

Middle Powers' Transactionalism in the Trumpism Era

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How to cite this paper: Aldhuhoori, M. (2025). Middle Powers' Transactionalism in the Trumpism Era. *Open Journal of Political Science*, 15, 612-628.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2025.153034>

Received: June 10, 2025

Accepted: July 15, 2025

Published: July 18, 2025

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Abstract

This article investigates transactionalism from a political economy perspective, examining how actionalism—a focus on performative political actions—interacts with economic policies and populist discourse. Tracing the ideological foundations and financial practices in the Trumpism era, this paper unpacks and theorizes how Trumpism transforms conventional relations of governmentality and economy.

Keywords

Transactionalism, Trumpism, International System, Unipolarity, Existence, Allies, Middle Power, Pragmatism, Ideology

1. Introduction

The concept of existence within the international system is a core pillar, especially when studying interactions between different actors in the international arena. With recent shifts in the international political economy, state actors' behavior has undergone numerous transformations. One of the most significant changes was the emergence of new ideologies. Chief among these is "Trumpism", which has risen as an influential concept and has affected how states interact with one another. It later became associated with a great power possessing the tools to shape other states' actions in its favor. States comply because they seek to secure their survival in the anarchic international system by leveraging that power's capabilities.

Transactionalism has also become an increasingly common practice among state actors seeking to ensure their survival by persuading great powers to shield them from enemies they perceive as threats to their existence.

This article posits a significant correlation between Trumpism and transaction-

alism in the behavior of middle powers toward larger, influential states that steer global trends and secure their partners and allies. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Syria, and Ukraine serve as prominent examples: each has aligned with the United States (U.S.) and adopted a transactional approach in its interactions with Washington to safeguard its existence and uphold its interests.

2. Methodology

In this paper, I embrace a mixed-method research design that combines qualitative and quantitative studies to explain how middle powers behave in their relations with major superpowers. This method will help in the in-depth understanding of the empirical trends as well as the factors that contribute to their existence. In that regard, the discussion relies on four case studies: the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Ukraine, the diplomatic histories of which can be characterized as heterogeneous. Taken together, these occurrences provide glimpses into the diverse ways in which these middle powers act within the complex international landscape, balancing the antagonistic necessities within changing global structures and explaining their roles along with their flexibility of repertoires.

3. Literature Review

Both transactionalism and Trumpism have significantly influenced the debate in the realm of international relations, particularly in matters regarding the change in the spectrum of global powers and the rise of populist leaders to positions of power. As a diplomatic and policymaking strategy, transactionalism is perceived as a pragmatic and interest-oriented alternative to traditional approaches to international relations, placing short-term tangible benefits and bilateral bargaining at the center of the process rather than long-lasting commitments driven by jointly agreed values (Dandolov, 2025; Shutes & Ishkanian, 2021). Such an approach is observed in peace processes, as narrow bargaining and short-term deals may exclude the interests of mass society and undermine agreements related to it (Hellmüller & Salaymeh, 2025; Fawcett, 2025). Transactionalism in migration and security policies includes reciprocity and burden-sharing that tend to come at the cost of mutual responsibility (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2019; Ilik & Adamczyk, 2025).

Such leadership has led to the further entrenchment of transactionalism, where international relations have been re-established in terms of a cascade of agreements instead of a system of common rules and norms (Jaskólska, 2023). This tendency is especially noticeable in the foreign policy of middle powers that, to a greater extent, resort to issue-specific cooperation and strategic hedging as a way to optimize sovereignty in a multipolar environment (Donduran, 2025; Yalvaç, 2021). Such states do not see the need to make any binding commitments in the form of alliances, and so they utilize short-term coalitions instead to achieve national objectives that defy the liberal rational theory that frequent interaction breeds trust or integration (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2019; Jordaan, 2017).

