade negotiations. In practice, this can be seen in the period after Brexit when Trump praised the United Kingdom to pursue U.S. trade leverage, requesting for concessions during trade talks.⁹⁵ Notwithstanding this, this kind of rationality lead to the accentuation of the tensions concerning Trump’s diplomacy, counterbalancing rhetorical solidarity with strategic self-interest. In contrast to his adversarial position towards the EU, in the post-Brexit era, Trump developed a strong and important relationship with the UK, especially during the leadership of the ex-Prime Minister Boris

⁹⁴ Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister May of the United Kingdom in Joint Press Conference, *National Archive White House website*, 13 July 2018, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-prime-minister-may-united-kingdom-joint-press-conference/> last consulted: 5 August 2025

⁹⁵ Heather S., Donald Trump praises “brave and brilliant” Brexit vote: “They took back control of their country”, *The Independent UK website*, 24 June 2016, available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/donald-trump-praises-brexit-they-took-back-control-of-their-country-a7100201.html> last consulted: 4 August 2025

Johnson, indeed Trump saw in him the figure who promoted and advocated for Brexit following a similar ideology characterized by nationalist rhetoric. According to Trump, the decision to leave the EU taken by the UK was a choice to admire, since it is the representation of an act of sovereignty and democratic empowerment, for this reason as stated in *The Independent*, in 2016 Donald Trump has declared that British people “took back control of their country” by voting the option to leave the European Union.⁹⁶

Generally, this choice of rhetoric adopted by the American President is significant since it represents the occurrence of Brexit in that time frame as something that was not only an issue concerning British people, but it also involved a broader populist renaissance that saw Trump as predominant figure. Additionally, this similarity between the two countries brought to the fact that Trump could envisage a new opportunity for a steady bilateral relationship and with the intent to reforge ties with the UK in terms of emphasized national sovereignty, instead of having multilateral relationships. In contrast to his combative tone toward the EU, his rhetoric toward the UK was intensely celebratory and characterized by symbolic populist language, in fact, Trump constantly tried to portray Brexit as the revolt of people against globalist elites, which is perfectly in line with his own populist narrative. It is important to remember that Trump succeeded in positioning himself as an ideological ally of the Brexit movement, not only, but Trump somehow exploited the phenomenon of Brexit as a rhetorical weapon to attack the European Union, whereas by describing this departure of Britain as evidence of the fact that the EU was facing a period of decline.

⁹⁶ Heather S., Donald Trump praises “brave and brilliant” Brexit vote: “They took back control of their country”, *The Independent UK website*, 24 June 2016, available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/donald-trump-praises-brex-it-they-took-back-control-of-their-country-a7100201.html> last consulted: 4 August 2025

2.2.3 KEY POLITICAL FIGURES AND TRASATLANTIC POPULIST NETWORKS

Moreover, in relation to Boris Johnson, Trump was deeply involved from the personal and emotional perspective, and this was the case in which Trump succeeded in strengthening the idea that under his leadership, the alliance between United Kingdom and United States was not just strategic but ideological as well. For this reason, Trump regularly referred to Johnson as “Britain’s Trump”, an expression that had the function of a compliment. In fact, in the 2019 Turning Point USA’s Teen Student Action Summit in Washington, Trump said: “We have a really good man. He’s going to be the prime minister of the U.K. now, Boris Johnson He’s tough and he’s smart. They’re saying, ‘Britain Trump.’ They call him ‘Britain Trump,’ and there’s people saying that’s a good thing”. By stating his position in those manners, Trump customized the relationship with the UK, by turning it into a populist fraternity fellowship as an alternative to a traditional diplomatic alliance.⁹⁷

In order to better analyze this particular relationship, it is fundamental to note that these political facts had an indescribable impact on foreign policy and on transatlantic relations, and they are the success of Trump’s populism in the United States and the achievement of Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom. This is possible due to the fact that they both shared common rhetorical substructures, for instance the repudiation of the ascendance of the elites globally, the request for national self-determination, and the fact that they also aim to redeem and recover the control that they thought they were entitled to from supranational institutions. Besides, in both the American and British contexts, the discourse of Trump around Brexit was focused on the key concepts of sovereignty and nationalism that could be obtained through reclaiming control and resisting supranational institutions, thanks to the reinforcement of a shared ideological framework with the British Conservative movement and important figures like Boris Johnson. In fact, Trump frequently signaled a political alignment with UK-Brexit, and he also approved the British nationalist project by supporting it with an international challenger; furthermore, this

⁹⁷ Forgey Q., Trump praises Boris Johnson as the “Britain Trump”, *Politico website*, 23 July 2019, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-praises-boris-johnson-as-the-britain-trump/> last consulted: 4 August 2025

performative dimension is crucial since rhetoric contributes to constitute social reality and to shape political consequences. Moreover, it had been perceived in Trump's speeches and tweets, the representation of Brexit as a courageous declaration of sovereignty and self-determination, indeed, some of these core concepts are enclosed also in his own narrative of "Make America Great Again", in which his stress is more on borders, economic independence, and national pride, especially across the Atlantic.

The public support to Brexit by Trump was a matter of policy alignment but also an act of identity construction to redefine the transatlantic relationship based on reciprocal nationalist solidarity. Notwithstanding this, while the rhetoric of Trump recognizes British sovereignty, it also creates uncertainty within UK political elites who were already facing the issues and difficulties that Brexit brought at the time, and this is the reason why some British officials viewed his support as opportunistic rather than honestly aiming to a strategic partnership.⁹⁸ In this context, the impact of Trump on transatlantic relations, especially with the UK, was more focused on the construction of the narrative and symbolic politics rather than concretely creating policy measures. As a result, his vocal support for Brexit reinforced the divisions that were present within the British society, complicating its external positioning in the global international sphere, doubtless since this campaign had been marked by populist undertones.

The consequences of Trump's rhetoric expanded to the hope and expectation of UK of a "special relationship" with the U.S. under the presidency of Trump, which was seen as an anchor to global power; in fact, Trump helped with his rhetoric celebrating their ties with the UK, but his diplomacy created uncertainties as well, probably due to the fact that his approach prioritized bilateral connections and national sovereignty, challenging the traditional expectations.⁹⁹ In practice, this alliance between the two countries radically challenged the idea of the traditional alliance solidarity in view of the fact that it was a partnership more concentrated on self-interest; however, despite sometimes rhetoric appeared aggressive, the UK and U.S. preserved a close

⁹⁸ Xu R., Rees W. (2022), *America and the special relationship: the impact of the Trump administration on relations with the UK*, pp. 62-80

⁹⁹ Görgen A., (2021), *US-EU Relations in the Trump Era: Quest for Autonomy in Europe*, pp. 1373-1395

cooperation regarding security and intelligence, and this let us understand the complexity of this relationship. Nevertheless, the populist rhetoric of Trump also reshaped the domestic political discourse within the UK, since he influenced debates with the key concepts of nationalism, sovereignty, and identity; moreover, these two types of nationalism are a clear example of how transatlantic populist narratives reinforced each other.

As previously mentioned, Trump's rhetoric was strongly anti-elitists, and this feature could also be found in UK Brexit supporters; indeed, his rhetoric rejected multilateral institutions such as NATO due to burden-sharing reasons and the United Nations for perceived inefficiency as well. In light of this, the engagement of the U.S. President with the UK post-Brexit was a little part of a wider project that had the objective to reconstruct and rethink alliances in terms of populist nationalist identities. Reanalyzing the promise of Trump to negotiate an advantageous bilateral trade agreement after Brexit, he suggested multiple discursive and strategic functions. Still, following the referendum, he repeatedly affirmed his priority of a possible U.S.–UK trade deal, a symbol of regenerated partnership unchained from the constraints of the European Union. This is illustrated by his July 2018 News Conference with Prime Minister Theresa May of the United Kingdom, when Trump declared: *“I also want to thank Prime Minister May for pursuing fair and reciprocal trade with the United States. Once the Brexit process is concluded, and perhaps the U.K. has left the EU — I don't know what they're going to do, but whatever you do is okay with me. That's your decision. Whatever you're going to do is okay with us. Just make sure we can trade together; that's all that matters. The United States looks forward to finalizing a great bilateral trade agreement with the United Kingdom. This is an incredible opportunity for our two countries, and we will seize it fully”*. However, the promise of this deal becomes complex owing to various geopolitical disquietudes, one of these is the status of “special relationship” that the UK pursued that was challenged by the U.S. priorities that changed.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister May of the United Kingdom in Joint Press Conference, *National Archive White House website*, 13 July 2018, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-prime-minister-may-united-kingdom-joint-press-conference/> last consulted: 5 August 2025

With reference to security matters and intelligence cooperation, despite the populist rhetoric and critiques towards multilateral institutions, security and intelligence ties between U.S.–UK endured throughout the first presidency of Trump. What is more is that Trump put emphasis on the relevance of the cooperation with the UK regarding global security, frequently referencing to the historical ties and the common values. As a result, this security relationship was manifested as a continuation of the framework regarding populist identity, meaning that allies act in a loyal manner in order to defend their nations against common threats, which could be terrorism and hostile powers. The important part of this specific transatlantic relation are the people who were protagonist of this tie. We are aware of the fact that the personal style and rhetoric of Trump found a fertile ground with key figures of British populism that are Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, and this is the reason why these relationships symbolize the transatlantic features of the construction of the populist identity, the so-called “Transatlantic Populist Network”. Boris Johnson became UK Prime Minister in July 2019 (until 2022), and he shared the nationalist and sovereigntist orientation belonging to Trump, however, they differed in style and policy. Notwithstanding their divergencies, Trump gave recognition to the political figure of Johnson as a “a very talented person”, adding that “he would be excellent [...] I have always liked him”, and this was not a omnichannel admiration, but it is reciprocal from both parts. It is no coincidence that the campaign of Johnson “Get Brexit Done” expressed similarities to the anti-elite rhetoric of Trump and its and nationalist central principles. This led to a reinforcement of the idea of a strong alliance between UK and U.S. as solid partners in a global populist revolt, and this helped to maintain resilient bilateral ties also during a time of political uncertainty in the UK.¹⁰¹

On the other side, Nigel Farage can be considered the “transatlantic populist symbol”, he was the leading figure in the Brexit campaign and in the UK Independence Party (UKIP). He was supporter of Trump, for this reason he tried to construct a populist narrative that surpassed the Atlantic, indeed, his visits to the U.S. during the campaign in 2016 contributed to increase and

¹⁰¹ Donald Trump says Boris Johnson would be “excellent” Tory Leader, *BBC website*, 1 June 2019, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48478706> last consulted: 5 August 2025

intensify the synergy between Brexit populism and Trump. It was inevitable that a sense of transatlantic camaraderie emerged from this mutual nationalist consolation, especially for the aspect of anti-EU rhetoric, creating in this way a shared identity that challenged the international order of that time.¹⁰²

In conclusion, Donald Trump's populist rhetoric profoundly influenced the discourse surrounding transatlantic relations with the United Kingdom in the post-Brexit era. Essentially the "special relationship" symbolized the values that the two countries share and also their political projects that had nationalists' features, but this brought to some pressures and rigidities. The open declaration of support by Trump concerning Brexit reinforced the ideological alignments, but it also introduced new uncertainties, leading to consequences such as a symbolic solidarity and ambiguity. This case highlights the crucial role played by political rhetoric and social construction in the field of international relations, especially in modern times characterized by the restoration of populism and nationalism not only in the United States but in the European continent such as in the United Kingdom with Brexit.

2.3 TRUMP'S DISCOURSE ON EU CONCERNING TRADE AND SOVEREIGNTY DISPUTES

Another important concern is the commitment and engagement of Donald Trump with the European Union, in particular with respect to the main motifs of his populism, such as trade, sovereignty, and a broader conceptualization of European identity, which represents a central aspect of his foreign policy discourse. To further develop the previous discussion on the transatlantic "special relationship" with the United Kingdom, it emerges that the perspectives of Trump on the EU were fundamental to his performative articulation of American primacy and

¹⁰² Farage: "Real opportunity" for UK business with Donald Trump, *BBC website*, 13 November 2016

national sovereignty, as well as his broader rhetorical strategies aimed at reconfiguring international norms.¹⁰³

2.3.1 POPULIST FRAMING OF TRADE AND AMERICAN VICTIMHOOD

Central to Trump's approach to the European Union was his evident skepticism toward multilateral trade measures and agreements, which he frequently framed as disadvantageous to the United States by nature. In his speeches, interviews, and official policy statements, Trump consistently depicted the EU as a coalition that exploited the United States through trade imbalances and protective regulations, arguing that America had been taken advantage of for decades, and this message can also be found in the Inaugural Address of Trump in January 2017, stating that:

"For many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry; Subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military; We've defended other nation's borders while refusing to defend our own; And spent trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay. We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon. One by one, the factories shuttered and left our shores, with not even a thought about the millions upon millions of American workers left behind".¹⁰⁴

Such framing resonated with his broader populist rhetoric, which juxtaposed a supposedly virtuous "American people" against predatory foreign actors, in this case represented by a

¹⁰³ Desmaele L. (2022), *Unpacking the Trump administration's grand strategy in Europe: power maximisation, relative gains and sovereignty*, pp.180-199; Ikenberry G.J. (2018), *The end of liberal international order?*, pp. 7-23

¹⁰⁴ Remarks of President Donald J. Trump, The Inaugural Address, *National Archive White House website*, 20 January 2017, available at : <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/> last consulted: 15 September 2025

unified European political and economic entity. Moreover, Trump's trade discourse manifested in concrete policy measures that further amplified these rhetorical positions; for example, the imposition of tariffs on European steel and aluminum, as well as broader threats to impose taxes on European automobiles, served as tangible expressions of the populist-nationalist claim that sovereignty entails the power to prioritize domestic economic interests over supranational commitments.¹⁰⁵ These policy decisions, often accompanied by highly visible public statements and tweets, were not only economic maneuvers but deliberate performative acts that communicated a broader message, the one that the regulatory and trade frameworks of the EU were subject to American scrutiny and, if necessary, coercion, reflecting Trump's underlying belief in a hierarchy of national interests within global governance. Furthermore, these interventions challenged the prevailing norms of the liberal economic order, emphasizing relative gains over absolute cooperation, and also signaled a broader change toward transactional diplomacy where rhetorical framing and symbolic gestures were as consequential as formal negotiations.¹⁰⁶

In particular, the discourse encompassing sovereignty was complexly linked to Trump's populist formulation of Europe as a body that had renounced a great part of its authority to confer it to supranational institutions, undermining in this way the autonomy of each member states. Indeed, the public of Trump frequently highlighted his admiration for nationalistic measures, celebrating countries that prioritized self-determination over collective European integration. Besides, his rhetorical stance not only echoed with domestic audiences who were broad-minded towards a nationalist sentiment, but it also aimed to persuade the discourse of the European public by validating skepticism toward the governance structures of the European Union.¹⁰⁷ In

¹⁰⁵ Presidential Document, Proclamation 9704 of March 8, 2018, Adjusting Imports of Aluminum Into the United States, *Federal Register*, Vol. 84, No. 51, 15 March 2018, available at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2018-03-15/pdf/2018-05477.pdf> last consulted: 7 August 2025

¹⁰⁶ Clarke M., Ricketts A. (2017), *Donald Trump and America foreign policy: The return of the Jacksonian tradition*; Friedman G., Shapiro J.L. (2017) *The Limits of the Trump Doctrine*, pp.12-19

¹⁰⁷ Remarks by President Trump to the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, *National Archive White House website*, 25 September 2018, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-73rd-session-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-ny/> last consulted: 25 August 2025

this context, several scholars argued that this form of external legitimization could facilitate future internal political debates within the EU, and as a result this transformed the European normative landscape and encouraged member states to reconsider the balance between national sovereignty and supranational authority.

