

POLARIZATION, TRANSACTIONALISM AND SMALL STATES IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM: NAVIGATING A FRACTURED ORDER

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Abstract

It is widely recognized that the global order is undergoing significant strategic transformations. While these shifts are frequently attributed to heightened geopolitical competition, relatively less scholarly attention has been directed towards the internal dynamics within states, particularly the role of political polarization, in amplifying international tensions. Increasingly polarized domestic politics, coupled with nationalist orientations toward foreign policy, compromise bipartisan consensus and foster transactional, self-interested behavior in international relations. This paper examines the relationship between domestic political polarization and transactional approaches to foreign policy, focusing especially, though not exclusively, on the administration of US President Donald Trump. It explores how these tendencies undermine established international security norms, institutions, and mechanisms. Additionally, the article assesses current and anticipated responses from small states as they adapt to the profound transformations reshaping the international system.

Keywords: *polarization, multipolarity, transactionalism, multilateralism, Asia-Pacific, New Zealand.*

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Introduction

Heightened strategic tension, protracted conflicts, and greater trade protectionism are shaping the current global environment. The New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Strategic Intentions 2024-2028 document identifies three 'big shifts' in the international order that will fundamentally alter how we see and shape our place in the world: "1. A shift from rules to power. This is a shift towards a 'multipolar' world, characterized by a period during which rules are more contested and relative power between states has a greater role in shaping international affairs. 2. A shift from economics to security. This is a shift in which economic relationships are reassessed in light of increased military competition in a more securitized and less stable world. 3. A shift from efficiency to resilience. This is a shift in factors driving economic behavior. Building resilience and addressing social and sustainability issues will become more prominent economic drivers for countries."¹

US President Donald Trump's radical foreign policy steps are adding uncertainty and disruption to the international order. They reflect the deepening political polarization in the United States and internationally. Yet, despite the growing interest in how polarization affects domestic politics, less research has been done on how polarization influences international cooperation and conflict.²

This article will examine how divisive political agendas, the narrowing of national interests, and the prevalence of threats versus opportunities perceptions not only enhance rivalry and conflict between states but also polarize tension between international norms, rules, and mechanisms. Particular attention will be paid to the challenges of the phenomenon of transactionalism in foreign policy to the values-based partnerships and multilateral cooperation. The resultant evolution of the regional security architecture in the Asia-Pacific and perspectives from small states, such as New Zealand, will be considered in more detail.

Political Polarization

Political polarization is understood as a division of society into distinct and opposing ideological camps. This results in the erosion of consensus, collaboration, and constructive dialogue, leading to a widening gap between political groups in terms of their values, beliefs, and policy preferences. Polarization is more than a disagreement. It fosters an "us versus them" mentality, where opposing sides view each

¹ "Strategic Intentions" (Wellington: New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024), <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/About-us-Corporate/MFAT-strategies-and-frameworks/Strategic-Intentions-2024-2028.pdf>.

² Rachel Myrick, *Polarization and International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2025).

other not just as adversaries, but as existential threats.³ Polarization, which manifests itself very strongly in the United States and several European countries, is not limited to established democracies. In emerging democracies, the lack of robust institutions and the presence of charismatic, divisive leaders often exacerbate polarization.⁴

Globalization is viewed as a major cause of rising political populism. The globalization shocks, often working through culture and identity, have played an important role in driving up support for populist, particularly right-wing, movements.⁵ A phenomenon known as “affective polarization” emphasizes that the divide is deeply rooted in the perception of political opponents as threats to one’s way of life and core values.⁶

According to Tigran Grigoryan, the head of the Yerevan-based Regional Center for Democracy, this de-legitimization is narrowing the space for political dialogue in the country: “when you claim that your opponent is not just a mere political opponent, but a danger, a ‘Turkish agent,’ a ‘Soros person,’ or similar labels, there is a chance you will use this as grounds for resorting to non-constitutional and non-democratic means for overthrowing your opponent.”⁷

Challenges to Consensual Foreign and National Security Policies

Populism transcends domestic politics by politicizing foreign policy, in the sense of defining and articulating foreign policy preferences in opposition to political predecessors, using foreign policy as an instrument and ground to battle opponents.⁸

President Trump’s accusation of the Biden and Obama administrations in allowing the war in Ukraine to happen or the Armenian opposition’s criticism of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s handling of the Karabakh conflict are good examples

³ Simon Chkuaseli, “The Divided World: Understanding Political Polarization and Its Global Impact,” *Eustochos*, December 15, 2024, <https://eustochos.com/the-divided-world-understanding-political-polarization-and-its-global-impact/>.