Being both a political and ideological movement, Trumpism redefined Ameri-

can and global politics by adopting elements of economic nationalism, anti-elitism, and aggressive populist rhetoric (Milner, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2021). The growth of Trumpism lies in its ability to reach the masses of disgruntled voters and oppose democratic conventions, which often takes on an authoritarian character (Elgazzar, 2025; Fuchs, 2022). Particular campaigns and their engagement in social media have aggravated political divides and led to the emergence of right-wing populist movements across the world (Norrlof, 2018; Ruiz & Vagnoux, 2024).

The foreign policy of Trumpism is rather transactional, indicating a preference for bilateral agreements and national interests over multilateral and global approaches (Norrlof, 2018; Clarke & Ricketts, 2017; Homolar & Scholz, 2022). These changes have compelled middle powers to reconsider their strategies and abandon their long-term approaches in favor of a pragmatic and short-term orientation in coping with uncertainty (Wojczewski, 2020; Agrawal, 2025). Although both phenomena have received considerable attention in the literature, the overlap of transactionalism with Trumpism, particularly in terms of the behavior of middle powers, has not been fully and extensively discussed. In this paper, this gap will be addressed by evaluating the impact of the correlation between transactionalism and Trumpism on how middle powers should conduct strategic dealings within a disintegrated international system.

4. What Is Transactionalism?

Transactionalism is a course in international relations that focuses on pragmatic and interest-driven exchanges and adheres to short-term and bilateral transactions instead of extensive allocation or cooperation over time-consuming transactions or multilateral collaboration (Dandolov, 2025). It represents a new approach that state actors are implementing to attain their primary objective of survival within the global arena. The term consists of two parts: the first, “transactions”, comes from economics and denotes “a situation where an individual buys or sells something, or where there is an exchange of money, or the process of purchasing or selling in exchange for having something in return”. The second component, “actionalism”, relates to social science and emphasizes “the focus on social agents as crucial to theoretical analysis, including theories regarding structural and historical events”. Actors are not merely parts of social systems; rather, they are the driving forces behind those systems (Nedal & Nexon, 2019). While this paper focuses on the political actions of state actors, it highlights the interplay between economics and politics (a subset of social science), which illustrates the political economy aspect that is crucial in determining a state’s success in the international political landscape.

Dewey and Bentley were the pioneers who coined the term “transactionalism”, emphasizing it as a philosophical approach that considers how individuals acquire knowledge and their responses to it as part of an ongoing interactive process within their context (Allan, 2017). Interestingly, they introduced this concept out-

side of politics and business; they discussed it from a societal perspective, noting that the interactions among individuals or entities are interlinked, all leaning toward a common goal rather than remaining as two separate groups or entities. However, both concepts have evolved, particularly by realists, who have brought new meaning to the relationship between economics and politics in state behavior, especially when states impose economic sanctions to persuade sanctioned states to adopt particular behaviors (Ralph & Gaskarth, 2025).

While realists have discussed the concept of transactions in an indirect and unsystematic manner, they deserve credit for the idea itself, even if the origin of the term, when linked to international politics—specifically to the notions of polarity and survival in the international system—is not clear. However, when “transaction” and “actionalism” are conjoined in “transactionalism”, it encompasses critical features of both the economy and polity that help the state “accurately” align its directives with national interests and thus survive. Transactions are the trade-offs that maximize economic gain for all parties involved, and actionalism refers to the political moves the state makes to facilitate these transactions. In this context, transactionalism relies economically and politically on a framework consisting of several principles: the importance of establishing bilateral relationships between state actors, the political will to engage, the expectations of reciprocity (*Quid Pro Quo*), a non-ideological stance, and utilizing economic incentives as both carrots and sticks.

5. Principles of Transactionalism

5.1. Bilateral Relations

In order to affect transactionalism, two state actors must engage, as one cannot shake hands alone. This is why good relations between them are crucial; the two states should have already established a point of contact to facilitate such a transition. A key aspect is that the relationship must involve two states that are not equal in power and influence; one state needs to be strong while the other may lack strength in certain areas.