2.3.2 *TRANSATLANTIC RESONANCE AND POLICY IMPLICATION*

In this case, trade and sovereignty concerns converge in Trump's rhetoric, however they saw complications due to the performative dimension of identity politics. Trump also put emphasis on fundamental concepts such as "fairness" and "taking back control" that we also met within the rhetorical motifs in Brexit discourse, consequently creating a transatlantic resonance that conceived the United States as a model for national self-determination.¹⁰⁸ Inevitably, by framing the EU as a monumental entity that sought to prioritize collective interests over the legitimate demands of each single nations, Trump reinforced a narrative in which American resolution was necessary and justified too; thus, influencing the European strategic calculations, because EU policymakers had to deal with the defense of institutional cohesion and also the management of the pressures regarding economy and diplomacy. An example of this interaction of rhetoric and policy can be perceived in the negotiations about the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), since the agreement was envisaged as a multilateral effort to sustain in order to coordinate and reconcile trade standards and economic integration, the discursive framing of Trump recognize such multilateral attempts as imbalanced, describing them as vehicles employed by the European Union to exploit the American economic strength. This rhetorical attack justified the withdrawal of the United States from an active engagement in TTIP negotiations, but it also reinforced the domestic support for a protectionist agenda,

¹⁰⁸ Bhambra K.G. (2017), Brexit, Trump, and "methodological whiteness": on the misrecognition of race and class, *The British Journal of Sociology*, Volume 68, Issue S1

reflecting the broader populist logic that locates elite multilateral provision as antithetical to the interests of the people.¹⁰⁹

2.3.3 CHALLENGING EU LEGITIMACY AND COLLECTIVE SECURITY

However, beyond the material dimensions of trade and regulatory disputes, Trump publicly questioned the legitimacy of the EU policy frameworks, suggested that member states should reaffirm sovereignty, and he also challenged the shared European identity. Primarily, this rhetorical strategy can be interpreted as an attempt to destabilize collective understandings of the European cohesion and to introduce an alternative normative framework in which national prerogatives are emphasized. As a matter of fact, Trump's rhetoric effectively transformed conventional economic debates into broader contests over political authority and cultural legitimacy, demonstrating that the performative capacity of populist rhetoric can influence policy outcomes and identity narratives.¹¹⁰

As mentioned previously, it is also crucial to take in consideration the role of media and communication platforms since the immediacy and the resulting public visibility of these communications systems served to intensify the uncertainties within EU institutions, forcing policymakers to respond to the essence of U.S. policy and to the performative suggestions embedded within the messages delivered by the American president. Therefore, the European response was multidimensional since it reflected strategic adaptation and normative resistance, and while some member states exhibited openness to national sovereignty debates, others tried to reaffirm the institutional authority and the collective identity of the European Union by

¹⁰⁹ Jungmittag A., Welfens J.J.P. (2020), *EU-US trade post-Trump perspectives: TTIP aspects related to foreign direct investment and innovation*, International Economics and Economic Policy, Vol.17, pp.259-294

¹¹⁰ Lacatus C. (2021), *Populism and President Trump's approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches*, pp. 31-33; 39-44; Clarke M., Ricketts A. (2017), *Donald Trump and America foreign policy: The return of the Jacksonian tradition*, pp. 366-379

emphasizing the importance of coordinated responses to these types of unilateral external pressures.¹¹¹

This dynamic clarifies the interaction and correlation between external discursive interventions and internal identity negotiation, highlighting the complex processes through which international actors construct, contest, and defend normative frameworks. Moreover, these interactions highlight the centrality of social and ideational factors in shaping the conduct of international relations, since rhetoric and perception often mediate material capabilities and formal institutional mechanisms.

2.3.4 ECONOMIC CRITIQUES AND REGULATORY SOVEREIGNTY

In addition, the rhetoric of Trump on fiscal European policy and regulatory standards exemplifies the intersection of economic and normative concerns, with critiques of European fiscal constraints and taxation framed as impediments to the American competitiveness, while linking domestic economic priorities to broader geopolitical narratives. This rhetorical strategy not only reinforced the populist logic to prioritize national interests, but it also positioned the EU as a place of contestation over international norms, in particular concerning the balance between economic integration and regulatory sovereignty. Nevertheless, by framing European policy frameworks as a threat, Trump actively constructed a normative hierarchy in which U.S. privileges were predominant, illustrating how populist rhetoric can reshape international expectations and legitimize unilateral action.¹¹²

Essentially, the rhetoric of Trump on the European Union was a complex amalgamation of economic critique, sovereignty advocacy, and identity politics that are articulated through a highly performative populist style, thus reshaping perceptions and interactions across the

¹¹¹ Fjærtoft E.T. (2019), Engaging the US in the Age of Trump: The Case for a New European Strategic Discourse, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 24, Issue 1, pp.7-25

¹¹² Stiglitz, E. Joseph (2018) Trump and Globalization, *Journal of Policy Modeling*, Volume 40, Issue 3, pp. 515-528

Atlantic. By framing the EU as an economic competitor and a normative challenger, he not only justified unilateral policy interventions such as tariffs and trade renegotiations, but he also contributed to a broader contestation over the legitimacy and coherence of European integration. In practice, his discourse regarding the European Union represented a significant departure from traditional diplomatic rhetoric in a manner that challenged and reconfigured existing norms of international engagement; in addition, from the beginning of his presidency, he employed a populist language that depicted the EU as a collection of bureaucratic and economically protectionist entities.¹¹³

This strategy served to criticize policy outcomes, and to delegitimize the structural authority of the EU as a collective actor, highlighting the primacy of nation-states and the necessity for the United States to negotiate bilaterally rather than within multilateral frameworks, signaling a constructivist reshaping of normative expectations in transatlantic economic relations. Indeed, in his speeches, press conferences, and social media communications, Trump consistently portrayed EU trade practices as unfair, highlighting alleged imbalances and framing Europe as exploiting the United States through tariffs and market restrictions, thus reinforcing a narrative of victimhood and American strength in line with populist performativity. For instance, Trump affirmed to CBS news in 2018:

*“In a trade sense, they’ve really taken advantage of us and many of those countries are in Nato and they weren’t paying their bills and, you know, as an example a big problem with Germany” or he also stated “I think the European Union is a foe, what they do to us in trade. Now you wouldn’t think of the European Union but they’re a foe”.*¹¹⁴

Furthermore, Trump’s rhetoric consistently linked economic competition with sovereignty claims, portraying the EU’s regulatory and fiscal policies as barriers to trade and a refusal to

¹¹³ Chryssogelos A. (2017), *Populism in Foreign Policy*; Clarke M., Ricketts A. (2017), *Donald Trump and America foreign policy: The return of the Jacksonian tradition*, pp. 366-379; Ettinger A. (2018), *Trump’s National Security Strategy: “America First” meets the establishment*, pp. 474-483

¹¹⁴ “I think the European Union is a foe,” Trump says ahead of Putin meeting in Helsinki, *Cbs news website*, 15 July 2018, available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-interview-cbs-news-european-union-is-a-foe-ahead-of-putin-meeting-in-helsinki-jeff-glor/> last consulted: 9 August 2025

recognize American primacy, a perception that resonated with populist narratives emphasizing national self-interest over institutional compromise. This can be perceived in his speeches, in the American First diplomacy and in all remarks and summits reported in this chapter. Inevitably, this led to the fact that EU policymakers increasingly engaged in defensive strategies that sought to protect regional autonomy while navigating the uncertainty generated by the unpredictability of U.S. policy. In support to this, these developments fostered a reconsideration of strategic autonomy within the EU, illustrating how populist discourse can act as a structural force, reshaping the target of criticism and the self-understanding of those criticized. Another essential point is the digital and regulatory dimensions of EU-U.S. relations, which further illustrate the complex synergy that is present between populist rhetoric and sovereignty concerns; in fact, Trump's administration frequently criticized the EU's approach to digital taxation and data governance, framing such measures as protectionist impediments to American technological and commercial interests. Here, populist discourse intersected with material policy enforcement; namely, by denouncing European regulatory initiatives, the administration constructed a narrative in which the American innovation and economic vitality were threatened by bureaucratic exceeds, portraying the EU as an actor unwilling or incapable of accommodating global market realities.¹¹⁵

2.3.5 IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS AND STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Moreover, Trump's discourse did not operate in isolation, since his administration was shaped by, and it also shaped broader transatlantic political currents. Above all, the post-Brexit context intensified the significance of sovereignty disputes, due to the fact that the urging of the administration on bilateral trade agreements and economic control have intensified the perceptions of institutional vulnerability within the Union. It is clear that Trump rhetoric, which

¹¹⁵ Jungmittag A., Welfens J.J.P. (2020), *EU-US trade post-Trump perspectives: TTIP aspects related to foreign direct investment and innovation*

is characterized by emotive appeals and performative exaggeration, served as an impulse and a mirror for European discourse, underscoring the reflexive relationship between American populist narratives and European responses. At the same time, Trump's rhetoric frequently blurred the distinction between economic competition and normative critique, and he provided a portrayal of EU trade barriers as manifestations of institutional arrogance and inefficiency.¹¹⁶ This underscores the performative dimension of populist foreign policy, in other words, by attaching moral and identity-based judgments to policy disputes, he elevated routine trade disagreements into emblematic confrontations over sovereignty, legitimacy, and the hierarchical ordering of international norms. Subsequently, this led to practical implications, as exemplified by European policymakers, environmental standards, and industrial policy, which were forced to balance and measure responses to economic threats, but also to a symbolic contestation.¹¹⁷ At the same time, by framing the EU as a series of individual actors rather than a cohesive supranational entity, Trump undermined perceptions of collective European agency, persuading policymakers to reaffirm institutional competence and normative credibility in the face of external skepticism. This strategy, while aimed at advancing American influence, illustrates the broader international ramifications of populist rhetoric, specifically in the construction of foreign actors' identities, policy choices, and institutional legitimacy.¹¹⁸

In sum, the rhetoric of Trump on the European Union, encompassing trade disputes and regulatory critiques, exemplifies the complex interaction between populist rhetoric and international relations, and by framing the EU as a bureaucratic and identity-challenged actor, Trump reshaped the normative landscape of transatlantic engagement, convincing both American and European policymakers to operate in an environment characterized by performative nationalism and uncertainty.

¹¹⁶ Desmaele L. (2022), *Unpacking the Trump administration's grand strategy in Europe: power maximisation, relative gains and sovereignty*, pp.180-199; Bhambra K.G. (2017), *Brexit, Trump, and "methodological whiteness": on the misrecognition of race and class*; De Ville F., Siles-Brügge G. (2019), *The Impact of Brexit on EU Trade Policy*, pp. 7–18

¹¹⁷ De Lemos Peixoto S., Spitzer K.G., Sabol M., Loi G., *US tariffs: economic, financial and monetary repercussions*

¹¹⁸ Desmaele L. (2022), *Unpacking the Trump administration's grand strategy in Europe: power maximisation, relative gains and sovereignty*, pp.180-199

2.4 CONSTRUCTING ALLIES AND ADVERSARIES: NATO DIPLOMATIC TENSIONS, BURDEN-SHARING, AND POPULIST RHETORIC

2.4.1 NATO AS A STAGE FOR POPULIST DIPLOMACY

The controversial representation of the European Union under the Trump administration, inevitably had influences also in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which operated as a diplomatic stage and a symbolic testing ground for the articulation of the “America First” principles in the security domain. Indeed, NATO became the arena through which allies and adversaries were redefined according to Trump’s populist logic of political antagonism, one that consistently blurred the line between cooperative partnership and confrontational rivalry. In this context, NATO represented a critical site where populist narratives and burden-sharing disputes converged, amplifying tensions about European dependency on American power, while at the same time modifying the role of United States’ leadership that brought instability and uncertainty to both allies and adversaries as well.¹¹⁹

Essentially, the treatment of Trump towards NATO was defined as questionable and problematic, as illustrated by his 2017 address in Brussels in NATO’s new headquarters, Trump addressing to the Article 5 blamed NATO member states for “*not* meeting their financial commitments to the alliance and declined to reiterate U.S. commitment to the alliance’s mutual defense pledge”.¹²⁰

A clear case of his populist attitude was when in July 2018, during a breakfast meeting at the NATO summit, Trump accused Germany of being “totally controlled by Russia” due to its reliance on the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, casting Germany not only as an unreliable ally but

¹¹⁹ Sperling J., Webber M. (2019), *Trump’s foreign policy and NATO: Exit and voice*, pp. 511–526

¹²⁰ Diamond J., Trump scolds NATO allies over defense spending, *CNN Politics website*, 25 May 2017, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/25/politics/trump-nato-financial-payments> last consulted: 11 August 2025

as a potential adversary whose economic choices undermined NATO's collective security.¹²¹ This "operation" blurred the categories of ally and adversary, framing a core NATO member as compromised by foreign influence while simultaneously reinforcing his populist narrative of American victimhood and betrayal, reshaping also the social meaning of alliance membership.¹²²

Another important concern is that by framing NATO as an unfair deal for the American people, Trump reinforced his domestic populist narrative while reordering the symbolic hierarchy of allies and adversaries in ways that complicated traditional transatlantic solidarity. At the same time, the impact lies not only in its immediate policy consequences, but also in its reshaping of the normative frameworks through which alliance politics are understood, suggesting that populist rhetoric can fundamentally alter the identities and expectations of international actors even in the absence of major institutional changes. The centrality of burden-sharing to Trump's NATO discourse cannot be overemphasized, however, Trump elevated the issue as evidence that U.S. citizens were being systematically exploited by foreign governments.¹²³ This was expressed in a press conference following the 2018 NATO summit, he declared to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenber at Bilateral Breakfast that "countries owe us a tremendous amount of money for many years back, where they're delinquent, as far as I'm concerned, because the United States has had to pay for them. [...] The United States has paid and stepped up like nobody. This has gone on for decades, by the way" and also "we're protecting Germany, we're

¹²¹ Meredith S., Turak N., Trump slams Germany at NATO summit: It's "totally controlled by Russia", *CNBC website*, 11 July 2018, available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/11/trump-slams-germany-at-nato-summit-says-its-a-captive-of-russia.html> last consulted: 11 August 2025

¹²² Sperling J., Webber M. (2019), *Trump's foreign policy and NATO: Exit and voice*, pp. 511–526; Diamond J., Trump scolds NATO allies over defense spending, *CNN Politics website*, 25 May 2017, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/25/politics/trump-nato-financial-payments> last consulted: 11 August 2025;

¹²³ Desmaele L. (2022), *Unpacking the Trump administration's grand strategy in Europe: power maximisation, relative gains and sovereignty*, 180-199; Welna D., FACT CHECK: Trump's Claims On NATO Spending, *Npr website*, 11 July 2018, available at: <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/11/628137185/fact-check-trumps-claims-on-nato-spending> last consulted: 12 August 2025; Daniel R., Weinberg J.R., Vinikas M., NATO Summit June 2025 – A Victory for Trump and Security Challenges for Europe, *INSS Insight*, No. 2014, 15 July 2025, available at: <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/nato-2025/> last consulted: 10 September 2025

protecting France. We're protecting everybody. And yet we're paying a lot of money to protect [...] It's an unfair burden on the United States".¹²⁴