⁴ Tobias Bunde, “The New Age of Multipolarisation,” *Bangkok Post*, February 11, 2025, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2959343/the-new-age-of-multipolarisation>.

⁵ Dani Rodrik, “Why Does Globalization Fuel Populism? Economics, Culture, and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism,” *Annual Review of Economics* 13, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-070220-032416>.

⁶ Carl-Johan Karlsson, “Divided We Stand: The Rise of Political Animosity,” *Knowable Magazine*, August 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1146/knowable-081924-1>.

⁷ Anna Pambukhchyan, “Armenia Grapples with Political Polarisation,” *Euractiv*, July 23, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/armenia-grapples-with-political-polarisation/>.

⁸ David Cadier, “Foreign Policy as the Continuation of Domestic Politics by Other Means: Pathways and Patterns of Populist Politicization,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 20, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orad035>.

of that. Domestic polarization thus leads to increased challenges to bipartisan foreign policy.

Political polarization also weakens the ability of government agencies to respond effectively to national security threats. Polarized political parties are less likely to cooperate and compromise, resulting in policy stalemates that leave the country vulnerable to external threats. It can lead to diminished trust in government institutions and officials and undermine the legitimacy of national security policies and the government's ability to implement them.⁹

Surveys show that the American public is increasingly divided about the role of the NATO alliance and the war in Ukraine. Most continue to believe the United States benefits from its NATO membership, but partisan differences on ratings of NATO have widened in recent years. Three-quarters of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents rate the organization favorably, while only 43% of Republicans and Republican leaders agree, down from 55% in a 2022 survey conducted soon after Russia invaded Ukraine. Attitudes toward the war in Ukraine have evolved to reflect the partisan polarization. Democrats and Republicans differ sharply on views about aid to Ukraine, ratings of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and whether supporting Ukraine helps or hurts the US interests. While the share of Democrats who believe the US is not doing enough to help Ukraine declined after the initial onset of the war, it has increased more recently. Currently, 36% of Democrats say the US is not providing enough aid. In contrast, just 13% of Republicans say the US is not giving enough support to Ukraine, while 49% believe it is giving too much. At the beginning of the war, Republican attitudes were essentially the reverse: 49% said the US was not providing enough aid, and 9% said it was providing too much. Among Republicans, conservatives are more likely than moderates and liberals to say the US is providing too much aid to Ukraine.¹⁰

Internal political division in post-Soviet Georgia between the ruling Georgian Dream and its opponents jeopardizes Georgia's prospects for EU membership. It is driven by both geopolitical and ideological factors. While the governing party holds conservative, nationalist, and increasingly pro-Russian views, the opposition forces primarily include pro-Western, pro-LGBT, and pro-democratic members. The rivalry between the two factions is so intense that they even disagree on who is responsible for the launching of the 2008 war: Russia or Georgia?¹¹

⁹ Rana Danish Nisar, "Political Polarization and National Security: Challenges and Solutions," *World Geostrategic Insights*, April 14, 2023, <https://www.wgi.world/political-polarization-and-national-security-challenges-and-solutions/>.

¹⁰ Richard Wike, Moira Fagan, Sneha Gubbala, and Sarah Austin, "Growing Partisan Divisions over NATO and Ukraine," *Pew Research Center*, May 8, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/05/08/growing-partisan-divisions-over-nato-and-ukraine/>.

¹¹ "Internal Divisions in Georgia Threaten Its European Dream," *Majalla*, 2023, <https://en.majalla.com/node/296146/politics/internal-divisions-georgia-threaten-its-european-dream>.