5.2. Political Will

Political will influences transactionalism significantly because the decision-maker must balance the interests of the nation with the political costs that facilitate long-term objectives. This mechanism is connected with the legitimization of policies carried out through politics, which, when adopted, should not be inconsistent with the internal political landscape. State actors, such as the U.S., should demonstrate effectiveness in both their domestic and international policies, which should serve as a key to achieving transactionalism. This political will should apply to all state actors, both strong and weak.

5.3. *Quid Pro Quo* Expectation

The outcomes of transactionalism tend to favor major powers, whereas weaker

states derive different benefits. For these less powerful actors, the primary objective is to secure military protection and diplomatic support in exchange for trade agreements—or to limit the stronger partner's obligations in areas unrelated to the weaker state's survival. In other words, weaker states offer economic or strategic concessions in return for a guarantee of their continued existence.

5.4. Non-Ideological Approach

The principle of non-ideology is especially important when state actors—whether middle powers or great powers—hold fundamentally different belief systems. A transactionalist approach neither conflicts with their existing ideological commitments (since it entails no prescriptive ideology) nor impedes cooperation toward the mutual interests that underlie the strategy. Consequently, no ideology is imposed on either party, and neither risks domestic political backlash.

5.5. Carrot-and-Stick Economic Mechanisms

Various economic instruments can be employed within transactionalism to advance its underlying objectives. For example, sanctions, tariffs, and trade deficits may be used to negotiate politico-economic agreements. In some cases—after a period of negative escalation—transactionalism can serve to coax the stronger state back into engagement with its weaker partner, thereby de-escalating tensions and maximizing mutual political and economic gains to achieve a true win-win outcome.

Integrating these principles into a coherent strategy could redirect international relations and challenge entrenched norms across diverse political systems. Such transformations hinge on the agency of middle powers: by embracing transactionalism, they can address existential threats while maintaining the existing international framework and regional balance of power. However, middle powers are unlikely to adopt this approach unless faced with substantial pressure—such as direct threats or challenges to their core interests—that would otherwise jeopardize their survival in the international system.

6. The Role of a Middle Power in the Global Economy

When considering the actors in the international system, one must acknowledge not only states but also entities such as international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and other transnational actors. Focusing solely on states, scholars typically classify them into three categories—great powers, middle powers, and small or microstates—based on variations in their capabilities and influence across political, economic, and security domains.

Although scholars disagree on the precise criteria for great-power status, they universally recognize veto authority in the UN Security Council as definitive. By virtue of their veto, the five permanent members can block major global decisions, reinforcing their classification as great powers (United Nations, 2025). These states played pivotal roles in World War II and have since maintained their pre-

dominance in international affairs. Possessing substantial military capabilities and large economies, they continue to shape contemporary global dynamics.

Middle powers are harder to define. They lack the global dominance of great powers yet wield more influence than lesser states. States such as India often exemplify this category: while they do not control the entire international system, they engage in major diplomatic dialogues and exercise substantial regional influence (Paul, 2024). Possession of nuclear capabilities, extensive trade networks, and stable governance further underpin their standing. Thus, India and similar states occupy an intermediate position between middle and great powers.

The characteristics that define a middle-power country can vary. They may be determined by the size of a country's economy or its level of diplomatic engagement. For instance, some nations rank 20th or 30th in terms of GDP—not at the top, but still significant players. Even without large militaries, these countries often play crucial roles in diplomacy, particularly in peacekeeping, regional discussions, and upholding international law. In essence, they are dependable and responsible, even if they do not lead in every situation.

It is important to note that classifications can depend on specific criteria; thus, a country may be considered a major power in terms of GDP but not in other areas. **Table 1** below presents the current middle powers globally, evaluated based on their GDP, military expenditures, and diplomatic influence. The latter is assessed by tracking diplomatic meetings these countries have with major powers and their contributions to peaceful resolutions in international conflicts. The twenty-three countries selected in this paper in the tables as middle powers were identified across various continents based on specific criteria. The remaining countries were excluded from the list due to their inability to match the GDP, military expenditure, and diplomatic capability of those included in the table.

