



ORIGINAL PAPER

Transactional Realism - recasting power as bargain. The diplomatic strategy of the United States in relation with the Russia-Ukraine war

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Abstract:

This paper highlights features of a possible transactional realism variant, a new mutation of the realism school of international relations, that deals foreign policy as sequences of explicit bargains, encapsulating characteristics such as pricing of commitment, conditional reciprocity, and performative sequencing of deal-making as a replacement option for stable strategies or institutionalized rules. By emphasizing the contractual logic of alliances and the interpretative nature of diplomacy, transactional realism allows a more adequate understanding of the act of governing in contemporary times. Built on recent scholarship on transactionalism, updated versions of realism and Trump-era foreign policy directions as main methodology, this article aims to test the approach on 2025 press-documented statements during the second term of U.S. President Donald Trump, on the topic of the Russia–Ukraine war. Drawing on a corpus of speeches, press releases, Oval Office remarks, leader-summit readouts and transcripts, I underlined these new signals of a broader transformation of global order and how they govern the way policymakers frame security guarantees, territorial concessions and alliance burden-sharing. Transactional practices deserve theorization, mainly through an attachment to realism, due to the fact that it explains the form, the content and the timing of policy. Although rich in theoretical propositions, this mutation may present a series of policy risks when we speak about a deals-based order, where market logics cannot be fully integrated into high politics.

Keywords: *transactional, realism, trump, international relations*

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Introduction

The general theory of realism has long provided the dominant mechanism for reflections on international politics, grounding the conduct of states on persistent conditions of anarchy, competition and the permanent seek for security. Throughout history, it showed that the classical emphasis on the tragic struggle for power is not sufficient to explain significant shifts in international relations (IR) and, in this regard, the structural approach was necessary to be integrated in order to adapt to the transformations of world politics. Paradigms evolve in response to empirical issues having their range expanded due to this continuous adapting spectrum. Neoclassical realism occurred as a later and necessary refinement, integrating domestic-level variables due to the fact that the systemic signal is often captured and shaped internally before releasing the external result (Rose, 1998; Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016). Meanwhile, current developments of global political interests, mainly characterized by the United States's decline in terms of hegemony, the rise of populist leaders and the erosion of multilateral institutions, have highlighted a series of shortcomings of traditional realist models, due to a fertile ground where credibility is being constantly replaced by leverage. Moreover, the end of the bipolar system and the beginning of a uni-multipolar or multipolar system that we are currently witnessing marks also the issue of transactionalism that becomes dominant in contexts of hegemonic withdrawal (Flint, 2025). If we were to search for a scientific anchor when it comes to transactional realism, Chansok's (2025, August 8) illustration of transactional hegemony offers eloquent testimonies in both great-power diplomacy and regional disputes. With a high potential for contagion, leaders sensitive to the idea of Trumpism may act less as watchkeepers of strategic traditions and more as brokers of short-term returns, eroding the normative infrastructure upon which alliances depend. Most of them would be, thus, associated with perpetual short-term negotiations, the subordination of alliances to public conditions and a so-called theatrical staging of diplomacy.

The paper itself does not claim to be exhaustive, but rather to highlight some gaps in international relations theory that can be improved and constantly updated. From a scientific point of view this could lead to another dimension of foreign politics, born at the internal level of analysis, that is insufficiently captured nowadays by classical, structural or even neoclassical realism. Yet, as Sørensen, Møller, and Jackson (2021) reminds us, the history of realism is not one of static orthodoxy or monolithically designs. Thus, an explicitly transactional character of diplomacy could follow a new theoretical recalibration path in response to shifting empirical realities, as both a continuation and also a slight shift from previous realist paradigms. We can remark, nowadays, that the international relations world did not concentrate enough on the ongoing practice embedded in the performative dimensions of diplomacy. In this regard, transactional realism could capture a series of particularities on how this particular external practice is increasingly imitating market interactions and its logic of exchange, from bargains, conditional offers to staged leverage. Donald Trump's presidency, mainly in his second term in office, provides the most salient illustration of these dynamics, as noted in Foreign Policy, "Donald Trump is commonly described as transactional. At some level, however, all leaders are transactional. What defines the U.S. president-elect is his unabashed opportunism, often at the expense of values, alliances and even treaties" (Agrawal, 2025). Furthermore, a recent analysis in *L'ÉPOQUE USA* describes Trump's 2025 foreign policy as "a doctrine of hard leverage, strategic disengagement, and economic self-