The Sweden-based V-Dem Institute has highlighted the negative impact of political polarization on Armenia's democracy as both the opposition and government are trying to delegitimize their political opponents by presenting each other as a threat to Armenia's independence and sovereignty.¹²

In Asia, South Korean politics have become deeply polarized in recent years, resulting in significant political conflict and division between parties. While the declaration of martial law on December 3, 2024, by President Yoon Suk Yeol was an extreme and anachronistic decision, it was a dramatic reflection of long-standing political polarization, rather than a spontaneous response.¹³ The escalating partisan polarization and entrenched political divisions pose significant vulnerabilities to South Korea's foreign policy. Political leaders in the country often frame foreign policy as a wedge issue, aiming to divide the public and secure their political constituency by forcing binary choices. This trend is evident in South Korea's policies toward Japan and North Korea. Public opinion is sharply divided along partisan lines: PPP supporters generally back the Yoon government's efforts to improve Korea-Japan relations and its deterrence-oriented North Korean policy, while the DP opposition is critical of those moves.¹⁴

In New Zealand, the opposition Labour Party and the ruling National Party are becoming more and more divided on the country's historically bipartisan foreign and security policies. The National party-led right-wing coalition favors a closer relationship with the US, arguing that the country can maintain its autonomy even after forming a strategic alliance with the United States. The Labour Party, on the other hand, continues to advocate for an independent, values-based foreign policy.¹⁵ There are significant and justified concerns that the growing political polarization may undermine international policy coordination or even challenge the international order more generally. However, while making international cooperation more difficult, it should also make it more desirable. International agreements

¹² Anna Pambukhchyan, "Armenia Grapples with Political Polarisation," *Euractiv*, July 23, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/armenia-grapples-with-political-polarisation/>.

¹³ Mitch Shin, "Yoon's Martial Law Declaration Was Bad. What He Did Next May Have Been Worse," *The Diplomat*, March 7, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/03/yoons-martial-law-declaration-was-bad-what-he-did-next-may-have-been-worse/>.

¹⁴ Yul Sohn and Won-Taek Kang, "How Polarization Undermines Democracy in South Korea," *Council of Councils*, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global-memos/how-polarization-undermines-democracy-south-korea>.

¹⁵ Danyl McLauchlan, "Danyl McLauchlan: Why Donald Trump Is Shunning Europe—and What It Means for NZ," *NZ Herald*, March 2, 2025, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/the-listener/politics/danyl-mclauchlan-why-donald-trump-is-shunning-europe-and-what-it-means-for-nz/4UVPLO4DXNDONPAH33DHMBTSIM/>.

could constrain domestic policymakers' more radical policies by forcing them to cooperate with other, hopefully more moderate, foreign policymakers.¹⁶

At the same time, domestic political polarization has its benefits in democratizing countries as it undermines the dominance of a single narrative on important issues, such as security or foreign policy. As Naira Sultanyan from the Democracy Development Foundation (former OSF-Armenia) points out, "it may sound odd, but polarization is even necessary as it helps to debate and discuss issues which have been taboo for ages."¹⁷

Transformative Transactionalism

Polarization may be the most consistent effect of populism, as it is integral to the logic of constructing populist subjects. In foreign policy, populist regimes are increasingly applying a transactional approach.¹⁸ A transactionalist foreign policy is inherently connected to domestic policy concerns, as well as being often associated with populist leaders. These populist leaders are looking for quick, splashy results that can be sold to domestic audiences for political benefit and lead to foreign policy decisions that have been considered impulsive.¹⁹

Transactional foreign policy tends to be more opportunistic, with a focus on immediate gains often at the expense of long-term relationships or shared values. While relational foreign policy emphasizes long-term relationships and cooperation, transactional foreign policy prioritizes short-term gains and tangible benefits.²⁰ It has similarities with realism in its distrust of international organizations, distaste for value-based policymaking, and ideological dispositions. It, however, differs from realism by using foreign policy decisions to score points in domestic politics. Also, transactionalism's objective of striking populist goals at home means that transactionalist foreign policy may interfere in the internal affairs of other

¹⁶ Carsten Hefeker and Michael Neugart, "Political Polarization and International Cooperation," *European Journal of Political Economy* 78 (May 2023): 102401, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2023.102401>.

¹⁷ Anna Pambukhchyan, "Armenia Grapples with Political Polarisation," *Euractiv*, July 23, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/armenia-grapples-with-political-polarisation/>.

¹⁸ Kenneth M. Roberts, "Populism and Polarization in Comparative Perspective: Constitutive, Spatial and Institutional Dimensions," *Government and Opposition* 57, no. 4 (2021): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.14>.

¹⁹ Galib Bashirov and Ihsan Yilmaz, "The Rise of Transactionalism in International Relations: Evidence from Turkey's Relations with the European Union," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 2 (2019): 165–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2019.1693495>.