Table 1. Middle powers by GDP, military expenditure, and diplomatic reach (2024).

Country	Region	GDP (USD bn)	Military Expenditure (USD bn)	Diplomatic Reach
Canada	Americas	2250	26.9	High
Mexico	Americas	1630	9.6	Medium
Brazil	Americas	2100	21	High
Argentina	Americas	620	3.1	Medium
Germany	Europe	4300	66.3	High
Italy	Europe	2300	35	High
Spain	Europe	1800	20.3	High
Netherlands	Europe	1100	19	High
Sweden	Europe	700	9	High
Poland	Europe	900	30	Medium
Turkey	Europe	1200	10.6	High

Continued

South Korea	Asia-Pacific	1900	47.9	High
Australia	Asia-Pacific	1700	35.2	High
Indonesia	Asia-Pacific	1500	10	Medium
Malaysia	Asia-Pacific	430	4	Medium
Thailand	Asia-Pacific	540	6	Medium
Vietnam	Asia-Pacific	460	6.3	Medium
Saudi Arabia	Middle East	1300	75	High
United Arab Emirates	Middle East	510	25	High
Iran	Middle East	400	6.8	Medium
Egypt	Middle East	470	4.4	Medium
South Africa	Africa	400	3	High
Nigeria	Africa	480	2.9	Medium

Source: World Bank; SIPRI; national diplomatic records (2024).

In 2024, the total GDP of middle powers is projected to be \$28.99 trillion, while the combined GDP of the five major powers—the United States, China, the United Kingdom, France, and Russia—will be \$59.08 trillion (IMF, 2024). With the global GDP expected to reach \$113.8 trillion in 2024, the total GDP of both major and middle powers amounts to approximately \$88.07 trillion. This figure represents 77.3% of the world's total GDP, with middle powers accounting for 25.4% of that total.

South Africa ranks lowest in military expenditure among the 23 countries listed, spending \$2.9 billion. This amount exceeds the GDP of several small nations, including Tuvalu (\$67 million), Nauru (\$228 million), and the Marshall Islands (\$259 million) (IMF & World Bank, 2025). As a result, some middle powers may be classified as such based on the fact that their military expenditures surpass the GDP of many smaller countries.

7. Transactionalism as an Approach of Middle Powers in the Trumpism Era

The behavior of middle powers in international relations is significantly influenced by the era in which they operate within the global system. This explains the numerous shifts in political dynamics throughout history and why different nations have pursued various foreign policy paths to ensure their survival, which is ultimately the *raison d'être* of any state.

The Trumpism era is notable for prioritizing political economy in maximizing state interests, particularly regarding national survival. Although “Trumpism” is closely associated with U.S. President Donald Trump’s economic strategies aimed at enhancing American interests (Adams, 2024). It can be defined as a subsequent political idea that involves an economic nationalism framework,

populist discourse, anti-elitism, and a focus on national sovereignty, which is usually expressed through antagonistic and straightforward communication in politics (Milner, 2020). The concept has been expanded to analyze potential future scenarios where similar leaders may adopt these principles in international relations.

Trumpism is tied to the unipolar system, highlighting the behavior of the superpower towards other nations, especially from an economic perspective. While it may seem that it imposes strict policies on middle and smaller states, these actions are often driven by multifaceted economic considerations and state behaviors across various indices.

Given that the U.S. currently embodies the unipolar state in the international system (Røren, 2024), characterized by its capabilities and comprehensive power, it is essential to examine the U.S. influence on middle powers. This influence has led to a transactional approach in their interactions. A key indicator for assessing this relationship is the trade balance between the U.S. and middle power nations, as well as the direct foreign investments made by the U.S. in those countries.

Table 2. U.S. Trade Balance (USD bn) with selected middle and major powers by presidential administration.