Afterwards, by casting NATO as not only a military alliance, but also a financial deal in which the United States was "getting ripped off," Trump situated foreign policy within the logic of domestic distributive justice, in fact, according to him, "Many countries owe us a tremendous amount of money from many years back, where they're delinquent as far as I'm concerned, because the United States has had to pay for them. So if you go back 10 or 20 years, you'll just add it all up, it's massive amounts of money is owed".¹²⁵ On the whole, the implications of this framing were profound, namely, by linking military expenditures to loyalty, Trump implicitly constructed a hierarchy of allies, distinguishing between those who "pay their bills" and those who are "delinquent", and this labeling disrupted NATO's traditional emphasis on collective identity and solidarity, replacing it with a transactional logic in which alliance commitments were depending on financial reciprocity.¹²⁶

2.4.2 INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND EUROPEAN DEFENCE AUTONOMY

All these factors contribute to the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), which provides further insight into how Trump institutionalized this populist reframing of alliances. It is well known that the document affirmed the importance of NATO "The NATO alliance of free and sovereign states is one of our great advantages over our competitors, and the United States remains committed to Article V of the Washington Treaty" , however, it did so within a framework that "Unfair burden-sharing with our allies and inadequate investment in our own defense had invited danger from

¹²⁴ Remarks by President Trump and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at Bilateral Breakfast, *National Archive White House website*, 11 July 2018, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-nato-secretary-general-jens-stoltenberg-bilateral-breakfast/> last consulted: 11 August 2025

¹²⁵ Welna D., FACT CHECK: Trump's Claims On NATO Spending, *Npr website*, 11 July 2018, available at: <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/11/628137185/fact-check-trumps-claims-on-nato-spending> last consulted: 12 August 2025

¹²⁶ Sperling J., Webber M. (2019), *Trump's foreign policy and NATO: Exit and voice*, pp. 511–526

those who wish us harm”. But the original document of the NSS declare also that “the NATO alliance will become stronger when all members assume greater responsibility for and pay their fair share to protect our mutual interests, sovereignty, and values”. The NSS thus codified the transactional logic that Trump had articulated in speeches and tweets, embedding populist rhetoric into formal policy. Furthermore, this institutionalization of populist narratives reveals how rhetorical strategies recalibrate the norms and expectations governing international institutions.¹²⁷

After examining the important aspect of Trump’s rhetoric to encompass broader European defense initiatives, he repeatedly proclaimed skepticism toward EU projects such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), interpreting them as attempts to circumvent NATO and diminish U.S. influence. In the same way, by framing EU defense autonomy as economically and strategically threatening, Trump reinforced his adversarial stance toward European multilateralism, echoing his broader skepticism toward the EU as a political project.¹²⁸

NATO discourse intersected with Trump’s anti-EU rhetoric, situating Europe’s strategic ambitions as part of the same exploitative logic in trade and regulatory affairs. In this context, his threats to withdraw from NATO, served as symbolic weapons to coerce allies into compliance, exemplifying what Sperling and Webber (2019) call the “exit and voice” dynamic in Trump’s foreign policy. This practically takes form from the fact he repeatedly threatened institutional exit as a means of amplifying his bargaining power; and even when this was not realized, these threats destabilized NATO cohesion by introducing uncertainty about U.S. commitment.¹²⁹

From the perspective of European leaders, this generated both short-term adjustments and long-term strategic anxiety; while some states accelerated defense spending, others sought to

¹²⁷ The White House official document, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, *National Archive White House website*, December 2017

¹²⁸ Sperling J., Webber M. (2019), *Trump’s foreign policy and NATO: Exit and voice*; Ikenberry G.J. (2018), The end of liberal international order?, *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, Issue 1, pp. 7-23

¹²⁹ Sperling J., Webber M. (2019), *Trump’s foreign policy and NATO: Exit and voice*, pp. 515–517

safeguard and protect themselves against U.S. unpredictability by intensifying intra-European defense cooperation. For instance, in May 2017, the German chancellor Angela Merkel, stated “the EU must now be prepared to take its fate into its own hands”, following the meetings of NATO and G7.¹³⁰ In the same way, Macron linked Trump’s unpredictability to the need for European “strategic autonomy,” a discourse that gained attention in Brussels and further strained U.S.-EU relations. Thus, Trump’s populist rhetoric eroded the normative foundations of transatlantic trust, fostering the perception that the United States no longer regarded itself as the unquestioned leader of the Alliance.¹³¹

2.4.3 PERFORMATIVE DIPLOMACY AND IMPACT ON TRASATLANTIC RELATIONS

Regarding his Twitter diplomacy, and the consequently European reactions, Trump’s approach to NATO diplomacy was inseparable from his performative style, which relied on visibility, dramatization, and public pressure as instruments of influence. Unlike previous administrations, which preferred private negotiations, he leveraged both the global media stage and social media platforms to amplify grievances against allies, often bypassing conventional diplomatic protocols. His repeated use of Twitter to publicize NATO spending disparities represent the complex alliance dynamics that framed the United States as exploited and allies as negligent. Moreover, a leading idea is that the combination of performative threats and public shaming created a feedback loop in which populist rhetoric shaped alliance behavior, prompting European states to increase defense spending while simultaneously seeking for greater autonomy.¹³²

¹³⁰ Henley J., Angela Merkel: EU cannot completely rely on US and Britain anymore, *The Guardian website*, 29 May 2017, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/28/merkel-says-eu-cannot-completely-rely-on-us-and-britain-any-more-g7-talks> last consulted: 13 August 2025

¹³¹ Richard R., Strategic autonomy: Europe’s awakening, *Polytechnique Insights*, 25 May 2022, available at: <https://www.polytechnique-insights.com/en/braincamps/geopolitics/industry-autonomy-scarcity-the-ripples-of-war-in-ukraine/strategic-autonomy-europes-awakening/> last consulted: 14 August 2025

¹³² Sperling J., Webber M. (2019), *Trump’s foreign policy and NATO: Exit and voice*; Fjærtøft E.T. (2019), *Engaging the US in the Age of Trump: The Case for a New European Strategic Discourse*; Ott B.L. (2017), *The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement*, pp. 59-66

However, the evidence shows us that the performative strategy extended beyond verbal statements into public rituals and appearances. Indeed, Trump's attendance at NATO summits, bilateral press conferences, and other international events consistently foregrounded symbolic gestures of critique and reward. By positioning himself as the arbiter of fairness and compliance, he redefined the relational dynamics within NATO, emphasizing hierarchical differentiation among allies based on adherence to his vision of burden-sharing, thus reframing existing alliances but also elevating the visibility of strategic disagreements.¹³³

Discussing about the populist rhetoric and the reconfiguration of allies and adversaries, the effect of Trump's NATO rhetoric was a fundamental reconfiguration of the social and normative landscape of transatlantic security. Allies were no longer guaranteed inclusion by virtue of institutional membership, but they were subjected to ongoing evaluation based on perceived loyalty, contribution, and alignment with U.S. priorities. Moreover, the rhetorical strategy adopted by Trump underscored the interdependence between domestic political narratives and foreign policy behavior, and by framing NATO as a site of exploitation, he addressed domestic audiences' concerns about fairness, sovereignty, and economic protection while simultaneously reshaping international alliances. In fact, in the last years, transatlantic relationship has been characterized by uncertainty and symbolic antagonism, and this has reshaped European strategic discourses and revealed the profound impact of populist communication on the structures of global governance.¹³⁴

¹³³ Remarks by President Trump at Press Conference After NATO Summit, Brussels, *National Archive White House website*, 12 July 2018, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-press-conference-nato-summit-brussels-belgium/> last consulted: 15 September 2025; Remarks by President Trump and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at Bilateral Breakfast, *National Archive White House website*, 11 July 2018, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-nato-secretary-general-jens-stoltenberg-bilateral-breakfast/> last consulted: 11 August 2025; Werkhauser N., Munich Security Conference in the shadow of Donald Trump, *Deutsche Welle website*, 12 February 2025, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/donald-trump-russia-ukraine-war-nato-global-security-v2/a-71565151> last consulted: 5 September 2025

¹³⁴ Fjærtøft E.T. (2019), *Engaging the US in the Age of Trump: The Case for a New European Strategic Discourse*; Ettinger A. (2018), *Trump's National Security Strategy: "America First" meets the establishment*, pp. 474–483; Sperling J., Webber M. (2019), *Trump's foreign policy and NATO: Exit and voice*, pp. 511–526; Diamond J., Trump scolds NATO allies over defense spending, *CNN Politics website*, 25 May 2017, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/25/politics/trump-nato-financial-payments> last consulted: 11 August 2025;

3. TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS IN TRUMP'S SECOND MANDATE (2025)

With the beginning of Donald J. Trump's second presidential term in early 2025, the transatlantic framework that was shaped under his first mandate reemerged under previous and new pressures. Having already analyzed in previous chapters how his rhetoric toward the UK and the European Union during his first presidency established trade skepticism and disdain for what he perceived as regulatory overreach, now it becomes crucial to examine how those patterns still exist and transform facts and relationships in his second term. In 2025, his return to office did not constitute fresh start, since it still sustained "America First" priorities, and domestic economic revival, however, it also introduced new emphases in communications, trade policy, diplomatic strategy, and ideological framing.

From the opening of 2025, Trump clarified that while certain institutional pillars such as NATO and trade treaties would remain, while the manner and tone of engagement would undergo changes. The global order was marked by the war in Ukraine, a country that continued to demand U.S. input, and while China remained a central competitor, the European concerns about internal cohesion, defense spending, migration, and regulatory policy were increasing. Considering these circumstances, Trump's administration conveyed its intention to adopt a more aggressive trade posture toward the EU, while fostering a favored connection with the United Kingdom, supporting in this way regulatory concessions and bilateral cooperation.

A clear example in May 2025 is when Trump publicly recommended a straight 50 % tariff on the European Union, citing stalled negotiations, trade deficits, and what he described as "powerful Trade Barriers, Vat Taxes, ridiculous Corporate Penalties, Non-Monetary Trade Barriers, Monetary Manipulations, unfair and unjustified lawsuits against Americans Companies." Indeed, his message on Truth Social said:

"The European Union, which was formed for the primary purpose of taking advantage of the United States on TRADE, has been very difficult to deal with. [...] Our discussions with them are going

nowhere! Therefore, I am recommending a straight 50% Tariff on the European Union, starting on June 1, 2025. There is no Tariff if the product is built or manufactured in the United States."¹³⁵

This position not only reaffirmed what he previously affirmed, namely the willingness to use high tariffs as a negotiation tool but intensified the pressure by setting a very high possible duty rate as well, demonstrating less tolerance for resistance. At the same time, there is a recurring motif, the one of burden-sharing in the field of defense, for instance there have been some criticisms concerning the EU military spending and some promises to revise American commitments unless European countries increase defense investment recur frequently. In support to this, reports from the Munich Security Conference in February 2025 announced this sort of continuity of Trump who reaffirmed his position, saying that "We were being ripped off by European nations both on trade and on NATO", pronouncing towards the EU "If you don't pay, we're not going to protect you" referring to new conditions of "demanding allies to spend 5% of their gross domestic product on defense. Germany is struggling to meet the 2% that is now regarded as a minimum requirement in NATO."¹³⁶

However, alongside this perpetuity of leitmotifs experience new emphases in 2025, and the first is the elaboration of *reciprocity* in the field of trade, due to the fact that Trump was disappointed by the vague and framed notions of fair trade, while the second concerns the differentiated treatment of the UK versus the EU. In support to this, while the UK was not exempt from trade pressures, Trump seems to perceive UK as a special strategic partner, that may receive favorable treatment in trade and regulatory access. A primary example of this lies in the *Fact Sheet: U.S.-UK Reach Historic Trade Deal*, a document where Trump and Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced what is described as a "new paradigm for our special relationship" promoting an increased market access for U.S. agricultural and industrial goods in the UK, commitments to reduce or eliminate non-tariff barriers, streamlined customs arrangements, and high standard commitments in labor, intellectual property,

¹³⁵ Breuninger K., Trump calls for 50% tariffs on EU, says he's "not looking for a deal" with bloc, *CNBC Politics website*, 23 May 2025, available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2025/05/23/trump-recommends-50percent-tariff-on-european-union-starting-june-1.html> last consulted: 5 September 2025

¹³⁶ Werkhauser N., Munich Security Conference in the shadow of Donald Trump, *Deutsche Welle website*, 12 February 2025, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/donald-trump-russia-ukraine-war-nato-global-security-v2/a-71565151> last consulted: 5 September 2025

environment, and security cooperation.¹³⁷ Indeed, in the implementation of that economic deal through the Executive Order 14309 that took place in June 2025, the U.S. explicitly included that “the United Kingdom will reduce or eliminate numerous non-tariff barriers that unfairly discriminate against American products, hurt the United States’ manufacturing base, and threaten the national security of the United States”, not only but it also threatened to apply Section 232 investigations with the UK for certain pharmaceutical imports unless reciprocity was improved with the aim to address “U.S. national security concerns”.¹³⁸

Furthermore, more formal trade deals and negotiations are being structured in manners that balance openness to large economies or blocs with protection of U.S. domestic industries, and this is exemplified by the trade deal with the European Union that was reached in late July 2025. In this deal the U.S. and the EU announced that the majority of European goods that entered the U.S., including vehicles, would face a 15 % tariff, while other products such as aircraft components, chemicals and pharmaceuticals would be exempt.¹³⁹ What has been also done is the integration of core domestic narratives concerning jobs, economic revival, and manufacturing resurgence into foreign policy messages as well. For instance, in the Fact Sheet of U.S.-UK trade deal, Trump emphasized agricultural exports, like beef, as sectors in which U.S. workers will be beneficiaries.¹⁴⁰ Afterwards, it has been noticed a frequent use of deadlines, conditional pauses, and threats as tools in negotiation, in fact, Trump set tariff deadlines or paused tariff actions for negotiation windows, as in April 2025 when he imposed a baseline tariff (10 %) on all countries on “Liberation Day”, which

¹³⁷ Fact Sheet: U.S.-UK Reach Historic, Trade Deal, *National Archive White House website*, 8 May 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/05/fact-sheet-u-s-uk-reach-historic-trade-deal/> last consulted: 9 September 2025

¹³⁸ Implementing the general terms of the United States of America – United Kingdom economic prosperity deal, Executive orders, *National Archive White House website*, 16 June 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/06/implementing-the-general-terms-of-the-united-states-of-america-united-kingdom-economic-prosperity-deal/> last consulted: 15 September 2025

¹³⁹ Doherty E., Kiderlin S., Trump announces EU trade deal with 15% tariffs, *CNBC Politics website*, 27 July 2025, available at: <https://www.cbc.com/2025/07/27/trump-european-union-eu-trade-tariffs.html> last consulted 15 September 2025

¹⁴⁰ Fact Sheet: U.S.-UK Reach Historic, Trade Deal, *National Archive White House website*, 8 May 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/05/fact-sheet-u-s-uk-reach-historic-trade-deal/> last consulted: 9 September 2025

is 2nd of April 2, but with the condition of higher or reciprocal tariffs on perceived unfair trade behavior.¹⁴¹

These new topics of focus introduced new tensions in this second presidential term of Trump, leading to the fact that the UK and EU have responded with caution, attempts at negotiation, resistance, and conditional cooperation. Indeed, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, for example, in reaction to the extended threat of tariffs against Europe, about the July 2025 agreement said, “It’s a good deal, it’s a huge deal, with tough negotiations”.¹⁴² On the other hand, the Italian Prime Minister Meloni spoke with Trump in April, expressing that despite trade tensions, she believed that the U.S. government and the EU would finally reach an agreement, portraying the U.S. as “a reliable partner”.¹⁴³ The transatlantic relations in the early months of Trump’s second mandate are defined by an interplay of continuity and innovation, since the economic and strategic fundamentals from his first term remain, notwithstanding the fact that these have been adapted. UK is still treated as a favored bilateral partner under the general America-First logic, while the EU is more seen as a collective bargaining counterpart.