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interest” (Kessler, 2025). We can easily observe that the transactional lens could not be dealt solely as an interpretive affair, but much more likely as a rich empirically observable shift in foreign policy behavior, extending this adaptive arc of realism throughout history by incorporating the diplomatic transaction itself as a potential causal mechanism. In this particular case, the deal itself becomes the strategy, although lack predictability, it is unstable and subject to constant renegotiations and further commitments.

This article proposes transactional realism as a theoretical innovation, although not mature enough to be considered a theory of foreign policy in its design but enough to be validated as a new variant for addressing the current gaps in international relations mainly associated with a superpower. While keeping the focus of realism and its foundational assumptions (centrality of states, omnipresent anarchy, primacy of power politics) this new mutation highlights the causal significance of transactional practices drawn from commercial sales, where performance-related liabilities are involved and the sum is regularly renegotiated. These features of transactional realism are bridging the realist thought with insights from transactionalism (Bashirov, 2019; Taim, 2024; Aldhuhoori, 2025) and discourse and practice theory (Hansen, 2006; Adler & Pouliot, 2011). Moreover, Sinkkonen (2018) argues that even in his first term, Donald Trump’s foreign policy cannot be understood within existing categories of realism or liberal institutionalism alone.

The Russia–Ukraine war that begun in 2022 and Trump’s public discourse and interventions from January to August 2025 provide an ideal empirical arena to test these claims, inside a broader tendency in global politics, not just an individual characteristic, but mainly a structural feature where scholars can study the practice of other states who end up imitating the issue of leverage and marketplace of bargains as power. It can be easily observed that a new concern for sovereignty was being coupled with a transactional impulse to monetize affairs. The peculiarities of the beginning of Trump’s second term, especially in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war and considerations regarding NATO, make the logic of transactionalism even more contrasting, where bargains become divisible, contingent and, in some points, revocable. Foreign policy, in this case, cannot be a discreet outcome of the structure, of the systemic imperatives, but much more likely an inside built-up based on iterative practice enacted in public.

A fruitful example is Aldhuhoori’s (2025) way to theorize the middle-power transactionalism, whereas states such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Ukraine pursue security via issue-specific bargains with a hegemon, in this case the United States. On the other hand, it can be acknowledged that Trump did destabilize the traditional categories of IR theory, complicating potential scientific efforts to further analyze his strategies in a balanced manner. The recognition of “amalgamation”, as Sinkkonen (2018) pointed out, does not necessary negate transactional realism, rather it provides starting points of what could be a surface-level diagnosis of hybridity, sacrificing, in some extent parsimony, in order to find mechanisms of integration that offer coherence. When we speak about the economic negotiation literature, building offers is a solid argument in this regard and as Fisher, Ury and Patton (2011) emphasize, successful negotiation is not based at all on a rigid consistency. Furthermore, as stated by Raiffa, Richardson and Metcalfe (2002) the roles of iterative moves, trial balloons and calculated ambiguity are determinant in a negotiation process and I can easily transpose these thoughts in terms of foreign affairs that test the counterpart’s flexibility and the possible range of additional outcomes. On the other hand, as Gavin (2025) and Happer (2025) underline, this form of transitioning inside

the international arena cannot be viewed as a benign instrument of adaptation, but rather a destabilizing force in contrast with norms, institutions and alliances.

The role of transactional realism which I set furthermore is to provide a general account of how bargaining, conditionality and public performance diplomacy are able to build a causal mechanism in this new hegemonic way of dealing with international politics.

Methodology

The methodology associated with this article starts from a clear delimitation and contextualization, an exploratory and political diagnosis approach, without claiming to exhaustively establish a theoretical construct of the caliber of classical realism, neorealism, or neoclassical realism. Instead, the objective is to sequence this new mutation on the international political scene by carefully examining the set of particularities of a diplomatic practice that is by no means negligible, dominant in the wake of a world superpower's behavior and to problematize this issue with a view on theoretical refinement. Thus, this approach, which we have called transactional realism, will be treated as an analytical filter and not as a prescriptive doctrine.