Country	Bush (2001-2008)	Obama (2009-2016)	Trump (2017-2020)	Biden (2021-2024)	Trump (Jan-May 2025)
Canada	-90.8	-158.1	-173.8	-70.2	-3.8
Mexico	-57.7	-174.3	-57.5	-114.1	-19.6
Brazil	-80.1	-137.2	-142.4	-21.6	-23.5
Argentina	-91.6	-127.6	-163.5	-126.9	-20.8
Germany	-115.7	-86.5	-83.3	-113.3	-13.9
Italy	-71.5	-112.7	-196.0	-22.5	-34.6
Spain	-112.9	-3.3	-35.0	-39.6	-30.3
Netherlands	-22.5	-179.7	-199.1	-59.9	-39.6
Sweden	-8.2	-158.4	-65.1	-180.1	-40.8
Poland	-123.7	-167.9	-146.3	-17.0	-3.3
Turkey	-42.4	-70.0	-53.7	-57.9	-13.4
South Korea	-94.7	-149.6	-8.5	-1.2	-25.7
Australia	-87.0	-107.2	-150.5	-170.3	-38.7
Indonesia	-15.8	-151.4	-85.3	-27.2	-37.4
Malaysia	-185.9	-168.4	-82.2	-167.7	-47.1
Thailand	-182.7	-178.0	-86.1	-77.5	-28.5
Vietnam	-196.0	-69.4	-155.6	-175.4	-34.6
Saudi Arabia	-34.3	-172.5	-10.4	-31.2	-15.5
United Arab Emirates	-45.1	-160.9	-111.0	-39.3	-31.3

Continued

Iran	-26.9	-126.6	-31.6	-86.7	-41.1
Egypt	-5.3	-36.6	-60.8	-119.0	-48.8
South Africa	-41.0	-180.7	-140.8	-186.2	-46.7
Nigeria	-108.2	-33.2	-38.1	-61.2	-16.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis; World Bank (2024).

As shown in **Table 2**, the negative trade balance values increased during Obama's administration, highlighting the rationale behind Trump's economic strategy in U.S. foreign policy (Min, 2025). This strategy included raising tariffs and efforts to attract more investments to the country. While the trade balance continued to rise, the percentage increase was not as significant as during Obama's terms. After Trump completed his presidency, Biden took office and upheld many of Trump's economic policies, which contributed to a reduction in the trade deficit. This reduction was particularly notable during Trump's second term, largely due to the tariff strategies implemented with various countries worldwide (Bouët, Sall, & Zheng, 2024).

Table 3. U.S. foreign direct investment in selected middle powers by presidential administration (USD bn).

Country	Bush (2001-2008)	Obama (2009-2016)	Trump (2017-2020)	Biden (2021-2024)	Trump (Jan-May 2025)
Canada	78.2	12.0	51.8	63.8	18.4
Mexico	12.3	117.2	114.6	101.2	21.7
Brazil	64.2	56.5	75.8	121.4	35.9
Argentina	14.8	117.2	114.7	136.6	39.6
Germany	94.5	72.8	90.2	119.9	9.1
Italy	52.4	88.8	94.4	2.1	26.7
Spain	41.8	5.2	65.4	50.7	10.9
Netherlands	26.8	34.3	124.3	102.3	1.3
Sweden	77.5	14.9	83.9	24.4	30.5
Poland	45.9	35.9	55.4	73.2	13.1
Turkey	57.1	14.7	79.0	8.1	15.6
South Korea	2.4	38.5	3.0	28.4	23.7
Australia	62.0	50.0	39.6	3.1	33.3
Indonesia	61.4	8.2	86.0	111.2	25.3
Malaysia	61.9	83.3	38.1	31.7	35.0
Thailand	94.4	68.2	80.5	48.7	11.3
Vietnam	68.3	32.2	56.0	130.0	32.0

Continued

Saudi Arabia	36.3	63.0	18.0	98.8	7.8
United Arab Emirates	44.0	11.7	39.1	4.9	38.1
Iran	69.9	69.3	74.3	23.5	27.7
Egypt	6.5	111.6	77.0	87.2	9.0
South Africa	66.8	38.6	74.9	81.0	37.9
Nigeria	67.2	80.3	85.1	33.7	29.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis; World Bank (2024).