²⁰ "Relational Foreign Policy vs. Transactional Foreign Policy—What's the Difference?" *This vs. That*, 2023, <https://thisvsthat.io/relational-foreign-policy-vs-transactional-foreign-policy>.

countries.²¹ US President Trump, for example, has already been doing that in relation to Canada, Greenland, and Panama. One of the key features of transactional foreign policy is its focus on bilateral relationships and individual transactions. Transactional foreign policy focuses on maximizing economic or strategic advantages through negotiations and deals with other countries.²²

The chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, James E. Risch (R-ID), openly uses the term “transactionalism” to characterize the Trump administration’s approach to foreign policy.²³ For decades, the United States projected global influence through “soft power” – the ability to shape world affairs through cultural appeal, diplomatic engagement, and ideological attraction. Under President Donald Trump’s administration, this traditional approach to international relations is undergoing a fundamental transformation. President Trump sees himself as the leader of a global movement aimed at eviscerating liberalism at home and abroad.²⁴

In his first administration, Donald Trump’s “America First” doctrine reshaped foreign policy, emphasizing economic nationalism, skepticism of military alliances, and a focus on domestic priorities over international commitments. The second Trump administration further seeks to re-evaluate military commitments abroad, reduce foreign aid, and pressure allies to contribute more to their defense, fueling concerns over the extent of US involvement and alliance commitments overseas.²⁵

Interestingly, even the Democrats in the US Congress appear to be slowly softening towards Russia and becoming more suspicious of America’s long-standing allies. It is not clear yet whether these small changes are enduring shifts in opinion.²⁶ President Trump’s actions are alarming America’s allies. His tariffs, disregard for the rule of law, and tough policies on migrants, affirmative action, and climate

²¹ Galib Bashirov and Ihsan Yilmaz, “The Rise of Transactionalism in International Relations: Evidence from Turkey’s Relations with the European Union,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 2 (2019): 165–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2019.1693495>.

²² “Relational Foreign Policy vs. Transactional Foreign Policy—What’s the Difference?” *This vs. That*, 2023, <https://thisvsthat.io/relational-foreign-policy-vs-transactional-foreign-policy>.

²³ Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Rischian Transactionalism,” *Ethics & International Affairs*, 2019, <https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/online-exclusives/rischian-transactionalism>.

²⁴ Kurt Davis Jr., “Trump Is Redefining, Not Abandoning, American Soft Power,” *Asia Times*, April 2025, <https://asiatimes.com/2025/04/trump-is-redefining-not-abandoning-american-soft-power>.

²⁵ Timothy S. Rich, “New Poll: Does ‘America First’ Mean Abandoning Taiwan and Korea?” *Asia Times*, April 2025, https://asiatimes.com/2025/04/new-polling-does-america-first-mean-abandoning-taiwan-and-korea/?utm_source=The+Daily+Report&utm_campaign=8fe7d4c839-DAILY_01_04_2025_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1f8bca137f-8fe7d4c839-31542117&mc_cid=8fe7d4c839&mc_eid=1e66540ed9.

²⁶ The Economist, “Schooled by Trump, Americans Are Learning to Dislike Their Allies,” *The Economist*, March 31, 2025, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2025/03/31/schooled-by-trump-americans-are-learning-to-dislike-their-allies>.

change have seen voters outside the US react with self-protective patriotism.²⁷ Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy is being matched by a transformational approach from long-time allies who continue to emphasize values-based foreign policy and partnership.

Friedrich Merz, Germany's new leader, has publicly expressed concerns about developments in the United States under Donald Trump's presidency. He has urged Europe to "achieve independence from the US" - words, he added, that "I would never have thought I would have to say."²⁸

Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer demonstratively warmly greeted Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky with a hug outside Downing Street as the two leaders held talks after the Ukrainian President's bruising encounter with US President Trump in the White House.²⁹ French President Emanuel Macron has raised the specter of extending his country's sovereign nuclear deterrent to provide a security umbrella for allied European nations.³⁰

Two-thirds of Australians believe America cannot be trusted as a security partner and want a more independent defense policy: 64% of them have little or no trust in America to "act responsibly."³¹

In her recent newspaper article, former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark warned the New Zealand government against aligning with the United States to ensure that New Zealand's security and prosperity continue to depend on foreign policy choices that reflect core values and national interests. "New Zealand must prioritize peace, multilateralism, and regional stability. In an increasingly uncertain world, our best strategy is independence, not subservience," says Helen Clark.³² In the develop-

²⁷ Grant Duncan, "A 'Trump Slump' Has Lifted the Left in Canada and Now Australia—What Are the Lessons for NZ?" *RNZ*, May 5, 2025, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/559972/a-trump-slump-has-lifted-the-left-in-canada-and-now-australia-what-are-the-lessons-for-nz>.