From the outset, the longitudinal discourse analysis will be limited to the period between the start of President Donald Trump's second term and August 2025, a month rich in international events such as the Alaska Summit on August 15 and the meeting of European leaders with President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on August 18. The aim is analytical and exploratory, without any claim to generalization. From the outset, focusing solely on one leader, even if he is the president of a global superpower with a decisive role in foreign policy, is not intended to establish universal laws, ideal types and even cemented concepts, but rather to treat transactional realism from a heuristic perspective. The analytical approach is oriented towards tracking the process and the way in which political discourse translates into actions in the international sphere. By focusing on the sequence of Trump's statements in relation to Zelensky, NATO allies and Vladimir Putin, the research aims to highlight how transactional logic coherently structures otherwise heterogeneous discursive elements.

The time frame established in this case is representative for the analysis itself: the day of Trump's second inauguration marks the moment when the presidential speech becomes a legitimate and effective political discourse, while the deadline, at the end of August, includes a series of important meetings for the logic of resolving the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, including a bilateral Trump-Putin summit, which is eloquent for the steps to be taken. At this stage, the dataset comprises in (i) speeches and primary executive decisions, recorded as such from primary sources but also transcribed by traditional media outlets, and (ii) secondary analyses and reports summarizing policies, decrypting foreign policy discourse, sequencing and contextual interpretation, analyzing all of their chronological content through the lens of the three arrangements that I propose to be defining for transactional realism: **pricing of commitment, conditional reciprocity, and performative sequencing**. The choice of secondary sources reflects an interest in methodological rigor and source reliability. This designation aims to prioritize publications with global coverage, recognized editorial standards, and consistent reporting with accurate data - *Reuters, Associated Press, The New York Times, CNN, Fox News, The Guardian, The Telegraph, The Washington Post, ABC News, CBS News, Foreign Policy and Foreign Affairs, Politico Europe and Politico U.S. (* media outlets)*.

From that period, we have selected only defining moments in American foreign policy and actions, which are not limited to a single month but have specific designations.

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Month / 2025	Primary source (i) – presented below Secondary source (ii) * previous mentioned media outlets	Approach
January	1. <i>The White House</i> (Jan 20): The Inaugural Adress. https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/	The formulation of the strategy begins with a conditional formulation.
February	1. <i>C-SPAN</i> (Feb 28): Full Meeting between President Trump, VP Vance and Ukrainian President Zelensky in Oval Office https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pxbGjvcdyY	Personal diplomacy (Trump–Zelenskyy–Vance) reveals incipient conditionalities and positions of strength.
March	1. <i>Times News</i> (Mar 6): Remarks indicating NATO defense is contingent upon allies’ payments. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJh-gHmViUA	NATO commitments become a subject of economic negotiation.
June	1. <i>NATO News Youtube channel</i> - NATO Secretary General with us US President Donald Trump (June 25) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHJGeyP3x20 2. <i>FOX 4 Dallas-Fort Worth</i> (June 25): FULL: Trump at NATO Summit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MeB3kdIpCA	The division of tasks between the US and the EU becomes official doctrine.
August	1. <i>CBS News Transcript</i> (Aug 15): Transcript of the press interaction between Trump and Putin following their Alaska summit (no media Q&A). https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-of-what-putin-trump-said-in-alaska/ 2. <i>The White House Transcript</i> (Aug 18): President Trump participates in multilateral meeting with European leaders — emphasizing conditional support. https://www.whitehouse.gov/videos/president-trump-participates-in-a-multilateral-meeting-with-european-leaders/ 3. <i>The White House</i> (Aug 20): Recap of breakthroughs in Ukraine peace talks — articulates transactional framing “both sides give up something.” https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/08/president-trump-recaps-breakthroughs-in-ukraine-peace-talks/	The defining moment of transactional efforts, with high-visibility summits and theatrical diplomacy.