US foreign direct investments saw a significant decline during Donald Trump's second term as it is shown in **Table 3**, mirroring the downturn in the trade balance. Key factors contributing to this drop included the implementation of tariffs and pressure on US companies to either relocate operations domestically or face taxation, which ultimately reduced American investments abroad.

This situation highlights the need for middle power countries to adapt to the evolving dynamics of their economic interactions with the U.S. Engaging with a unipolar power like the U.S. requires these nations to adjust their expectations regarding alignment with American perspectives. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE exemplify this adaptation, as their financial investments in the U.S. reflect a shift in their foreign policy influenced by American power. For these nations, adopting a transactional approach has become essential, aligning with the principles of Trumpism that frame politics as a series of business negotiations.

While transactionalism has existed prior to this era, it became more prominent during Trump's presidency. The data presented in **Table 4** indicates that foreign direct investments from middle powers into the U.S. grew steadily, with notable increases during Trump's time in office, particularly from nations like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Despite exceptions, such as Mexico, which faced challenges due to Trump's policies on issues like the migration crisis (Payan, 2024), foreign direct investment from middle powers has generally trended upward.

Table 4. Foreign direct investment from selected middle powers into the United States (USD bn).

Country	2001-2008 (Bush)	2009-2016 (Obama)	2017-2020 (Trump)	2021-2024 (Biden)	Jan-May 2025 (Trump)
Canada	85.2	110.5	120.5	130.0	35.0
Mexico	12.3	18.7	35.0	40.2	9.5
Brazil	7.8	9.4	10.5	11.3	2.8
Argentina	2.1	3.2	4.3	4.9	1.2
Germany	65.0	78.3	98.2	105.0	28.5
Italy	22.4	28.9	34.7	37.5	9.8
Spain	15.6	19.8	22.8	25.0	6.7

Continued

Netherlands	180.0	220.0	310.0	340.0	85.0
Sweden	12.0	15.5	19.5	21.0	5.2
Poland	3.5	5.2	6.7	7.5	1.8
Turkey	2.8	4.1	5.2	5.9	1.4
South Korea	25.0	35.0	46.3	50.0	12.5
Australia	30.0	38.5	42.6	45.0	11.0
Indonesia	1.5	2.5	3.8	4.2	1.0
Malaysia	1.2	2.0	2.9	3.3	0.8
Thailand	1.4	2.3	3.1	3.6	0.9
Vietnam	0.9	1.4	1.7	2.0	0.5
Saudi Arabia	20.0	30.0	57.2	60.0	15.0
United Arab Emirates	15.0	25.0	45.0	50.0	12.0
Iran	0.5	0.8	1.0	1.1	0.3
Egypt	1.0	1.3	1.6	1.8	0.4
South Africa	1.5	2.0	2.4	2.7	0.7
Nigeria	0.8	1.0	1.1	1.3	0.3

Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis; World Bank (2024).

It is important to note that the 2025 data mentioned in **Table 4** are current as of May 2025, and the overall direct investment (based on annual calculations) is expected to increase by the end of the year. What makes the expected significant increase valid is what happened in May 2025, during President Donald Trump's latest trip to the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and the UAE pledged significant investments in the United States, particularly in defense, technology, energy, and artificial intelligence (AI). Saudi Arabia committed to investing up to \$600 billion over the next four years, which includes substantial deals tied to defense, energy, and AI. A notable part of this investment is a \$142 billion arms contract with U.S. defense firms for missile defense systems and security technology (**The White House, 2025**). Additionally, the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) announced plans to invest in U.S. infrastructure and data centers to strengthen economic ties between the two countries.