This section of the thesis will examine in detail the continuities with the first presidency, taking into consideration how trade protectionism, defense burden-sharing, and skepticism of international regulatory regimes manifested in early 2025, in ways similar from Trump’s first term, with a focus on the new and previous-adapted core elements of Trump’s foreign policy diplomacy in the two central case-studies.

¹⁴¹ Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Ensures National Security and Economic Resilience Through Section 232 Actions on Processed Critical Minerals and Derivative Products, *National Archive White House website*, 15 April 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/04/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-ensures-national-security-and-economic-resilience-through-section-232-actions-on-processed-critical-minerals-and-derivative-products/> last consulted: 5 September 2025

¹⁴² Doherty E., Kiderlin S., Trump announces EU trade deal with 15% tariffs, *CNBC Politics website*, 27 July 2025, available at: <https://www.cbc.com/2025/07/27/trump-european-union-eu-trade-tariffs.html> last consulted: 15 September 2025

¹⁴³ Connor R., Sexton K., Taha R., Trump says “100%” confident of US trade deal with EU, *Deutsche Welle website*, 17 April 2025, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/trump-says-100-confident-of-us-trade-deal-with-eu/live-72269083> last consulted: 5 September 2025

3.1 THE UNITED STATES AND THE UNITED KINGDOM: BREXIT LEGACY, COMMERCIAL DEALS AND POLITICAL FRAMING

3.1.1 BREXIT LEGACY AND IDEOLOGICAL FRAMING

If the early months of Trump's second term were marked by a confirmation of familiar patterns in transatlantic relations, the dynamics with the United Kingdom revealed the historical value of the longstanding tradition of the "special relationship" and the concrete reconfiguration imposed by the post-Brexit order. From his first weeks back in office, Trump reconfirmed his thoughts about UK as a privileged partner, that was in a position to negotiate on its own terms, echoing a narrative that he had embraced in 2016 when he portrayed Brexit as a courageous act of sovereignty. By linking Brexit directly to the ability of Britain to enter a bilateral deal with the United States, Trump reinforced his longstanding argument that supranational institutions like the European Union constrain trade, weaken democracy, and impose regulatory shackles.¹⁴⁴

The Brexit legacy has been perceived as a background and a justification for Trump's differentiated treatment of the UK compared to the EU, and whereas Brussels was presented as an obstructive bloc, London was elevated as a state capable of pragmatic engagement. This framing allowed Trump to present the U.S.–UK Economic Prosperity Deal of 2025 as an outcome impossible under EU membership, thereby reinforcing his ideological narrative that national sovereignty produces better trade outcomes. For UK Prime Minister Starmer, who had campaigned on rebuilding pragmatic ties with Washington, this was an opportunity and a challenge as well, because while the deal promised access and investment, it also exposed the UK to Washington's tariff leverage and conditionality.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ General Terms for the United States of America and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland Economic Prosperity Deal, *National Archive White House website*, 8 May 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/05/general-terms-for-the-united-states-of-america-and-the-united-kingdom-of-great-britain-and-northern-ireland-economic-prosperity-deal/> last consulted: 7 September 2025

¹⁴⁵ Iqbal N., da Silva J., Race M., Eu tariffs "pretty soon" but UK can be worked out – Trump, *BBC website*, 3 February 2025, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn4zgx808g7o> last consulted: 7 September 2025; Lincicome S., What the U.K. Deal Reveals About Trump's Trade Strategy, *The Atlantic website*, 13 May 2025, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/economy/archive/2025/05/uk-trade-deal-trump/682787/> last consulted: 8 September 2025; Roth A., Trump hails trade deal with "oldest ally" UK – but what about the details?, *The Guardian website*, 8 May 2025, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/may/08/trump-trade-deal-uk-analysis> last consulted: 8 September 2025

3.1.2 ECONOMIC PROSPERITY DEAL AND TRADE CONSITIONALITY

The Economic Prosperity Deal, announced in a White House Fact Sheet on May 8, 2025, and formalized by an Executive Order in June, represented the centerpiece of U.S.–UK economic relations in Trump’s second term. Officially it has been described as a “new paradigm for our special relationship” since it created market access opportunities for U.S. agricultural and industrial exports while committing Britain to reduce non-tariff barriers, align regulatory standards in specific sectors, and expand customs cooperation.¹⁴⁶

Although some critics in the UK feared that agricultural liberalization could undermine domestic producers, Trump framed the concessions as mutual gains, as declared by Starmer:

“That is a deal will protect British businesses and save thousands of jobs in Britain, really important, skilled, well-paid jobs. It will remove tariffs on British steel and aluminium, reducing them to zero. It will provide vital assurances for our life sciences sector, so important to our economy and grant unprecedented market access for British farmers without compromising our high standards. And for the great British cars that you make here, that we see all around us, this deal means that US tariffs will now be cut from 27.5% to 10% for 100,000 vehicles every year, that’s a huge and important reduction”.¹⁴⁷

However, notwithstanding this, Trump did not refrain from applying pressure to Britain even in this context of preferential treatment. As demonstrated by the June 16 Executive Order, he made clear that unless pharmaceutical imports were liberalized under reciprocal terms, Section 232 investigations could be applied to the UK, thereby framing Britain not merely as a friend but as a partner that must comply with U.S. expectations.¹⁴⁸ This duality, which can be interpreted as a

¹⁴⁶ Fact Sheet: U.S.-UK Reach Historic, Trade Deal, *National Archive White House website*, 8 May 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/05/fact-sheet-u-s-uk-reach-historic-trade-deal/> last consulted: 9 September 2025

¹⁴⁷ PM remarks on the UK’s landmark economic deal with the US: Thursday 8 May, *Gov.uk website*, 8 May 2025, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-remarks-on-the-uks-landmark-economic-deal-with-the-us-thursday-8-may> last consulted: 7 September 2025

¹⁴⁸ Implementing the general terms of the United States of America – United Kingdom economic prosperity deal, Executive orders, *National Archive White House website*, 16 June 2025, available at:

celebration of sovereignty on the one hand, and imposition of conditional reciprocity on the other, illustrates the balance Trump between ideological framing and transactional pragmatism. In this situation Britain was privileged rhetorically but was still required to deliver concessions, demonstrating that the Brexit legacy did not exempt it from the America First logic.

3.1.3 SECURITY COOPERATION AND NATO IMPLICATIONS

As it can be noted, the Brexit legacy also shaped Trump's security framing, for instance, at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, Vice President JD Vance argued that Europe was in danger of losing its "fundamental values" and that Britain, by contrast, represented a country reclaiming democratic control, and this meant emphasizing bilateral defense cooperation.¹⁴⁹

However, Trump's political framing of the UK in 2025 revolved around three interconnected themes, which are the fact that Brexit is portrayed as a vindication of sovereignty, while economic deals as proof of mutual benefit, and bilateral cooperation as a symbol of ideological alignment. Each of them has reinforced the others, allowing Trump to present Britain as a preferred partner without undermining his core America First posture. On the other side, by depicting the EU as bureaucratic and obstructive, Trump used Brexit to justify his differentiated diplomacy. Although the announcement of the Economic Prosperity Deal in May 2025 was acclaimed by both parts as an historic turning point, the months that followed revealed that the agreement was less a final settlement than a framework for continuous bargaining, recalling for both domestic and foreign audiences that U.S. commitments were conditional. Moreover, the linkage implemented by Trump between a transatlantic trade deal and domestic electoral constituencies was an emblem of his

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/06/implementing-the-general-terms-of-the-united-states-of-america-united-kingdom-economic-prosperity-deal/> last consulted: 15 September 2025

¹⁴⁹ J.D. Vance, Remarks by the Vice President at the Munich Security Conference, *The American Presidency Project website*, 14 February 2025, available at: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-vice-president-the-munich-security-conference-0> last consulted: 8 September 2025

rhetoric, since the bilateral agreement was not framed as an abstract diplomacy but as a concrete victory for American workers and farmers.¹⁵⁰

Furthermore, since the U.S. had opened the possibility of a Section 232 investigation into UK pharmaceutical exports, citing national security risks if reciprocity was not assured, brought to the fact that pharmaceuticals represented another contested area, and this framed British pharmaceutical pricing policies as discriminatory against U.S. companies, that disadvantaged American producers.¹⁵¹

Tariff conditionality became an increasingly central tool, as for the case of Trump's April 2 "Liberation Day" executive actions that introduced a 10% baseline tariff on all imports, with the possibility of higher rates if countries were considered unfair traders. UK, despite its favored status, was not exempt from this framework, indeed, Trump repeatedly suggested that London's ability to avoid the rates depended on compliance with U.S. expectations, and this underscored a paradox, namely the fact that Britain was celebrated as sovereign this meant exposure to the same tariff threats applied elsewhere.¹⁵²

The sectoral disputes revealed how Brexit's legacy functioned as a rhetorical resource, since for Trump, every agricultural concession or pharmaceutical negotiation was not merely about economics but about proving the virtue of Brexit-like sovereignty. This linkage allowed him to draw parallels with his own campaign themes in the United States that mirrored also his principles during his first presidential term. Therefore, the domestic narrative further reinforced due to Trump's deliberate

¹⁵⁰ Lincicome S., What the U.K. Deal Reveals About Trump's Trade Strategy, *The Atlantic website*, 13 May 2025, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/economy/archive/2025/05/uk-trade-deal-trump/682787/> last consulted: 8 September 2025; Revell E., Trump touts UK trade deal as boosting US agriculture, beef producers, *Fox Business website*, 8 May 2025, available at: <https://www.foxbusiness.com/politics/trump-touts-uk-trade-deal-boosting-us-agriculture-beef-producers> last consulted: 8 September 2025

¹⁵¹ Implementing the general terms of the United States of America – United Kingdom economic prosperity deal, Executive orders, *National Archive White House website*, 16 June 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/06/implementing-the-general-terms-of-the-united-states-of-america-united-kingdom-economic-prosperity-deal/> last consulted: 15 September 2025; White House's Navarro says pharma tariffs likely under Section 232 probe, *Reuters website*, 14 August 2025, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/white-houses-navarro-says-pharma-tariffs-likely-under-section-232-probe-2025-08-14/> last consulted: 8 September 2025

¹⁵² Harithas B., Meng K., Brown E., Mouradian C., "Liberation Day" Tariffs Explained, *CSIS website*, 3 April 2025, available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/liberation-day-tariffs-explained> last consulted: 8 September 2025

choice of language in public remarks, as a matter of fact, whereas official fact sheets described tariff schedules, customs procedures, and regulatory benchmarks in technical terms, Trump used populist phrases that resonated with his supporters.¹⁵³

In addition to trade disputes, the Economic Prosperity Deal saw intensified discussions on regulatory convergence, indeed, the U.S. side committed to negotiate digital trade provisions and streamlining customs and regulatory barriers, including in areas like digital services and pharma. UK government debate also reflects concern about how far alignment with U.S. practices might conflict with EU-derived standards, and while the deal offered U.S. incentives, such as tariff relief and expanded export access, UK business groups and officials have flagged tensions, especially in sectors where EU regulatory regimes remain influential.¹⁵⁴

On the whole, the evolution of U.S.–UK trade disputes in 2025 reveals a paradox at the heart of Trump’s approach, namely, on the one hand, he consistently elevated Britain as a sovereign, preferred partner, contrasting it with the EU’s bureaucracy and obstruction, while on the other hand, he subjected Britain to the same instruments of tariff threats, Section 232 investigations, and conditional deadlines that he deployed against adversarial trade partners. At this point, what distinguished the UK was not exemption from pressure but rather rhetorical privilege, and this framing allowed Trump to maintain ideological coherence, showing that America First applied universally, while still honoring the symbolic status of the “special relationship.” Trump’s political and ideological framing of the United Kingdom in 2025 extended well beyond tariffs and market access, using UK as a symbolic counterpart in a larger struggle over sovereignty and democracy. In the early months of his second term, his public remarks consistently contrasted the UK’s post-Brexit independence with what he depicted as the European Union’s bureaucratic decline. This rhetorical

¹⁵³ Roth A., Trump hails trade deal with “oldest ally” UK – but what about the details?, *The Guardian website*, 8 May 2025, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/may/08/trump-trade-deal-uk-analysis> last consulted: 8 September 2025

¹⁵⁴ Allen B.E., Benson J., Bell J.F., The UK-US “Economic Prosperity Deal” and Its Impact, *Skadden Publication*, 12 July 2025, available at: <https://www.skadden.com/insights/publications/2025/07/the-uk-us-economic-prosperity-deal-and-its-impact> last consulted: 9 September 2025; Collis J., The UK-US trade deal: what will be the effects?, *Economics Observatory*, 30 July 2025, available at: <https://www.economicsobservatory.com/the-uk-us-trade-deal-what-will-be-the-effects> last consulted: 9 September 2025; Peres A., What is a trade deal? UK-US trade talks since 2020, *House of Commons Library Research Briefing*, N. 10316, 30 July 2025

move functioned on several levels, because it honored the symbolic “special relationship,” reinforced the narrative of Brexit as a triumph of sovereignty. For instance, in an interview with the BBC Trump said *“It’s a special relationship. Look, that’s why I made a deal with them ... For the most part in terms of your competitors and in terms of the European Union, I haven’t made a deal. Now the UK is very special ... they have been a really true ally.”*¹⁵⁵

In this framework, the UK was depicted as a political partner that validated America First principles abroad and Trump suggested that just as his administration was reclaiming the U.S. economy from unfair trade practices, so had Britain reclaimed its political autonomy from the EU. This analogy allowed him to present bilateral cooperation as evidence that sovereignty share earnings. In fact, it is important to notice that the deliberate parallel between Brexit and his own electoral victory were presented as populist revolts against elites, both vindicated by subsequent trade deals, and both framed as proof of national destiny. Another important concern is the fact that the “special relationship” was redefined not merely as a partnership of two nations with historical ties, but as an alliance of values in opposition to supranational governance and progressive regulatory norms. In support to this, the use of UK as a counterpart extended into discussions of NATO and defense can be perceived also when Trump affirmed in a BBC interview that he “still had doubts about support from NATO members, even after they agreed to increase defense spending”, and concerning the subject matter on the fact that if they had a war, U.S. would fight for NATO, questioning at the same time if NATO would do the same, declaring also that *“I’m not sure I can say it, but I will say this, I believe that the UK would fight with us [...] I think that they would be with us. I’m not sure that a lot of the other countries would be”*.¹⁵⁶ In this way, Britain’s role was elevated not only as a compliant economic partner but as a responsible security ally, offering to Trump a dual benefit, one the importance that the U.S. was not abandoning NATO altogether, the other the fact that he was allowed to portray UK as the exception that proved the rule, demonstrating that allies could be trusted if they