Figure 1 - Timeline of transactional mechanisms

According to *Figure 1*, this paper will focus on President Donald Trump's speeches and interactions that signal foreign policy in relation to the Russia-Ukraine dyadic relationship, the approach to NATO and Euro-Atlantic relations, with an emphasis on defining moments such as the inauguration of Trump's second term (January 2025),

the Oval Office discussion with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Vice President JD Vance (February 2025), NATO negotiations on defense spending (March & June 2025), and peace talks in Alaska and Washington with President Vladimir Putin and European leaders (August 2025). The current qualitative analysis will refer to process tracking principles (George & Bennett, 2005) as a defining tool designed to decode the causal mechanisms of foreign policy design. Limitations may include an excessive reliance on discourse and performance rather than deliberations and actions per se.

Pricing of commitment mechanism

The concept of **pricing of commitment** aims to identify the characteristics of a coherent mechanism which, beyond institutional rigidity, operates in a consistent manner as quid-pro-quo exchange, in an attempt to redefine state relations as measurable, revocable and redistributable commodities. As Flint (2025) pointed out in the issue of hegemonic retreat and taking into consideration the transactional modalities in U.S. diplomacy (Agrawal, 2025), the following discourse analysis could offer context for how pricing as a mechanism might function in practice. The inaugural speech on January 20, 2025, corresponding to the second term of US President Donald Trump, can be considered a moment of settling the foreign policy framework and redefining the status of the United States' commitments. Unlike previous inaugural speeches (Bush Jr., Obama, Biden), which promoted universal values or collective security, Trump's rhetoric raises the level of expectations from the first term and brings a dimension of commitments that are marketable under certain conditions and no longer embedded within the paradigm of collective provision.

Three statements particularly emerge as defining for this turnaround:

1. *"We will not allow ourselves to be taken advantage of any longer."* (White House, Jan. 20, 2025)
2. *"I will, very simply, put America first."* (ibid.)
3. *"Our nation's wealth and strength will no longer be given away freely."* (ibid.)

Adjusting a previous approach to the discourse act as established by Ole Wæver (1995), this results in a notion of pricing speech-act, due to its potential to reframe the puzzle of international commitment, from normative duty to conditional exchange. The expression *"not being exploited"* positions the US not anymore as a benefactor or a global policeman, but rather as a victim of its own provision of security on the international stage, shifting the tradition of a global leadership discourse to one of market transaction that needs fair compensation. The phrase *"Our nation's and power of our nation will no longer be given away for free"* introduces the rationale behind transactional realism, the one where obligations must be quantified. And since every discursive element of transactionalism must start from an ethos, the statement *"I will, very simply, put America first"* although populist in places, represents the cultural specificity of this theoretical variant, where national interests translate into a notion of costed obligation. Subsequently, the meeting in the Oval Office with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (C-Span transcript, February 28, 2025) opens up the vocabulary to notions of high-pressure sales techniques, where an assertion such as *"You don't have the cards right now with us. With us, you have the cards"* shows how hegemon-support is priced as leverage and Ukraine's *"cards"* only can be issued at Washington. The gambling metaphor *"You're playing with World War III"* emphasizes that the price of American support is inextricably linked to strategic concessions and without the American umbrella, the prospect of extensive war becomes very close. Pricing commitments and commercial profit prospects had been set

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during that meeting in order to facilitate an agreement that gives the US access to Ukraine's valuable rare minerals. The same logic extends to the North Atlantic Alliance, another key element in the positioning on the Russian-Ukrainian war, where Trump's warning, *"If you don't pay, we won't defend you"* (Times News transcript, March 6, 2025), clearly shows that NATO's collective security guarantees are no longer automatic benefits who draw their strength from the treaty, but a subscription-based service. Moreover, the statement *"You have to pay or you're out"* speaks volumes in this regard, with the pricing principle crystallizing into a lock-in mechanism. The highlight was, as expected, Anchorage, where the pricing of commitments mechanism also recognizes the principle of revocability: *"There is no deal until there's a deal"* (CBS transcript, August 15, 2025), a sign that commitments can be subject to delay and remain provisional until they are offset by equivalent concessions in such a way that the search for balance between supply and demand satisfies the rigors of transactional interest. In essence, the inaugural principle that America's resources are not *"given away for free"* is transposed into a geopolitical order organized around who pays, how much and when.