²⁸ Giselle Ruhyyih Ewing and Hans von der Burchard, "The US Is 'No Longer the America We Used to Know,' Warns Germany's Merz," *POLITICO*, February 5, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/us-politics-germany-eu-europe-donald-trump-friedrich-merz-white-house/>.

²⁹ Iwan Stone and Lettice Bromovsky, "NATO Issues Dire Warning to Volodymyr Zelensky as Keir Starmer Hugs Him at No10 amid Frantic Talks...," *Mail Online*, March 2025, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14450319/Zelensky-arrives-Downing-Street-meet-Keir-Starmer-bruising-White-House-encounter-Donald-Trump-pair-prepare-crisis-Ukraine-talks-European-leaders-tomorrow.html>.

³⁰ RNZ News, "Exit Stage Right: Trump Blows up the West as We Know It as America's Allies Flinch," *RNZ*, April 6, 2025, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/world/557345/exit-stage-right-trump-blows-up-the-west-as-we-know-it-as-america-s-allies-flinch>.

³¹ "Aussies Are Doing a Political Pivot," *The Economist*, May 2025, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2025/05/01/aussies-are-doing-a-political-pivot>.

³² Helen Clark, "Opinion: Helen Clark and Marco de Jong—Subservience Puts New Zealand's Sovereignty and Security at Risk," *NZ Herald*, May 2, 2025, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/opinion>.

ing world, Donald Trump's transactional foreign policy has met less resistance as many developing countries avoid following values-based foreign policy due to pragmatic, nationalistic, or authoritarian types of their leadership. India is one such example. According to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement has inspired MIGA, or "Make India Great Again."³³

The leaders of Southeast Asian countries of ASEAN do not seem to be bothered when Trump's United States speaks less about the liberal rules-based order and puts more stress on transactional engagement. They have been known for being quintessentially pragmatic, advancing their own interests — especially economic interests — and hedging between major powers. The willingness to be open to all sides, despite differences in governing ideology, has been emphasized time and again across Southeast Asia.³⁴

It is clear that under President Donald Trump, the traditional American approach to international relations is undergoing a fundamental transformation. However, it may not be about completely abandoning the US leadership or "soft power" but could be perhaps viewed as a recalibration for a world where old rules no longer apply. While the Trump administration currently prioritizes tangible returns over ideological appeal, this may reverse in the future. Moreover, there is definitely a need to reassess America's strategic allies and their capabilities in favor of more flexible and effective partnership frameworks.³⁵

Implications for Multilateralism and Regional Security

The same ASEAN and other small nations are, however, much less comfortable with the transactionalist policy's restrained, if not hostile, approach to multilateralism. It challenges the very notion of ASEAN centrality in the Asia-Pacific and limits the smaller nations' opportunities to promote their interests in multilateral formats.

ASEAN's inclusive, consensus-based approach to security has provided smaller states with a platform to collectively engage larger powers. Trump's open skepticism of such institutions, coupled with his administration's inconsistent participation in ASEAN summits and related forums, threatens to marginalize the organiza-

[helen-clark-and-marco-de-jong-subservience-puts-new-zealands-sovereignty-and-security-at-risk/IHEVY3RVFZG3PEONGRX6AOD6AQ/](https://www.economist.com/asia/2025/03/13/india-is-benefiting-from-trump-20).

³³ The Economist, "India Is Benefiting from Trump 2.0," *The Economist*, March 13, 2025, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2025/03/13/india-is-benefiting-from-trump-20>.

³⁴ Anthony Milner, "ASEAN Adapts and Advances as Global Politics Shift," *East Asia Forum*, February 24, 2025, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/02/25/asean-adapts-and-advances-as-global-politics-shift/>.