¹⁵⁵ Elgot J., Trump dismisses parliamentary recall idea and praises Starmer’s Brexit efforts, *The Guardian website*, 15 July 2025, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/jul/15/trump-dismisses-parliamentary-recall-idea-and-praises-starmer-brexit-efforts> last consulted: 9 September 2025

¹⁵⁶ Trump says UK would fight for US, suggests EU may not, *Reuters website*, 15 July 2025, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/trump-says-uk-would-fight-us-suggests-cannot-say-same-eu-2025-07-15/> last consulted: 15 September 2025

made the right choices. A clear example of this is “his willingness to grant Britain some exemptions from his tariff programme. In contrast, he has threatened a 30% tariff on European goods”, sustaining that “that's why I made a deal with them, and I haven't made a deal, I mean, I've made some other deals, but for the most part, in terms of your competitors, and in terms of the European Union, I haven't made a deal”.¹⁵⁷

The ideological framing also penetrated Trump's direct bilateral communications with Starmer, in fact, in their joint statement on May 8, both leaders referred to the event as an “historic agreement” and “historic day”, indeed, Starmer affirmed “This is a really fantastic, historic day in which we can announce this deal between our two great countries. And I think it's a real tribute to the history that we have of working so closely together”, remembering also the roots of their historical strong ties:

*“It's going to not only protect jobs but create jobs, opening market access. And as you say, Donald, the timing couldn't be more apt because not only was it 80 years ago today that victory came for Europe at the end of the Second World War. But of course on that day, the UK and the US stood together as the closest of allies. And now we take this into new and important territory by adding trade and the economy to the closeness of our relationship. It is built, as you say, on those notions of fairness, and reciprocal arrangements. We've always had a fair and balanced arrangement between our countries. This builds on that, hugely important for sectors like car manufacturing, and for steel and aluminum and so many others.”*¹⁵⁸

The UK–U.S. tariff package announced in May 2025 must be interpreted not only as a narrow technical trade arrangement but also as a political signal that encapsulated the broader transformation of Trump's second-term trade diplomacy. This is due to the fact that although its economic scope was limited, it carried disproportionate structural weight that saw months of rhetorical escalation into legal measures and it also consolidated a model in which sectoral

¹⁵⁷ Trump says UK would fight for US, suggests EU may not, *Reuters website*, 15 July 2025, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/trump-says-uk-would-fight-us-suggests-cannot-say-same-eu-2025-07-15/> last consulted: 15 September 2025

¹⁵⁸ Remarks: Donald Trump Announces a New Trade Deal with the United Kingdom – May 8, 2025, *Rollcall website*, 8 May 2025, available at: <https://rollcall.com/factbase/trump/transcript/donald-trump-remarks-trade-agreement-keir-starmer-united-kingdom-may-8-2025/> last consulted: 9 September 2025

developments, tariff-rate quotas and reciprocal conditions became the new rules to follow in transatlantic commerce. At the surface level the agreement involved the partial reduction or removal of duties in selected areas, most prominently through the lowering of U.S. tariffs on British cars, the elimination of duties on certain steel and aluminum derivatives, and the creation of preferential access for U.S. agricultural exports such as ethanol and beef, while the general 10% baseline tariff imposed on all countries on “Liberation Day” in April remained in place, signaling that this was an exception that allowed both governments to claim victory in targeted sectors while preserving Washington’s broader leverage.¹⁵⁹ From the perspective of U.S. domestic politics the deal was presented as a triumph for American workers and farmers, with the White House and USTR highlighting figures on projected export growth in ethanol and beef and portraying the carve-outs as proof that Trump’s confrontational tactics produced tangible gains, a narrative reinforced in rallies and Truth Social posts that framed the UK deal as a “win” achieved through strength rather than compromise.¹⁶⁰ However, from the perspective of governance, its significance lay in the institutionalization of reciprocity, owing to the preferential tariffs which were not given freely but conditioned on measurable commitments by UK, such as expanded access for U.S. goods, openness to future regulatory alignment, and the agreement explicitly reserved Washington’s right to reopen investigations or reimpose duties under Section 232 if it judged reciprocity insufficient, thereby converting what in the first term had often been vague calls for “fair trade” into legally enforceable mechanisms.¹⁶¹

Economically the effects were modest, in fact, analysts noted that because the 10% baseline tariff remained, most British exporters continued to face higher costs than before April 2025, while only a

¹⁵⁹ Boak J., Lawless J., Megerian C., Trump jeeves 10% tariffs on UK but cut taxes on British autos, steel and aluminum with trade deal, *AP News website*, 9 May 2025, available at: <https://apnews.com/article/us-uk-trump-starmer-trade-deal-79d55b8ade0dd8c9265ada9400d079db> last consulted: 9 September 2025

¹⁶⁰ Historic U.S. – UK Trade Deal Freaws Praise, *Office of the United States Trade Representative website*, 14 May 2025, available at: <https://ustr.gov/about/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2025/may/historic-us-uk-trade-deal-draws-praise#:~:text=The%20historic%20agreement%20was%20met,American%20family%20farmers%20and%20ranchers.%E2%80%9D> last consulted: 9 September 2025

¹⁶¹ Implementing the general terms of the United States of America – United Kingdom economic prosperity deal, Executive orders, *National Archive White House website*, 16 June 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/06/implementing-the-general-terms-of-the-united-states-of-america-united-kingdom-economic-prosperity-deal/> last consulted: 9 September 2025

few sectors benefited immediately, creating a scenario in which the symbolic value of the deal outweighed its macroeconomic impact. In support to this, the Bank of England commented that:

*“Uncertainty surrounding global trade policies has intensified since the imposition of tariffs by the United States and the measures taken in response by some of its trading partners. There has subsequently been volatility in financial markets, and market-implied policy rates have moved lower. Prospects for global growth have weakened as a result of this uncertainty and new tariff announcements, although the negative impacts on UK growth and inflation are likely to be smaller.”*¹⁶²

Not only, but the Monetary Policy Report of the month May 2025 of the Bank of England analyzed also the economic trend since April in order to understand the consequences of U.S. tariffs:

*“The Agents’ regular intelligence cycle has been complemented with more focused discussions during April to understand better firms’ early reactions to the US tariff announcements. Uncertainty remains the primary concern among manufacturing contacts. Following the 90 day pause in tariffs, those directly exporting to the US are now waiting to see the permanent change in tariffs and how these may impact both their customers and competitors. Those seeking to grow exports to the US are less confident this will be achievable. Manufacturers with international supply chains report little change and expect any changes to be relatively slow given that making adjustments to sourcing is often a complex process. Some contacts report rerouting of shipments from the US to European and UK ports, but the impact on UK pricing remains uncertain at this stage.”*¹⁶³

Politically, the deal illustrated three dynamics central to Trump’s second-term trade strategy. The first one is the differentiated bilateralism that allowed the U.S. to treat the UK as a privileged case and thereby using this country as a demonstrative partner facing the EU; the second is the legalization of rhetoric, in which threats made publicly were systematically followed by executive

¹⁶² Monetary Policy Report – May 2025, *Bank of England website*, 8 May 2025, available at: <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy-report/2025/may-2025> last consulted: 9 September 2025

¹⁶³ Monetary Policy Report – May 2025, *Bank of England website*, 8 May 2025, available at: <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy-report/2025/may-2025> last consulted: 9 September 2025

orders and proclamations that translated discourse into binding rules; and third, the deployment of sectoral conditionality that ensured political visibility without dismantling the broader tariff regime. The UK's position thus became emblematic of the strategic squeeze, by securing limited relief, in exchange it accepted a framework that bound its regulatory and commercial choices more tightly to U.S. demands and risked widening its divergence from EU norms, especially in areas such as automotive standards, food safety and pharmaceutical approvals, which the White House explicitly listed as future points of negotiation.¹⁶⁴

In a BBC article dated 17 June 2025, following Trump's Executive Order, the reporter Meiehans explains what the U.S.-UK tariff deal is about. The article still reports the 10% tariff on "most UK items" entering the U.S. and explains all the tariff aspects regarding the previous mentioned sectors, such as the car field, the steel and aluminum 25% tariff deal, which "could double to 50% if the UK and US do not reach a deal by 9 July", and the pharmaceuticals (major export for UK trade) that still were under reciprocal tariffs with the U.S. Not only, but it has been noted that the UK's tax on digital services did not undergo changes, however, "The UK government said it had "agreed to work on a digital trade deal". But the U.S. government said it was "disappointed that the UK was unwilling to agree to fully address the tax". In the same way, the consequences of food standards modifications, brought to the fact that "the UK has chosen alignment with EU - and the forthcoming "Brexit reset" with the EU - over the US" in order not to weaken UK food standards on imports due to their position on "insisting that American hormone-treated meat will not seep onto the UK market".¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Fact Sheet: U.S.-UK Reach Historic, Trade Deal, *National Archive White House website*, 8 May 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/05/fact-sheet-u-s-uk-reach-historic-trade-deal/> last consulted: 9 September 2025; Historic U.S. – UK Trade Deal Freaws Praise, *Office of the United States Trade Representative website*, 14 May 2025, available at: <https://ustr.gov/about/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2025/may/historic-us-uk-trade-deal-draws-praise#:~:text=The%20historic%20agreement%20was%20met,American%20family%20farmers%20and%20ranchers.%E2%80%9D> last consulted: 9 September 2025;

¹⁶⁴ Implementing the general terms of the United States of America – United Kingdom economic prosperity deal, Executive orders, *National Archive White House website*, 16 June 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/06/implementing-the-general-terms-of-the-united-states-of-america-united-kingdom-economic-prosperity-deal/> last consulted: 9 September 2025

¹⁶⁵ Meierhans J., What is in the UK-US tariff deal?, *BBC website*, 17 June 2025, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c15ng4g5g0eo> last consulted: 9 September 2025

The political and ideological framing of the UK in Trump's 2025 legitimized bilateral concessions by casting them as sovereign choices, differentiated UK from the EU in order to strengthen U.S. bargaining power with Brussels, and reinforced his domestic narrative of respect, sovereignty, and strength. The result was a symbolic elevation of UK, as demonstrated by the UK Government Press Release at the end of June that symbolizes a confirmation of its privileged position with the U.S.:

*"The UK is the only country to have secured this deal with the US, reducing car export tariffs from 27.5% to 10%, saving manufacturers hundreds of millions each year and protecting hundreds of thousands of jobs. [...] These changes are a huge win for both sectors (auto and aerospace) and will help ensure UK manufacturers remain globally competitive, protect British jobs and continue to lead in innovation and excellence."*¹⁶⁶

The cumulative effect of Trump's trade and political framing of the United Kingdom in 2025 was not confined to bilateral dynamics but reverberated throughout the transatlantic landscape, shaping both perceptions of U.S. power and the internal cohesion of Europe. By elevating Britain as a sovereign partner and contrasting it with the EU, Trump depicted the UK as an ideological ally and the EU as a transactional adversary. This strategy allowed him to extract concessions from both while sustaining a narrative of America First triumph, yet it also risked exacerbating divisions within Europe and complicating NATO's collective agenda. The Brexit legacy was thus not only a British phenomenon but a resource for Trump's broader strategy of redefining transatlantic relations.

The geopolitical implications of this diplomacy were significant, since by privileging the UK, Trump brought a relationship of dependence that seemed to put the UK in a situation in which it found itself caught between two stools: the economic logic of proximity to the EU and the political logic of privileged status with the U.S.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Department for Business and Trade, The Rt Hon Jonathan Reynolds MP, Press release UK- US trade deal kicks into gear: immediate cuts for UK auto and aerospace sectors, *Gov.uk website*, 30 June 2025, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-us-trade-deal-kicks-into-gear-immediate-tariff-cuts-for-uk-auto-and-aerospace-sectors> last consulted: 9 September 2025

¹⁶⁷ Fact Sheet: U.S.-UK Reach Historic, Trade Deal, *National Archive White House website*, 8 May 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/05/fact-sheet-u-s-uk-reach-historic-trade-deal/> last consulted: 9 September 2025

There have been somehow similar consequences to NATO, since UK's privileged status reinforced U.S. calls for higher European defense spending. Trump appeared unconcerned with these risks, indeed, at 2025 NATO Summit in the Hague it has been discussed about the collective security guarantee. As a matter of fact, "European countries received a renewed American commitment to the collective security guarantee within the alliance. In return, they agreed to increase their defense budgets as demanded by President Trump. Nevertheless, obstacles remain in Europe's path to security independence, and there is no certainty that the parties will fulfill their commitments. The shifts in power dynamics within NATO and the implications of Trump's approach to relations between the United States and its partners will also influence Israel's strategic environment." In practice, during his second term, Trump demanded European member states to increase their defense budgets in order to gain more responsibility concerning the European security. At the same time, about Article 5 on Collective defense, the INSS Insight affirmed that:

*"The Trump administration has placed budgetary contributions at the center of its NATO policy, suggesting that American support for a member state under attack could hinge upon that country's defense spending. Already during his first term, Trump hinted that he would not rush to invoke Article 5 of the NATO treaty—which establishes collective security among member states—in the event of an attack against one of the members, if doing so did not serve American interests."*¹⁶⁸

3.1.4 CONTINUITY AND INNOVATION IN U.S. – UK RELATIONS

In this case-study of U.S. Trump's relationship with UK in 2025, demonstrates the evident continuity with Trump's first presidency regarding in the methods that he employed, which can be exemplified by tariff threats, demands for reciprocity, skepticism toward supranational institutions, and the celebration of bilateralism. For this reason, Trump's approach to the United Kingdom in 2025 illustrates the fusion of continuity and innovation that characterizes his second term. UK was

¹⁶⁸ Daniel R., Weinberg J.R., Vinikas M., NATO Summit June 2025 – A Victory for Trump and Security Challenges for Europe, *INSS Insight*, No. 2014, 15 July 2025, available at: <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/nato-2025/> last consulted: 10 September 2025

consistently elevated as a privileged partner as during his first mandate, celebrating his sovereign choice to leave the European Union as a proof of the fact that independence can generate and produce tangible economic and political gains. The subject matter of the Economic Prosperity Deal within the two countries further accentuated their historical ties, but it mainly highlighted the fact that the U.S. concessions towards UK were more reciprocal obligations, tariff threats as instrument of leverage in order to protect U.S. domestic priorities. This can be interpreted as a sort of coherence with Trump's populist rhetoric and his pragmatic negotiation, moreover, this not only structured U.S.–UK relations but reshaped the transatlantic landscape by encouraging division, pressuring NATO allies, and reinforcing populist narratives across borders.

3.2 THE UNITED STATES AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: TRADE IMBALANCES, TARIFFS AND REGULATORY AGREEMENTS

3.2.1 U.S – EU TRADE TENSIONS AND TARIFF STRATEGY

Building on the differentiated approach that Trump applied toward the United Kingdom, the focus on the European Union in 2025 reveals a distinct set of dynamics, rooted in both continuity and innovation, where trade imbalances, tariffs, and regulatory disputes became the main instruments through which the administration sought to assert America First principles. Unlike the UK, which benefited from a narrative of ideological alignment, the European Union was consistently positioned as a bureaucratic and collectively resistant entity whose. Regarding this case-study, in 2025 Trump aimed at leverage U.S. economic and political power to secure more favorable terms, particularly in areas such as automotive exports, industrial goods, and agricultural commodities, where its country perceived itself to be systematically disadvantaged by European protectionist practices already during his first term.