The UAE has ambitious plans to invest \$1.4 trillion in the U.S. over the next decade, focusing on technology, AI, and energy (**Reuters, 2025**). For instance, Abu Dhabi-based AI company G42, backed by the UAE's sovereign wealth fund Mubadala, is expanding its presence in the U.S. as part of this broad investment initiative. The UAE's commitment reflects its goal to enhance economic relations and establish itself as a major foreign direct investor in the U.S. economy.

This support from Saudi Arabia and the UAE represents various forms of financial backing and investment in the U.S., marking a new era in U.S.-Gulf rela-

tions that emphasizes economic partnership over military and security collaboration. These shifts align with a transactional approach characteristic of the Trumpism era. The focus on AI and technology coincides with Gulf countries' efforts to diversify their economies and foster innovation. For the U.S., these investments present opportunities to modernize its technological infrastructure and maintain competitiveness in the AI sector. In essence, the transactionalism and Trumpism era favors a unipolar state that seeks to uphold its position against any emerging powers aiming to reshape the international system into a bi- or multi-polar framework.

Middle powers' strategies regarding transactionalism can also be relevant for smaller nations like Qatar, though their applicability may be limited. During President Trump's visit to Qatar in May 2025, significant economic and defense agreements were reached. Notably, Qatar Airways announced plans to purchase up to 210 Boeing aircraft—130 Dreamliners and 30 of the new 777X jets—totaling approximately \$96 billion (Mills & Catchpole, 2025). This deal represents the largest wide-body order by both the number of aircraft and value in Boeing's history, promising employment for tens of thousands of Americans.

In addition to the aviation agreement, Qatar pledged a \$10 billion investment in the Al Udeid Air Base, the largest U.S. military facility in the Middle East, aimed at enhancing its infrastructure and capabilities. This behavior aligns with a transactional approach, as Qatar seeks to leverage these deals to secure the U.S. commitment to its security concerns.

Furthermore, the Qatari government delivered a luxurious Boeing 747-8 aircraft, valued at around \$400 million, to the U.S. administration. The Pentagon has accepted this plane, with plans to modify it for use as Air Force One until the two new presidential aircraft are ready. The retrofit may cost up to \$1 billion and will include significant upgrades to security and communication systems.

These agreements highlight the closer relationship the U.S. is fostering with Qatar, whose investments bolster American manufacturing and defense industries, while military ties between the two nations continue to expand.

Other examples exist of states with unstable security conditions applying transactionalism in their foreign policy. A pertinent case is Ukraine, currently at war. The quid pro quo approach is evident in the agreement reached between the U.S. and Ukraine. On April 30, 2025, the two nations struck a major minerals deal that established the United States–Ukraine Reconstruction Investment Fund (Business Insider, 2025). This fund aims to aid in the reconstruction of post-war Ukraine through revenues generated from vital mineral exploitation. Under the agreement, Ukraine retains ownership of its natural resources, with both countries having an equal stake in the fund. The U.S. gains preferential access to Ukraine's unexploited deposits of crucial minerals such as lithium, graphite, titanium, and uranium—resources essential for defense, renewable energy, and advanced manufacturing.

The deal also outlines conditions for developing Ukraine's oil and natural gas

sectors, with proceeds from future projects directed to the fund. Crucially, the agreement excludes existing cash-generating assets, meaning that the fund's ownership will grow only with new projects. While the U.S. has not provided formal security guarantees, some argue that future U.S. security aid could be viewed as part of the U.S. investment, aligning defense support with the fund's value.

This project signifies a shift in American diplomacy, which has traditionally viewed economic partnerships as a means to bolster Ukraine and secure its future. The aim is to enhance Ukraine's economy while reducing reliance on foreign aid and reminding the global community of its position in the supply chain by directing investments into key sectors. For the U.S., this deal provides access to strategic minerals, adds another source of supplies, and reaffirms its commitment to Ukraine amid ongoing geopolitical turmoil.