³⁵ Kurt Davis Jr., "Trump Is Redefining, Not Abandoning, American Soft Power," *Asia Times*, April 2025, <https://asiatimes.com/2025/04/trump-is-redefining-not-abandoning-american-soft-power>.

tion's role in shaping regional security dynamics. The "bilateralization" of US involvement puts ASEAN's already waning centrality at even greater risk of losing its normative clout and strengthening power imbalances that benefit extra-regional players with greater coercive capabilities.³⁶

In addition, the declining mutual trust between major Asian powers, such as between India and Pakistan, or Japan and China, accompanied by rising nationalism, increases uncertainties in the security environment of the Asia-Pacific region and endangers the post-Cold War security multilateralism in Asia.³⁷

The Indo-Pacific is likely to confront a wider and more dangerous security vacuum. Washington's allies and close partners, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan, are openly questioning the reliability of the United States in honoring its security commitments. President Trump's transactional approach to diplomacy elevates concerns about flashpoints where tensions are already running high: The South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, and the Taiwan Strait. Voices are being raised to develop national nuclear capabilities.³⁸

In light of deepening major power rivalry and shortcomings of large-scale multilateralism, minilateralism has emerged as an alternative format of choice for several regional countries. Recent minilateral initiatives, such as QUAD and AUKUS, have been regarded as the building blocks of an "Indo-Pacific" regional architecture amid the advancement of the new regional construct. It is premised on smaller groupings akin to "coalitions of the willing" or "like-minded" arrangements.³⁹ The purpose and value of such minilaterals are being vigorously debated in the region. For some, they are exclusive mechanisms that could lead to more confrontation in the region. Australian National University Emeritus Professor Hugh White is of such opinion and believes that AUKUS is dangerous in provoking rather than deterring aggressive China.⁴⁰

³⁶ Aries A. Arugay, "It's Way Too Complicated! Trump 2.0 and Southeast Asia," *Asian Politics & Policy* 17, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.70020>.

³⁷ Ren Yuanzhe, "Competitive Regional Security Architecture and the Value of ASEM," in *The Asia-Europe Meeting 2020 (ASEM)*, <https://www.kas.de/documents/264850/7057229/Article+10+Competitive+Regional+Security.pdf/3b421ed0-e9e5-0a83-63b5-57e11460f511?version=1.0&t=1568275707566>.

³⁸ Vina Nadjibulla, "Trump and the Asia Pacific: Five Key Questions in 2025," *Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada*, January 16, 2025, <https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/trump-and-asia-pacific-five-key-questions-shaping-2025>.

³⁹ Sarah Teo, "The Rise and Endurance of Minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific," *Lowy Institute*, December 27, 2024, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/rise-endurance-minilaterals-indo-pacific>.

⁴⁰ 1News Reporters, "AUKUS: Possible NZ Entry Would Provoke More than Deter—Academic," *1News*, August 4, 2024, <https://www.1news.co.nz/2024/08/04/aukus-possible-nz-entry-would-provoke-more-than-protect-academic/>.

For others, minilateralism is providing a flexible, efficient, and focused approach to addressing global and regional issues. It enables countries to form strategic alliances based on common interests, facilitating more effective and timely responses to emerging challenges.⁴¹

Patrick Cronin from Heritage Foundation believes that ASEAN, the QUAD, and AUKUS are the pillars on which Indo-Pacific security will rest in the coming decades. ASEAN serves as a norm-builder, the QUAD functions as a problem-solver, and AUKUS acts as a deterrent to military conflict. ASEAN's annual meetings of leaders, foreign ministers, and defense chiefs are a foundation of inclusive diplomacy and cooperation. The informal QUAD dialogue among the United States, Japan, India, and Australia would promote a broader rules-based order, while the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) pact promises leading-edge defensive technology necessary to maintain a military balance of power.⁴²

Some commentators believe that, given the decline of multilateralism, minilateralism could become a useful mechanism for smaller states to exert greater influence on specific issues, which might be diluted in larger multilateral settings dominated by great powers.⁴³ Nevertheless, it is clear that the actions taken to undermine free trade, America's alliances, and rule- and norm-based diplomacy will harm small states on the whole. While a genuine disaster is unlikely in the short term, there is a heightened tail risk that irreparable harm may be done to the liberal international order. For large states in the international system, the effects of a Trump presidency are far more uncertain. Large states are simply not as reliant on trade, alliances, and the functioning of international organizations for their security and prosperity.

Dilemmas for Small States

Politicians and experts in small states have already started discussing optimal responses to the transactional foreign policy pursued by the United States and several other major powers.