By mid-2025, the trade relations between U.S. – EU were under considerable strain; in fact, Trump's repeated public pronouncements throughout May and June highlighted the EU's supposed failures in respecting American commercial interests. In support to this, at the end of May, Trump wrote a Truth Social post affirming: "The European Union, which was formed for

the primary purpose of taking advantage of the United States on TRADE, has been very difficult to deal with". As a matter of fact, according the Euractive article on 23rd of May, it is stated that at that time, the tariff situation of EU exporters to the U.S. was of "25% tariff on cars, steel and aluminium, as well as a 10% blanket levy. Trump has also suspended so-called "reciprocal tariffs" until July, which could potentially add another 10% import tax on EU products". Not only the EU was facing a time in which these measures were punitive, but these tariffs served to convey to domestic constituencies that the administration was defending American jobs and industries, while simultaneously demonstrating to European negotiators that the United States was prepared to escalate pressure if its conditions were unmet.¹⁶⁹

The EU prospect was to encounter 50% tariffs from 1 June, however, the days following this article brought some changes, in fact, Trump decided to "postpone the implementation of a 50 per cent tariff on all imports from the European Union until 9 July, in order to allow more time for trade negotiations". The position of Trump in this situation was a warning, he was not looking for a deal since according to him the EU was working against the U.S. advantage, stating that "discussions with them are going nowhere".¹⁷⁰ Notwithstanding the fact that the American President announced an increase of U.S. tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from 25% to 50%, the European Commission reacted affirming that this increase would contribute in adding significant uncertainty to global trade and it would inevitably rise costs for consumers and businesses, undermining in this way the negotiation that were in progress. As a consequence, the EU officials had paused their countermeasures earlier, namely in mid-April, in order to give space to dialogue, but with this new tariff threat, they have warned that the EU's retaliation will take effect from July 14 if no acceptable solution is found. Afterwards, on the behalf of this EU position, the German MEP Bernd Lange posted on X "We have our countermeasures ready for

¹⁶⁹ Kurmayer N. J., Moller-Nielsen T., Trump threatens EU with 50% tariff from 1 June, *Euractive website*, 23 May 2025, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/news/us-president-trump-threatens-50-tariff-on-eu/> last consulted: 15 September 2025

¹⁷⁰ Pugno A., Trump delays 50% EU tariff until 9 July, *Euractive website*, 26 May 2025, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/news/in-phone-call-with-trump-von-der-leyen-seeks-more-time-in-tariff-talks/> last consulted: 11 September 2025; Head of EU executive secures tariffs delay after talk with Trump, *The Guardian website*, 26 May 2025, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2025/may/25/german-finance-minister-joins-call-for-us-eu-talks-after-trump-tariff-threat> last consulted: 11 September 2025

the unjustified tariffs on steel and aluminum. If what has been announced really becomes reality, then we should apply these counter-tariffs immediately".¹⁷¹

3.2.2 *SECTORAL IMPACTS AND ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES*

Substantially, this transatlantic trade relationship in 2025 has been marked by heightened uncertainty and an increase of discordance between the two parts, mainly due to the Trump's administration broad use of tariffs as a foreign policy tool. In the meantime, while the EU and the U.S. were two interdependent economic partners, the evolution concerning Washington's trade policy under Trump has recast this relationship into a bargaining and confrontational situation, instead of finding a solution for cooperation.

These kinds of tariffs were justified under the banner of "reciprocity", which is the claim of Trump that his country was acting in this manner in order to fight against the EU that unfairly was taking advantage of the U.S. power, affecting in this way European exporters, especially in the field of cars, machinery, steel and many others. In this context, the European businesses were also still facing the consequences of the post-pandemic recovery and the challenges related to the war in Ukraine, this in particular from an economic perspective, since it mainly was characterized by high energy costs, tariffs and uncertainty.¹⁷² However, the aim of these tariffs was wide, since they targeted large economies such as France and Germany, but also smaller states that had a limited volume of foreign trade. The consequences of these tariffs imposed by the U.S. had two dimensions; namely, the American side, in which the industries that were dependent on EU imports faced high input costs, contributing in this way to inflationary pressures, while for the European exporters, they were experiencing significant challenges to

¹⁷¹ O' Neill R., EU prepared to counter new Trump tariffs, *Politico.eu website*, 31 May 2025, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/tariffs-trump-european-union-trade-steel-parliament-bernd-lange/> last consulted: 11 September 2025

¹⁷² Doherty E., Kiderlin S., Trump announces EU trade deal with 15% tariffs, *CNBC Politics website*, 27 July 2025, available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2025/07/27/trump-european-union-eu-trade-tariffs.html> last consulted: 15 September 2025;

maintain an access to the U.S. market. Not only, but also European small and medium-sized enterprises were disproportionately affected by this, due to their lower capacity to absorb costs or redirect their exports. The announcement of a U.S.–EU trade agreement in late July 2025 was presented as a breakthrough in averting a full-scale trade war, and in practice, this arrangement represented a compromise, because it avoided the extreme tariff levels threatened earlier in the year, but it still imposed a significant burden on European exporters. Moreover, the agreement was asymmetrical, as the EU did not reciprocate with equivalent tariff measures on U.S. imports, highlighting the transactional nature of Washington’s negotiating stance.¹⁷³

The European Parliament’s think tank analysis examines the profound implications of U.S. tariff escalation under President Trump for the EU; indeed, this report contextualizes the tariffs within a broader protectionist agenda that reshapes the transatlantic trade relations. The first element that is analyzed is the fact that there is an essential escalation of tariffs in few months, indeed, Trump started imposing steel and aluminum tariffs in March with a 25%, which, as mentioned before, it has culminated in July when on the 12th of July Trump posted on Truth Social that it would be imposed a 30% rate on EU good, which owing to an intervention of EU Commission President von der Leyen, it has been subject to an extended suspension until 1st of August 2025.¹⁷⁴ The response of the EU was the result of a combination of pragmatism and restraint, since while adopting countermeasures of about 8 billion EUR worth of U.S. goods, they prepared further steps to bring total EU countermeasures to 93 billion EUR in retaliation, indeed, the Commission initially suspended enforcement to preserve negotiations channels. As a matter of fact, the EU countermeasures acted on the legal basis of “the EU’s Enforcement Regulation (Regulation (EU) No 654/2014), which allows the EU to protect its trading interests when third countries adopt measures that violate international trade rules. The EU is treating the U.S. tariffs as safeguard measures, which permits a proportionate response under WTO rules. The EU also

¹⁷³ Capucci L., Figures T., Gilbert M., Lichtblau S., McAdoo M., Chiffelle C.R, The EU-US Trade Agreement: Some Clarity and Ongoing Uncertainty, *Boston Consulting Group website*, 29 July 2025, available at: <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2025/eu-us-trade-agreement-clarity-and-uncertainty> last consulted: 15 September 2025

¹⁷⁴ De Lemos Peixoto S., Spitzer K.G., Sabol M., Loi G., US tariffs: economic, financial and monetary repercussions, *Directorate-General for Economy, Transformation and Industry*, PE 764.382, July 2025, pp. 3-4

launched a World Trade Organisation dispute against U.S. tariff policies in May 2025, arguing they "blatantly violate fundamental WTO rules".¹⁷⁵

Employment effects are debated in the document as well, in fact, with 8,000 – 10,000 jobs estimated to be lost per 1 billion EUR in reduces exports, suggesting that the impacts on employment could be "substantial in certain regions and sectors heavily dependent on U.S. exports", concentrating the loss in automotive manufacturing, chemicals, pharmaceuticals and machinery hubs especially in Ireland and Germany, that were particularly exposed, facing an unemployment rate that would have been increased of 0.1% in 2025 because of the tariffs.¹⁷⁶

The document underscores the fact that the economic and financial repercussions of these tariffs were far from an exact and fair distribution across the Union, in fact, export-oriented economies, especially those embedded in global supply chains, are disproportionately affected.

The study concludes affirming that the tariffs escalation has been a structural shock to transatlantic relations in general, underscoring EU's vulnerability and the urgency of a strategic autonomy, suggesting the fact as well that tariffs are not about balancing trade but redefining the global economic power.

Another source in support to this is an article from Euronews, which examines which European Union economies are most exposed to the economic risks arising from U.S. tariffs, especially after the announcement in April a "25% tariffs on auto imports and car parts", taking into consideration existing tariffs and proposed or threatened ones, especially in the pharmaceutical sector. In fact, the author analyses how different countries might be disproportionately affected, highlighting that Germany emerges as the most vulnerable among EU economies under the tariff regime in mid-July given the centrality of its automobile sector and its reliance on the U.S. market. As illustrated by the data provided, Germany used to send about 22,7% of its export to

¹⁷⁵ De Lemos Peixoto S., Spitzer K.G., Sabol M., Loi G., *US tariffs: economic, financial and monetary repercussions*, pp.7-8

¹⁷⁶ De Lemos Peixoto S., Spitzer K.G., Sabol M., Loi G., *US tariffs: economic, financial and monetary repercussions*, p.12

the U.S. among its total goods exports and the automotive sector is consequently particularly exposed, since with the 25% U.S. auto tariff imposed in April, Germany faced risk to GDP of about 0,4% in the long-term effects. Tariffs on cars and auto parts have immediate repercussions not only for German manufacturers but also for smaller EU economies integrated into German supply chains. Other countries, such as Ireland, face risks in the pharmaceutical sector, because more than half of Ireland's goods exports, that is 53,7% of its exports, and concerning its GDP predictions, they would have lost about 3% by 2028 under certain scenarios involving pharma tariffs. On the other hand, other EU countries like France and Italy must contend with potential losses in agricultural and luxury exports, not only, but Italy showed high exposure also in its fashion, auto manufacturing and pharmaceuticals sectors, while France estimated GDP hit was predicted as smaller than Germany one but not less meaningful (0,25% c.a.) due to its exports to the U.S. regarding the industrial makeup. Although overall GDP losses for the EU were projected to be modest (around 0.3% in the medium term) the political salience of concentrated sectoral pain was significantly greater, especially in industries that employ large workforces or carry symbolic economic weight.¹⁷⁷

What emerges across these analyses is a picture of deep uncertainty, in which while the EU as a whole would feel economic consequences from U.S. tariffs, the burden would not fall equally since countries with high export dependencies to the U.S resulted vulnerable in some specific sectors. The impacts were not only expected in the immediate future, but built also over time, with short-term disruptions that might be manageable, but cumulative serious losses could result or be perceived in GDP or employment rate if tariffs persisted or escalated.

While at the end of July the 15% tariff framework for many EU imports to the U.S. provided short-term predictability, key questions remained unresolved, since the agreement did not specify whether this 15% of tariff rate should be understood as a "ceiling", in other words the maximum rate beyond which no additional duties would be charged, or whether it could be

¹⁷⁷ Katanich D., Which European economy stands to suffer the most from US tariffs?, *Euronews website*, 11 July 2025, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/business/2025/07/11/which-european-economy-stands-to-suffer-the-most-from-us-tariffs> last consulted: 12 September 2025

accumulated on top of existing “most-favored-nation” rates (MFN), which would substantially increase effective tariff levels for some specific products. Another important aspect is the lack of clarity regarding definitions and scope, for instance “even the term “automotive” is not defined in the EU-U.S. agreement, although it is likely to cover the harmonized system (HS) codes listed in the section 232 action under the US Trade Expansion Act of 1962, and this ambiguity leaves exporters uncertain about whether specific categories of auto parts, batteries or related technologies would fall under the new rate. As it remains unclear which other sectors, in particular the pharmaceutical one, might be affected in following adjustments because the framework did not explicitly confirm inclusion or exclusion.¹⁷⁸

Even though the U.S. tariffs were not the only main problem, they were one of the causes of the deep crisis that affected Germany’s automotive sector in Summer 2025. A clear case is the one of the openings of the International Motor Show (IAA) in Munich, when the trade economist Dr. Martin Braml argued the causes and the effects of this situation. Germany was facing an increasing great competition with China, in particular in the field of electric vehicles, with a 15% U.S. tariffs on German vehicles, so with still existing external pressure as one of the causes of this sector crisis. Moreover, Braml affirm to be critical towards recent trade negotiation with the U.S., in particular with the agreement that resulted in a “15-to-zero tariff advantage for the U.S”, because U.S. car imports to the European Union faced zero tariffs, while the European cars entering the U.S. faced 15% tariffs, interpreting this as a reflection of current geopolitical power dynamics. Additionally, he suggested that the EU could have negotiated more strongly, but security concerns like the Russia’s war in Ukraine constrained what Europe was willing to risk.¹⁷⁹

These ambiguities limited the ability of European businesses to plan strategically, reinforcing a climate of instability. From a broader perspective, the deal reflected the shifting nature of

¹⁷⁸ Capucci L., Figures T., Gilbert M., Lichtblau S., McAdoo M., Chiffelle C.R, The EU-US Trade Agreement: Some Clarity and Ongoing Uncertainty, *Boston Consulting Group website*, 29 July 2025, available at: <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2025/eu-us-trade-agreement-clarity-and-uncertainty> last consulted: 15 September 2025

¹⁷⁹ Resnik D., Germany’s automotive industry in crisis: Politics are to blame, says trade economist, *Euronews website*, 10 September 2025, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/business/2025/09/11/germanys-automotive-industry-in-crisis-politics-are-to-blame-says-trade-economist> last consulted: 12 September 2025

transatlantic trade relations, and it illustrates how economic instruments are increasingly deployed within a geopolitical framework, where tariffs are not simply protective measures but also tools of leverage in negotiations that affect energy sector, investment, and even defense commitments. For the EU, the challenge has two aspects, which are mitigating the immediate costs of U.S. trade policy while simultaneously accelerating diversification of trade partnerships to reduce vulnerability to future shocks.¹⁸⁰

3.2.3 RHETORIC AND NEGOTIATING STRATEGY

Regarding the perspective of Trump about his choices as 47th U.S. president, it is possible to analyze also in this case the fact that his rhetorical tone can still be associated to the “America First” assertiveness. As exemplified by his address to the World Economic Forum at Davos in January 2025, he delivered a forceful reaffirmation of an “America First” foreign trade and policy, underscoring that his country under his administration would no longer tolerate what he depicts as imbalances in trade, energy dependency and also defense contributions. In fact, he stated (not for the first time) that companies operating globally had to choose between producing in the U.S. and enjoy low taxes since he promised to cut tax rate from 21% to 15% or facing punitive tariffs. In addition, he criticized the EU’s regulatory and bureaucratic obstacle to investment, and bringing into play his own business experience, he illustrated what he considered a systemic inefficiency that disincentivized trade with or into the U.S. under those conditions. Regarding the defense contribution he also demanded to all NATO member states to rise again their defense spending to 5% of GDP, while at that time the minimum commitment was of 2%, framing this not as an optional goal but a duty, using a rhetoric characterized by fairness and burden-sharing, since according to Trump, other countries were benefitting from his country protection, justifying in this way the fact that these states should pay fully for their

¹⁸⁰ De Lemos Peixoto S., Spitzer K.G., Sabol M., Loi G., *US tariffs: economic, financial and monetary repercussions*

share. In this Economic Forum, Trump reaffirmed for another term his protectionist intentions, aiming at consolidating his economic nationalism and policies through taxations and investments that must serve U.S. interest above all, even if that meant to create discordances with allies and global institutions. With respect to EU, the European leaders were being put on notice and under pressure, indeed, whether in the realm of defense spending or trade policy, Trump communicated that the status quo was no longer acceptable. Rather than relying only on diplomatic or multilateral channels, Trump proposed to use economic tool, like tariffs, tax cuts or incentives as well as regulatory reforms in order to force alignment, framing bureaucratic delays or regulatory inefficiency as a barrier to American fairness and prosperity.¹⁸¹