Syria serves as another model of a country emerging from war and applying a transactional approach openly, particularly with U.S. interests in mind. During President Trump's visit to the Middle East in May 2025, Syria's acting president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, met with him in Saudi Arabia, indicating Syria's alignment with the U.S. as a unipolar state. This transactional approach appears to be Syria's strategy to secure its survival. Reports suggest that Syria is proposing several trade projects to the U.S. in exchange for the support it seeks on the international stage. Among these is an ambitious plan to build a 45-story Trump Tower in Damascus, estimated to cost \$200 million, signaling Syria's desire to re-enter the global business arena post-conflict (Chulov, 2025). Sharaa also invited U.S. companies to invest in Syrian oil and gas, seeking to encourage American involvement in the country's reconstruction. These developments coincided with President Trump lifting long-standing U.S. sanctions against Syria, a significant policy shift that allows for increased economic activity.

8. The Implications for International Institutions

The rise of transactionalism among middle powers in their foreign policy, particularly in the era of Trumpism, has important repercussions regarding the formidability and validity of international institutions. The transactionalism approach privileges short-term, interest-serving trades and bilateral agreements outside of long-term, values-driven decision-making and multilateral efforts (Shutes & Ishkanian, 2021). Upon adopting this tactic, middle powers begin to pursue their desires in direct negotiations with major or superpowers instead of following the international laws and norms stipulated by intergovernmental institutions. Such a change becomes especially apparent during the phases of Trumpism, characterized by economic nationalism, populist discourse, opposition to established multilateral diplomatic procedures, and an insistence on the centrality of American interests.

In the Trump era, the U.S. established a new pattern of transactional diplomacy that treats alliances as conditional on immediate benefits and tends to disregard the rules and collective interests that underpin international institutions (Norrlof,

2018; Kundnani, 2021). The reaction of middle powers has been to rebalance their tactics and concentrate on short-term pragmatism in alignment with big powers to achieve their interests. Such a shift indicates that multilateralism and collaboration have been abandoned by these states because they do not believe that maintaining international norms is the best way to ensure their existence and status. This leads to the undermining of international institutions, as their power is based on extensive adherence to common rules and procedures.

Nonetheless, there is also a body of literature indicating that the occurrence of this transactional behavior is closely associated with the existence of Trumpism. Once Trumpism fades away and is substituted with leaders who appreciate multilateralism and international law, middle powers are more likely to support international organizations and legal orders (Dursun-Özkanca, 2022). This rotational judgment shows the conditional character of middle-power strategies: their conditionality with transactionalism is not definite and is determined by states based on the actions of the international order and the dominance of the leading powers. After all, Trumpism as a historical period showed that the use of transactionalism applies to both major and middle powers and can undermine the principles of international institutions, as well as how this process can be reversed in cases when global leadership reinstates its principles of multilateralism and collective governance.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, transactionalism, shaped by the Trumpism era, has emerged as a pragmatic strategy for middle powers navigating the unequal dynamics of a unipolar world. Nations such as the Saudi Arabia, UAE, Ukraine, and Syria have adopted this approach to maintain stability, gain economic benefits, and secure diplomatic recognition from the U.S. This trend reflects a broader pattern in international relations where economic considerations outweigh ideological convictions. The prioritization of economic gains through Trumpism, rather than adherence to multilateral norms, has emboldened these actions, deepened bilateral relations, and transformed diplomacy into a series of negotiated agreements worldwide.

This shift is significant, as it marks a departure from the value-based foreign policies typically advocated by liberal internationalism and suggests that transactionalism will likely remain prevalent in a unipolar context. The economic initiatives of the Gulf States and strategic agreements with Ukraine and Syria demonstrate that transactionalism is a viable method for engaging in the competitive landscape of Great Power politics. Future investigations should delve into the implications of this trend for global governance, alliance stability, and the normative foundations of the international order.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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