An interesting conversation between three Georgia experts demonstrates the range of options for small states like Georgia. According to David Aprasidze, Georgia cannot afford to pursue a transactional foreign policy. Although such a policy may appear practical in a swiftly shifting environment, for a small nation,

⁴¹ Swathi Satish, "Minilateralism: The New Trend in Diplomacy," *ClearIAS*, May 28, 2024, <https://www.clearias.com/minilateralism/>

⁴² Patrick M. Cronin, "The 3 Pillars of Asia's New Security Architecture," *Hudson Institute*, October 2, 2021, <https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/the-3-pillars-of-asia-s-new-security-architecture>.

⁴³ Swathi Satish, "Minilateralism: The New Trend in Diplomacy," *ClearIAS*, May 28, 2024, <https://www.clearias.com/minilateralism/>

lacking a dependable ally, it can turn into a trap that eventually infringes on its sovereignty. A big, aggressive state could either turn such a country into its satellite or directly subordinate it. Nick MacFarlane, on the other hand, argues that if Georgia tilts too close to Russia in order to prevent serious regional disruption, it risks alienating the West. If it tilts too close to the West, it risks alienation of Russia and consequent economic and security disruption. Nick Macfarlain believes that, on balance, Georgia's foreign policy should lean towards the transactional without forgetting the values. Stephen Jones offers a flexible multi-vector foreign policy option focusing on minilateral partnership with Ukraine and Moldova as part of the pro-European "package of three.⁴⁴ This debate focusing on Georgia is relevant for many geopolitically challenged small nations.

The current Armenian leadership seems to be pursuing a balanced and pragmatic foreign policy with values-based aspirations. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan recently stated that Armenia is not formulating and implementing its foreign policy in one direction but is trying to find and build the right balances. "We want, and this is logical, to have good relations with all international partners. Moreover, we want to regulate relations with our regional countries - Azerbaijan, Turkey, we want to improve relations with other neighbors - Georgia, Iran. And, of course, we want to deepen relations with the European Union. ...There may be situations when there will be certain tensions and intersections between the different directions of our foreign policy. We see the resolution of this situation in our transparency, sincerity, and openness towards all our partners, so that there are no dark corners in the policies we pursue, as well as in their causes and justifications," declares Nikol Pashinyan.⁴⁵

Singapore, one of the most successful and pragmatic small states, follows five core principles in its navigation through current international uncertainties. First, have a strong economy, a stable political system, and a united society. Second, build credible armed forces to defend the country and ensure that the nation is not bullied by an external adversary. Third, develop a wide network of relations based on mutual respect. Be a friend to all and an enemy of no one. Avoid siding with one side over the other. Four, promote a global order based on the rule of law and

⁴⁴ Expert Comment, "Can Georgia Afford Transactional Foreign Policy?" *Georgian Institute of Politics*, no. 23 (March 2023), <https://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/GIP-Expert-comment-23-EN.pdf>.

⁴⁵ "Armenia Does Not Intend to Aggravate Relations with Russia – Pashinyan," *Arka.am*, 2025, <https://arka.am/en/news/politics/armenia-does-not-intend-to-aggravate-relations-with-russia-pashinyan/>.

international norms. Lastly, Singapore must also be a “credible and consistent” partner.⁴⁶

New Zealand very much shares and follows these principles. However, declaring and implementing the principles is not the same thing. The New Zealand government has been carefully assessing the current strategic situation and considering various responses. It has already toned down some of its values-based approaches. New Zealand has been largely mute while President Trump decided to quit the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Accord, attacked foreign assistance programs, and withdrew funding from key United Nations organizations. When the Trump administration imposed sanctions on the International Criminal Court, New Zealand, along with Australia and Japan, failed to join a statement from 79 other countries expressing unwavering support for the court.⁴⁷

New Zealand has to navigate increased polarization in its Asia-Pacific neighborhood and avoid being drawn into what is expected to be a more intense US-China rivalry while continuing its commitment to support a liberal-rules-based international system. New Zealand has been able to maintain close economic engagement and security cooperation with the United States and Australia, and at the same time forge strong economic connections with China. Whether this balance can or should be maintained is up for debate.⁴⁸

Some New Zealand experts believe that the country should reduce reliance on China and strengthen ties with the United States while striking a balance between principle and pragmatism.⁴⁹

Other commentators are more concerned about the foreign policy dichotomy between New Zealand’s traditional strategic partners—the US and Europe—and urge the New Zealand government to follow the principled European approach to international affairs, which they believe is closer to New Zealand’s worldview than the one currently articulated by the Trump administration.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Danson Cheong, “As a Small Country, Singapore Has to Be Friends with Everyone, but at Times It Needs to Advance Its Own Interests,” *The Straits Times*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/as-a-small-country-singapore-has-to-be-friends-with-everyone-but-at-times-it-needs-to>.