As the author of the article affirmed:

*“Trump’s speech in Davos carried all the hallmarks of his first presidency: Direct, combative, and unapologetically focused on US interests. Yet the global landscape has changed since he last held office. Europe has spent years forging new trade alliances, NATO has strengthened its unity[...] With his return to power, Trump has made it clear that he intends to rewrite the terms of US engagement with the world. For European leaders, his speech served as both a warning and a reminder: the Trump era is back, and it will not be business as usual.”*¹⁸²

Besides, in this occasion at the beginning of his second mandate, President Donald Trump criticized the trade relationship between the U.S. and the EU, stating that “From the standpoint of America, the EU treats us very, very unfairly, very badly”, leading to the fact that his complaints revolved around tariffs, non-tariffs barriers, regulatory burdens and trade deficits. With this affirmation, Trump highlighted his previous combative tone emphasizing grievances “They essentially don’t take our farm products, and they don’t take our cars, yet they send cars to us by the millions. They put tariffs on things that we want to do ... We have some very big

¹⁸¹ Cingari P., Trump at Davos: NATO 5% push, tariff warning for Europe, *Euronews website*, 23 January 2025, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/business/2025/01/23/trump-at-davos-nato-5-push-tariff-warnings-for-europe> last consulted: 15 September 2025

¹⁸² Cingari P., Trump at Davos: NATO 5% push, tariff warning for Europe, *Euronews website*, 23 January 2025, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/business/2025/01/23/trump-at-davos-nato-5-push-tariff-warnings-for-europe> last consulted: 15 September 2025

complaints with the EU". The logic beyond this reasoning used the strong contrast of the EU gains against the U.S. losses, positioning the Union as an advantageous player against the disadvantageous U.S. In this, there is a populist subtext, which is his way to frame the issue as one where average American workers and citizens were losing due to this unfair global trade rules.¹⁸³

In July, Trump joined the European Commission President von der Leyen in Scotland in order to announce a trade deal between U.S. and the EU, with the U.S. imposition of a 15% tariffs on many European goods including automobiles; in exchange, the EU committed to large purchases of U.S. energy and made some changes in investment and trade policies with the aim to make their export to the U.S. easier. The deal was presented as avoiding more severe trade conflicts, especially higher tariffs that previously threatened the EU with a 30% rate. As a matter of fact, both leaders agreed with the idea that this was a powerful deal with tough negotiations.¹⁸⁴

Following this significant deal, in August 2025, the EU and the U.S. reached a temporary trade agreement aimed at avoiding an escalation in tensions and a hypothetical trade war. The deal included provisions for the U.S. to reduce tariffs on European goods, while the EU agreed to purchase more U.S. energy and make some regulatory adjustments. However, the agreement resulted fragile due to the fact that underlying issues remained unresolved. During the month following the deal, Trump's rhetoric continued to be consistent with the "America First" approach, emphasizing the need for reciprocal trade relationships and the protection of U.S. economic interests. With respect to the key elements of his positions, what is important is his emphasis on reciprocity and fairness, because he repeatedly highlighted the importance of a fair and reciprocal trade agreement, arguing that the previous deals had been one-sided and

¹⁸³ Reid J., Trump slams trade relationship with European Union: "We have some very big complaints", *CNBC website*, 23 January 2025, available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/01/23/trump-slams-trade-relationship-with-european-union-we-have-some-very-big-complaints.html> last consulted: 15 September 2025

¹⁸⁴ Doherty E., Kiderlin S., Trump announces EU trade deal with 15% tariffs, *CNBC Politics website*, 27 July 2025, available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/07/27/trump-european-union-eu-trade-tariffs.html> last consulted: 15 September 2025

that the new agreement was a step toward the correction of these types of imbalances. The use of tariffs as leverage was a central component in his strategy in order to gain the desired objectives, and he made clear that his country would not hesitate to impose those additional tariffs if the EU failed to meet its commitments or if American industries were not adequately protected. It has been previously affirmed that the nationalistic framing in this trade negotiations were useful to portray the U.S. as a victim of unfair trade practices, positioning his own figure as the defender of American workers and industries. Another important aspect is the skepticism still present towards multilateralism, since his statements suggested more a preference for bilateral agreements that he could more easily control and adjust to U.S. interests.¹⁸⁵

An article from AP news demonstrates the mixed reactions in Europe after the deal decisions of July, with business associations that resulted worried about the 15% tariffs since it was still a high cost, but what emerges the most in the article is the position and rhetoric of Trump that pursue the same course with the core on national interest, a fair treatment and the use of leverage.¹⁸⁶

In support to this, a Truth Social post of Donald J. Trump on August 30, 2025, demonstrates all the characteristics of his rhetoric in 2025 previously mentioned:

“ALL TARIFFS ARE STILL IN EFFECT! Today a Highly Partisan Appeals Court incorrectly said that our Tariffs should be removed, but they know the United States of America will win in the end. If these Tariffs ever went away, it would be a total disaster for the Country. It would make us financially weak, and we have to be strong. The U.S.A. will no longer tolerate enormous Trade Deficits and unfair Tariffs and Non Tariff Trade Barriers imposed by other Countries,

¹⁸⁵ Holland S., Trump says there is a 50-50 chance of trade deal with EU, *Reuters website*, 25 July, 2025, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/trump-says-there-is-50-50-chance-trade-deal-with-eu-2025-07-25/> last consulted: 13 September 2025; Mchungh D., Head of EU parliament trade committee has “doubts” about deal with US, says it could be amended, *AP News website*, 3 September 2025, available at: <https://apnews.com/article/eu-us-trade-trump-tariff-lange-e7bc724519009112c67d34817a185918> last consulted: 13 September 2025

¹⁸⁶ Mchungh D., Head of EU parliament trade committee has “doubts” about deal with US, says it could be amended, *AP News website*, 3 September 2025, available at: <https://apnews.com/article/eu-us-trade-trump-tariff-lange-e7bc724519009112c67d34817a185918> last consulted: 13 September 2025

*friend or foe, that undermine our Manufacturers, Farmers, and everyone else. If allowed to stand, this Decision would literally destroy the United States of America. At the start of this Labor Day weekend, we should all remember that TARIFFS are the best tool to help our Workers, and support Companies that produce great MADE IN AMERICA products. For many years, Tariffs were allowed to be used against us by our uncaring and unwise Politicians. Now, with the help of the United States Supreme Court, we will use them to the benefit of our Nation, and Make America Rich, Strong, and Powerful Again! Thank you for your attention to this matter.*¹⁸⁷

However, what is behind this post is the fact that the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit ruled that most of Trump’s global tariffs, especially the “reciprocal” tariffs targeting trade imbalances were illegal, including the EU ones, since these measures adopted targeted almost all U.S. trading partners. Although the Truth Social post did not name the EU deal, the warning that removing tariffs would “destroy” America, it let the reader understand that it extends also to the relationship between U.S. and EU. The decision also undermines the tariffs deals of July 2025, raising doubts about their validity. In this context, Trump’s rhetoric regarding the existential threat and “America First” sovereignty reinforced a consistent populist framing in which domestic institutions, for instance courts, but also external international actors such as the EU are depicted as obstacle to the protection of the American strength and autonomy.¹⁸⁸

3.2.4 REGULATORY CONDITIONALITY AND TRANSATLANTIC POWER DYNAMICS

The 27th of July 2025 trade agreement, while celebrated by both sides as a milestone deal, was a temporary truce in a wider confrontation that continued to evolve in the months that followed, especially with regard to regulatory agreements and sector-specific disputes that exposed the divergence between the U.S. and the European Union. Trump’s administration strategically

¹⁸⁷ @realDonaldTrump Truth Social post, *Truth Social*, 30 August 2025, available at:

<https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/115114339832960282> last consulted: 13 September 2025

¹⁸⁸ Matza M., Zurcher A., US court rules many of Trump’s global tariffs are illegal, *BBC website*, 30 August 2025, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ckgj7jxkq58o> last consulted: 13 September 2025

embedded regulatory compliance into the trade framework, with the aim not only to dismantle specific barriers but to institutionalize an American role in shaping European market governance, effectively turning U.S.–EU trade into a continuous process of conditional bargaining. His strategy demonstrated how Trump tied transatlantic trade to domestic industrial policy, using the leverage of tariffs not simply as defensive tools but as proactive mechanisms to redirect investment flows, especially for what it concerns the automotive sector.¹⁸⁹

What distinguished Trump's regulatory strategy in 2025 from earlier episodes was the systematic integration of deadlines and conditionality, in fact, the beginning of his second presidency the administration was characterized by setting a deadline, and the amplification of threats through public discourse. Concerning the case-study of U.S.-EU trade relations in 2025, this had been observed between July and August, creating a sense of predictability for international negotiators, while still preserving the perception of unpredictability that Trump cultivated rhetorically. Furthermore, Trump's guiding logic was consistent, owing to tariffs and exemptions as tools to secure regulatory concessions, investment commitments, and symbolic acknowledgment of U.S. primacy, an approach that was a hybrid model between protectionism and cooperation, generating a cycle of confrontation and compromise that reflected Trump's transactional vision of international economic relations.

His rhetorical strategy fragmented European unity and allowed him to present himself as a global leader of a broader populist coalition, with trade disputes serving as the material expression of ideological divides. For him, the EU's trade imbalances were not only economic grievances but symbols of geopolitical exploitation, and tariffs were not only corrective measures but instruments of ideological contestation. By portraying the EU as declining, bureaucratic, and divided, Trump reinforced the legitimacy of his aggressive tactics, while the EU's attempts to defend its unity and autonomy often appeared reactive.

¹⁸⁹ Fact Sheet: The United States and European Union Reach Massive Trade Deal, *National Archive White House website*, 28 July 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/07/fact-sheet-the-united-states-and-european-union-reach-massive-trade-deal/> last consulted: 13 September 2025

For the EU, these moths were characterized by adaptation and uncertainty, succeeding in concluding the agreement at the end of July, limiting the most extreme tariff threats, managing at the same time to secure certain key sectors. What emerged was a trade agreement that demonstrated that compromise between U.S. and EU is still possible, but it also revealed the fragility of a relationship that was grounded in the principles of free trade and mutual trust. The asymmetry of the deal and the persistence of uncertainty suggested that the transatlantic trade order has entered a new era, where unpredictability and negotiation have replaced stability and institutionalized cooperation as its defining features.

3.3 FROM RHETORIC TO POLICY

The approach of Donald Trump to trade policy demonstrated one of the rare examples in contemporary populist politics where campaign rhetoric has been transformed into policy practice across two mandates. Indeed, his first and second presidencies illustrate that his protectionist discourse was not exclusively rhetorical, but it was programmatic, bringing material consequences for global economic governance. During his first term, Trump established a formal policy already characterized by tariffs as an economic and symbolic tool, thus reflecting key themes of his populist discourse, like the delegitimization of global institutions, the dramatization of “unfair” trade deficits, and the framing of economic policy as a matter of national security. Some scholars such as Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) described populism as a “thin-centered ideology” that often struggles with institutionalization, however, Trump demonstrated unusual continuity between campaign promises and governance. For instance, his use of tariffs as leverage tool became an emblem of his governing style, clarifying that the “America First” diplomacy was not empty rhetoric but the organizing principle of U.S. trade policy following its main paradigms and core concepts.¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ Mudde C., Kaltwasser C. R. (2017), *Populism, A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 6-8;19-20

3.3.1 ESCALATION AND SYSTEMIC REORDERING IN 2025

Concerning Trump's second mandate, the escalation characterizing 2025 is a confirmation of this continuity, with even an intensification of it; in fact, as the chapter has analyzed, Trump rapidly moved from re-election to implementing broad and extended tariff measures, with a 10% baseline tariff on all imports, an increase of steel and aluminum duties to 50%, and a new 30% tariff package on EU goods; thus, revealing a trajectory from the first mandate characterized by tactical and sector-specific protectionism into the second one with a systemic reordering of global trade relations. The continuity also lies in the way Trump's rhetoric has shaped institutional instruments, because in both mandates, tariffs were justified through national security narratives, for example by invoking Section 232 of the 1962 Trade Expansion Act and the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), leading to an institutionalized rhetoric that became an enforceable authority, even if their constitutionality remains contested.¹⁹¹ Furthermore, the persistence of Trump's protectionism demonstrates that his populism is not reducible to a simple rhetorical style since it saw a practice realization through acts and policies. This continuity of Trump's rhetoric has two implications, the first one the fact that it blurs the line between populist discourse and foreign policy outcomes, showing that populism can function as a durable orientation, and concerning the transatlantic relations, this underscores that tensions are structural and not episodic. This can be exemplified by EU's 2025 countermeasures and the risk of an intense trade war that illustrate that Europe perceives Trump's tariffs not as negotiating tactics but as a systemic challenge requiring long-term strategic autonomy. Concerning Trump's trade populism began in 2017 as a campaign promise and discursive rupture with the "America First" diplomacy and by 2025 it has become a coherent, even if disruptive, governing doctrine. The result is that tariffs are no longer considered as temporary bargaining tools but as instruments of geopolitical intervention and strategy.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ Kurmayer N. J., Moller-Nielsen T., Trump threatens EU with 50% tariff from 1 June, *Euractiv website*, 23 May 2025, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/news/us-president-trump-threatens-50-tariff-on-eu/> last consulted: 15 September 2025; Trump says UK would fight for US, suggests EU may not, *Reuters website*, 15 July 2025, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/trump-says-uk-would-fight-us-suggests-cannot-say-same-eu-2025-07-15/> last consulted: 15 September 2025

¹⁹² Capucci L., Figures T., Gilbert M., Lichtblau S., McAdoo M., Chiffelle C.R., The EU-US Trade Agreement: Some Clarity and Ongoing Uncertainty, *Boston Consulting Group website*, 29 July 2025, available at:

It is commonly thought that rhetoric and policy operate on different levels, because rhetoric belongs to the realm of words and persuasion, while the act of implementing policies to formal institutions and bureaucratic procedures. However, the rhetoric of Trump exemplifies the fact that it is a tool that shapes agendas, remakes alliances and normalizes practices. During Donald J. Trump's political career (both mandates) his rhetoric has demonstrated to have a notable continuity; characterized by repeated linguistic motifs using terms such as sovereignty, victimhood, and transnationalism, and rhetorical structures he succeeded in applying performative acts as well. For instance, his specific policy choices and administrative practices like trade protectionism were through tariffs, while critiques of alliances changed gradually into pressure for burden-sharing.¹⁹³

3.3.2 CORE RHETORICAL MOTIFS

According to the analysis of several primary sources, there are three motifs that occur with continuity during the two Trump presidential terms, the first one is sovereignty as moral frame, which includes the concepts of defending national borders, and restoring control over laws and trade, framing international cooperation as an abdication of national will; in fact, Trump in the 2017 National Security Strategy wrote: “we would revitalize the American economy, rebuild our military, defend our borders, protect our sovereignty, and advance our values”, thus, positioning sovereignty and national interest at the core of his doctrine. The second motif can be perceived in Trump's accusation of complex policy failures as the result of deliberate betrayal by elites that have exploited the people, delegitimizing established institutions. The third and last element is embodied in Trump's rhetorical habit of reducing relationships to transactions depicting situations as composed by winners and losers, and opting more on policy choices that privileged immediate, measurable gains that appeared