⁴⁷ Alexander Gillespie, “Trump’s Dismantling of International Order Has Left NZ Mute—Why?” *1News*, February 14, 2025, <https://www.1news.co.nz/2025/02/15/trumps-dismantling-of-international-order-has-left-nz-mute-why/>.

⁴⁸ Guy C. Charlton and Xiang Gao, “Sailing Chaotic Seas: New Zealand’s Foreign Policy in 2025,” *The Diplomat*, January 7, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/01/sailing-chaotic-seas-new-zealands-foreign-policy-in-2025>.

⁴⁹ Sanjay Karthikeyan, “New Zealand and the Quest for a Coherent Foreign Policy,” *YIP Institute*, September 29, 2024, <https://yipinstitute.org/policy/new-zealand-and-the-quest-for-a-coherent-foreign-policy>.

⁵⁰ Alexander Gillespie and Robert Patman, “America or Europe? Why Trump’s Ukraine U-Turn Is a Fork in the Road for New Zealand,” *The Spinoff*, March 5, 2025, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/06-03-2025/america-or-europe-why-trumps-ukraine-u-turn-is-a-fork-in-the-road-for-new-zealand>.

In the meantime, former deputy chief of staff under the first Trump administration, a New Zealand born, Chris Liddell advises New Zealand leadership to “stay diplomatically cautious during the current geopolitical shifts, and avoid unnecessary confrontation; focus on long-term strategic positioning rather than reacting to short-term political turbulence; leverage the country’s strengths as a small, stable nation with strong rule of law and minimal corruption; prioritize relationships within the Five Eyes alliance; position the country as an attractive investment destination with unique opportunities in digital and natural infrastructure; and remain pragmatically optimistic about global challenges, seeing them as potential opportunities. Liddell believes that “we are now entering a world of challenges, but at the same time a world of unlimited opportunity. It’s also a world where a small nation can outperform.” To do that, New Zealand, according to Liddell, should overcome complacency, increase national aspiration levels, embrace transformational solutions, develop more flexible and effective institutions, and compete globally, not just locally.⁵¹

Conclusion

Our analysis has demonstrated the interdependence between domestic and international political politicization and its impact on the global and regional orders. While nationalist foreign policies lead to more geopolitical competition, they are at the same time adding urgency to adjusting the international and regional mechanisms and developing new forms of cooperation.

With the rise of bilateralism and the decline of multilateralism, minilateralism is starting to play an increasingly prominent role. Such structures could become more responsive and effective in dealing with emerging security challenges as long as they focus on engagement and not confrontation.

Transactional foreign policies resent value-based partnerships. At the same time, they inject necessary pragmatism in dealing with the very diverse community of nations, where narrow ideological commitments can further fragment the international society and limit collaboration in addressing existential challenges like climate change.

One could relate to Distinguished Professor of International Relations at American University Amitav Acharya’s point that a world order, where non-Western nations have a greater voice, will create a more equitable and mutually

⁵¹ Fran O’Sullivan, “Ex-Trump Adviser Chris Liddell Tells NZ Stay Cautious, Seize Opportunities in Global Shifts,” *NZ Herald*, March 14, 2025, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/economy/ex-trump-adviser-liddell-tells-nz-to-stay-cautious-seize-opportunities-in-global-shifts-fran-osullivan/CJI5DXNI4JEGTME7IQ6TJP4OC4/>.

respectful global arrangement. Acharya urges “the West” to embrace the inevitable and work with “the Rest”. Burying the “West-versus-the Rest” mindset is a central challenge for our age,” states Acharya.⁵² One of the important consequences of global strategic shifts and transformational politics is the need to reassess traditional international relations’ theories, concepts, and frameworks to ensure that our understanding and interpretation of ongoing trends is less factional and more nuanced. This could become a great opportunity for academic communities in smaller nations as part of enhancing their countries’ international voice and diplomatic capabilities.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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⁵² “Interview – Amitav Acharya,” *E-International Relations*, March 22, 2025, <https://www.e-ir.info/2025/03/22/interview-amitav-acharya-2/>.

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