<https://www.bcg.com/publications/2025/eu-us-trade-agreement-clarity-and-uncertainty> last consulted: 15 September 2025

¹⁹³ The White House official document, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, *National Archive White House website*, December 2017; Remarks of President Donald J. Trump, The Inaugural Address, *National Archive White House website*, 20 January 2017, available at : <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/> last consulted: 15 September 2025

more attractive than long-term multilateral investments, resulting in critiques on alliances as in the case of NATO's burden sharing request to pay for their part of protection, but also in trade policy, especially in 2025 by applying tariffs.¹⁹⁴

If the disputes of 2025 became a stage for symbolic confrontation between the United States and the European Union, they also revealed the extent to which Donald Trump's rhetoric was not an isolated phenomenon but a deliberate prelude to policy choices in his second term. Whereas during his first presidency critics often argued that Trump's rhetorical excesses did not always produce immediate policy consequences, in 2025 the alignment between words and performance became more pronounced, suggesting that the performative dimension of America First had matured into a logic that mixed symbolic confrontation with material outcomes. In this sense, the transatlantic framework of 2025 cannot only be understood through discourse or negotiation but rather through the dialectic between the two. The clearest demonstration of this rhetorical-policy nexus emerged in Trump's relationship with the United Kingdom, with his language of "special relationship" and "historic sovereignty" found concrete expression in the 2025 U.S.–UK Economic Prosperity Deal, a document released with UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer that elaborated a sectoral liberalization and intellectual property protections, thereby transforming symbolic affirmations of their solidarity into measurable policy outcomes, and in this case, the continuity with Trump's first term was in the rhetorical glorification of Brexit as proof of Britain's independence.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ The White House official document, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, *National Archive White House website*, December 2017; Cingari P., Trump at Davos: NATO 5% push, tariff warning for Europe, *Euronews website*, 23 January 2025, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/business/2025/01/23/trump-at-davos-nato-5-push-tariff-warnings-for-europe> last consulted: 15 September 2025

¹⁹⁵ Implementing the general terms of the United States of America – United Kingdom economic prosperity deal, Executive orders, *National Archive White House website*, 16 June 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/06/implementing-the-general-terms-of-the-united-states-of-america-united-kingdom-economic-prosperity-deal/> last consulted: 15 September 2025

3.3.3 MECHANISMS LINKING RHETORIC TO POLICY

The repetition of recurrent rhetorical themes in both Trump's mandates lead to an implementation of it in policy practices. However, it is not simple to explain the mechanism that realistically put into practice the rhetorical subject matters of Trump into actions. The 2017 National Security Strategy is emblematic in this sense, since even though it goes back to the first mandate, it represents one of the earliest examples of how Trump's rhetorical motifs had been translated into a formal written document. In this sense, Trump populist rhetoric took his first steps from theory to practice, but also by defining priorities, budgets, and publishing executive orders. Another important aspect is the electoral reinforcement, since rhetoric mobilizes a domestic base for political options; indeed, electoral incentives create a feedback loop because rhetorical performance produces popular support, which in turn incentive the pursue of policies that fulfill rhetorical promises.¹⁹⁶

The last mechanism allowing the implementation of rhetoric in practice is the coercive reciprocity that Trump realized in foreign affairs. With the use of public threats and insistence on transactions he created an alteration in the expectation of allies and adversaries, thus producing concessions or adjustments in 2025 trade agreements. Official press releases and public statements from trade authorities link the rhetorical affirmation of Trump positioning his country into as treated unfairly to his concrete tariff action, illustrating how public rhetoric conditions the administrative response.¹⁹⁷

All these mechanisms in both case-studies regarding the U.S. President Donald Trump with the European Union and the United Kingdom demonstrate that are mutually reinforcing, leading to the

¹⁹⁶ Implementing the general terms of the United States of America – United Kingdom economic prosperity deal, Executive orders, *National Archive White House website*, 16 June 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/06/implementing-the-general-terms-of-the-united-states-of-america-united-kingdom-economic-prosperity-deal/> last consulted: 15 September 2025; The White House official document, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, *National Archive White House website*, December 2017; Remarks of President Donald J. Trump, The Inaugural Address, *National Archive White House website*, 20 January 2017, available at : <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/> last consulted: 15 September 2025

¹⁹⁷ Implementing the general terms of the United States of America – United Kingdom economic prosperity deal, Executive orders, *National Archive White House website*, 16 June 2025, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/06/implementing-the-general-terms-of-the-united-states-of-america-united-kingdom-economic-prosperity-deal/> last consulted: 15 September 2025

preservation of electoral coalitions and international limitations or regulations. Focusing on the notion of reciprocity, it became the conceptual core of Trump's rhetoric and policy, by repeatedly invoking fairness and balance as slogans and as operational principles embedded in the structure of his agreements. His speeches portrayed the United States as a victim of unjust treatment, especially within its relationship with the EU, as a consequence, the following executive actions found expression in obligations or tariff schedules.¹⁹⁸

In Trump's second term, trade agreements had been rarely presented as technocratic compromises, in fact they were performed as dramatic vindications, and consequently, the transatlantic relationships in 2025 must be seen as an arena in which Trump's rhetoric and policy constantly mirrored each other, producing both stabilization and destabilizations at the same time. On the one side, the consistency between Trump's words and actions enhanced his credibility in negotiations, making threats more believable at first sight, while on the other, the rigidities produced by this alignment reduced the opportunity for a pragmatic compromise. This pattern was particularly evident in the negotiation of the U.S.–EU trade deal, where the initial threats and the invocation of reciprocity had progressively materialized into clauses that reshaped the transatlantic economic relationship.¹⁹⁹ As demonstrated across the thesis, this dynamic was not confined to the trade realm, but it extended also into the ones of defense and security, where rhetorical criticisms of European burden-sharing translated into pressure for policy alignment within NATO.²⁰⁰

All these factors contributed to the fusion of rhetoric and policy, producing systemic consequences for transatlantic governance. This is due to the consistent framing of negotiations in zero-sum terms,

¹⁹⁸ Cingari P., Trump at Davos: NATO 5% push, tariff warning for Europe, *Euronews website*, 23 January 2025, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/business/2025/01/23/trump-at-davos-nato-5-push-tariff-warnings-for-europe> last consulted: 15 September 2025; Reid J., Trump slams trade relationship with European Union: “We have some very big complaints”, *CNBC website*, 23 January 2025, available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/01/23/trump-slams-trade-relationship-with-european-union-we-have-some-very-big-complaints.html> last consulted: 15 September 2025

¹⁹⁹ Doherty E., Kiderlin S., Trump announces EU trade deal with 15% tariffs, *CNBC Politics website*, 27 July 2025, available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/07/27/trump-european-union-eu-trade-tariffs.html> last consulted: 15 September 2025;

²⁰⁰ Remarks by President Trump at Press Conference After NATO Summit, Brussels, *National Archive White House website*, 12 July 2018, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-press-conference-nato-summit-brussels-belgium/> last consulted: 15 September 2025

reorienting the logic of U.S.–EU relations away from compromise toward conditional coercion. However, the imbalances between the two parts in terms of rhetorical effectiveness translated into asymmetry in policy outcomes, with the EU accepting tariff burdens and investment commitments as the cost of avoiding a deeper confrontation with U.S.

Essentially, the development of rhetoric into policy in 2025 defined Trump's second presidency, for the administration this ensured that discursive threats, ideological critiques, and symbolic affirmations were followed by executive orders, and agreements that regulated their content. The continuity with the first term is the result of the fact that the main themes remained the concepts of sovereignty, reciprocity and burden-sharing; notwithstanding this persistence of the first term's leitmotifs, the innovation of 2025 was the systematic relocation of these themes into policy frameworks, reducing in this way the gap between words and facts in Trump's presidential career.

CONCLUSIONS

The current thesis aimed to explore the populist dimension of Donald Trump's foreign policy and its implications for the transatlantic relationship, placing the discussion within a constructivist framework that emphasizes the importance of ideas, discourse, and identity in shaping international relations; in fact, the thesis has demonstrated that critical discourse analysis, applied through a constructivist perspective offers a powerful framework for understanding the dynamics concerning the rhetoric of Trump's foreign policy. First and foremost, the identity-construction approach revealed how his discourse consistently redefined allies and adversaries, thus portraying the European Union as an hostile international actor, while elevating the United Kingdom as a natural partner after Brexit. Furthermore, the norm contestation perspective highlighted how Trump's rhetoric challenged the liberal internationalist consensus by undermining the legitimacy of multilateral institutions, collective security but also shared economic governance. Not only, but the analysis also adopts an historical critical discursive analysis lens, which is not predominant, but it helps to situate the developments withing longer traditions of American nationalism and protectionism. Taken together into consideration, these frameworks have demonstrated that Trump's rhetoric was not only ornamental but constitutive as well, since it shaped political identities, destabilized already existing norms and reoriented the terms of transatlantic relations too. Indeed, in this sense, the critical discourse analysis within a constructivist paradigm has confirmed to be indispensable for creating a connection within language, identity and policy outcome in the study of Trump's populist foreign policy.

The central aim of the thesis has been to evaluate the extent to which Trump's rhetoric has found continuity in concrete foreign policy practices across his two mandates, with particular attention to the main case-studies explored, namely the United States relations with the United Kingdom, the European Union, and in part also with NATO. What emerged in this research is the fact that Trump's foreign policy cannot be reduced to an assortment of isolated, pragmatic decisions, but instead it represents the external manifestation of a coherent populist worldview, whose rhetorical instruments

and political logic have generated real and severe consequences for institutional structures and traditional alliances.

The thesis has also demonstrated how the conceptual framework of populism applied to international relations, provides a fruitful perspective for understanding the performative aspects of Trump's communication and the substantive choices made by his administration, an example of this could be Trump's constitutive representation of allies and adversaries to redefine the position of the United States in the world.

Concerning the relation with the three core case studies, the relationship of U.S. with the United Kingdom demonstrates that Trump's rhetoric surrounding Brexit can exemplify the convergence between populist discourse and foreign policy, and by framing the British withdrawal from the EU as a triumph of national sovereignty over bureaucratic elites, he aligned the U.S. with a narrative of liberation and self-determination, elevating the UK as a model partner. This endorsement of Brexit shaped the context in which trade negotiations and political alignments were pursued, since Trump promoted a bilateral trade deal with UK in a partnership with Boris Johnson, a fellow nationalist leader, representing the UK as a sovereign actor reclaiming its independence.²⁰¹

In contrast, Trump's discourse on the European Union was frequently antagonistic, reflecting his tendency to depict supranational institutions as exploitative elites undermining national sovereignty. In fact, the EU was portrayed as a "trade enemy" accused of imposing unfair tariffs and regulatory barriers that disadvantaged American workers. Such framing justified Trump's aggressive protectionist measures, including the imposition of tariffs on European goods and repeated threats to escalate trade disputes; however, by personalizing his attacks against EU leaders and institutions, Trump reinforced the populist narrative of "us versus them," transforming trade negotiations into arenas of moral conflict rather than cooperative problem-solving and leading to material

²⁰¹ The White House official document, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, *National Archive White House website*, December 2017

consequences as well, contributing to a climate of distrust and rivalry that worsened efforts to maintain stable transatlantic economic relations.²⁰²

The NATO case further demonstrates the interplay between populist rhetoric and institutional practice, indeed, Trump's repeated accusations that European allies were not meeting their defense spending obligations redefined the burden-sharing debate in moralized terms, challenging the foundations of collective defense but also recasting NATO as an institution undermined by actors unwilling to respect their commitments. His threats to reduce U.S. engagement, combined with his dramatic performances at NATO summits, clarify the way in which populist rhetoric destabilizes long-standing institutional norms.²⁰³

These three case studies collectively illustrate that Trump's populist rhetoric was not a superficial performance detached from practice, but a constitutive force shaping policy outcomes, but they also highlight the asymmetry in his approach, namely, whereas the UK was elevated as a sovereign ally aligned with populist values, the EU was criticized as an elitist adversary, and NATO was delegitimized as a burdensome institution.

One of the main key questions addressed by this thesis has been whether there is continuity between Trump's populist rhetoric and his actual foreign policy actions, both within his first mandate and across the transition to his second presidency in 2025. The evidence suggests there is a clear pattern of continuity that demonstrates the substantive influence of populist discourse on policy, in fact, during his first term, with Trump's withdrawal from multilateral agreements, and the beginning of trade wars it has been revealed a remarkable alignment between his rhetoric and practice.

²⁰² Lacatus C. (2021), *Populism and President Trump's approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches*; Friedman G., Shapiro J.L., *The Limits of the Trump Doctrine*, *Horizons*, Autumn 2017, Issue no.9, pp.12-19

²⁰³ The White House official document, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, *National Archive White House website*, December 2017; Remarks by President Trump at Press Conference After NATO Summit, Brussels, *National Archive White House website*, 12 July 2018, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-press-conference-nato-summit-brussels-belgium/> last consulted: 15 September 2025; Görden A., (2021), *US-EU Relations in the Trump Era: Quest for Autonomy in Europe*, pp. 1373-1395

The second mandate, even though it is still ongoing, provides further evidence of continuity, due to Trump's pursuit of new trade arrangements with the UK in the post-Brexit context, and his insistence on regulatory divergence from the EU. Similarly, his criticism of NATO allies and insistence on burden-sharing obligations underscores the persistence of the same discursive patterns that defined his earlier approach. Moreover, the overall path demonstrates that Trump's populist rhetoric was not a temporary and evanescent campaign tool, but a durable element of his foreign policy identity, that shaped institutional practices and international alignments across both mandates.

The broader implications of this research extend beyond the specific case of Trump, indeed, by showing how populist rhetoric reshapes the tone and the substance of transatlantic relations, the thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways in which populism challenges the liberal international order. The erosion of trust in multilateral institutions and the rise of transactional bilateralism indicate a transformation of diplomatic practices with potentially long-lasting consequences, similarly, the actions and discourses of Trump suggest that populist leaders can disrupt traditional alliances through unilateral actions but also by redefining the meaning of partnership itself. As the thesis revealed, the UK is no longer simply a close ally, but a symbolic partner in a shared populist narrative, while the EU is an economic competitor and NATO an institution whose legitimacy is undermined by criticisms of unequal burden-sharing.

On the whole, the endurance of populist rhetoric in transatlantic relations raises important questions about the resilience of liberal multilateralism and the adaptability of institutions. As demonstrated by this thesis, if populist leaders continue to frame alliances in terms of cost-benefit calculations and moral antagonisms, the foundations of collective defense and economic cooperation may weaken further. At the same time, the European Union's search for strategic autonomy and NATO's efforts to adapt to new security challenges illustrate that allies are not passive recipients of populist disruption, but they seek to redefine their own. In this, Trump's second mandate underscores the urgency of understanding how such dynamics evolve over time and across different policy arenas.

In conclusion, this thesis has argued that Donald Trump's populist rhetoric represents a coherent worldview that has found continuity in policy practice across his two mandates. Through this analysis

of the U.S.–UK, U.S.–EU, and NATO case studies, the thesis has shown how populist discourse redefined allies and adversaries, reshaped institutional practices, and challenged the norms of multilateralism. Consequently, the overall pattern reveals a durable alignment between rhetoric and action, confirming that Trump’s populism in foreign policy is performative and substantive at the same time, however, the implications of this continuity are profound, as they transform transatlantic relations and represent a challenge to the liberal international order.

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