The meeting on August 18 between President Donald Trump and European leaders Emanuel Macron, Friedrich Merz, Keir Starmer, Giorgia Meloni and Alexander Stubb, President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenski, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen and the Secretary General of NATO, Mark Rutte, is the moment when transactional realism denotes a sharing of tasks. Trump explains this in a broader sense when he states: *"We will also consider this aspect at the negotiating table. That is, who will do what, essentially"* (The White house transcript, August 18, 2025). The costs of the commitments are formulated in such a way that the main issuer, the United States, does not bear a significant burden, but rather arbitrates the costs of the commitments from a position of dominance: *"European nations will bear a large part of the burden. We will help them and ensure a high level of security."* Membership in the negotiation format is essentially transformed into a transactional service contract.

In this sequential logic of Donald Trump's speeches and remarks, it is easy to see that pricing works procedurally, as a primary mechanism of credibility, from a normative license to operationalizations in positioning, interactions and negotiations stances on the subject of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Although US foreign policy, strictly in the logic of this international dossier, may seem improvised, the mechanism analyzed above gives it a coherence at least in the initial stage of the approach and also draws on constraints exerted on the actors involved. The novelty here, regarding the pricing mechanism, is not limited to the rhetorical leverage, part of the discursive analysis, but more on a structural recalibration of the security architecture, as can be seen from the current case study, from the establishment of NATO contributions, aid to Ukraine and even future security guarantees, all of which considered monetized commitments and subject to price reassessment.

Conditional reciprocity mechanism

Conditional reciprocity in transactional realism is mainly stated ex ante, subject to progressive entrenchment that raise thresholds in a continuous manner and obligations remain pending until they are met by the counterpart or the actors involved in a diplomatic process. It is a complementary mechanism to pricing of commitment, in which activation rules are established, illustrated or spoken, most often through ostentation and also through a set of eligibility criteria for the counterpart.

Since his inaugural address, President Donald Trump has announced that conditionality will be a cornerstone of relations with external actors and that the projection

of American power in support of partners will only be exercised under certain auspices - *"America's wealth and strength will no longer be given away freely. We will no longer subsidize others without return"* (White House, Jan. 20, 2025).

An empirical illustration of this notion can be also found, for example, in the meeting in the Oval Office on February 28, 2025, between US President Donald Trump, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and US Vice President JD Vance, when Trump reminds Zelenskyy: *"You're not in a position to dictate... You're not in a very good position"* (C-Span transcript, February 28, 2025), a behavioral marker that denotes only US validation in a Russian-Ukrainian power struggle. And perhaps the most contrasting aspect is the demand for gratitude, *"Have you ever said thank you? ... You have to be grateful"*, which underscores a semiotics that determines conditional reciprocity with all its avatars deriving from the recognition of America's status. The willingness of a state to verbalize its acknowledgment of debt can be considered, in this particular context, as part of the price of continued support.

In his March 6, 2025 statement on NATO, the White House leader gives reciprocity a set of contractual terms - *"Are you up to date or are you behind? ... If we were behind, would you defend us? ... No, I would [not defend you]."* (transcript NATO News Youtube channel, March 6, 2025). Translated into financial terms, collective defense is reduced to a logic of creditworthiness. Through constant borrowings from contractual and financial language, Trump's speech reaches its climax: *"As soon as I said that... the money started flowing"*, an empirical anchor for illustrating the causal mechanism rendered by reciprocal conditioning.

Moreover, The NATO summit on June 25 gives reciprocity the dimension of a comprehensive agreement (transcript FOX 4 Dallas-Fort Worth, June 25, 2025), after Donald Trump states that *"our allies have increased spending by \$700 billion"* a contractual consolidation and validation of the conditions set out above. Later afterwards Trump enshrines the norm, calling it *"the Hague Defense Commitment"* in order for the transactional aspect to take a written form, an integral part of NATO doctrine, transforming the criterion of reciprocity from a simple quantitative measure of an objective into a ceremonial qualitative assessment of results.

The Anchorage summit marks a new qualitative approach in the mechanism of conditional reciprocity, being a moment when the balance of power is narrowing, but also taking on a character of adversity between the US and Russia. It focuses on a game of trial and error in search of the moment when obligations are activated, due to the fact that Trump codifies the idea that commitments remain on hold until the counterpart is confirmed - *"We look forward to dealing- we're going to try and get this over with [...] would like to thank President Putin and his entire team, whose faces who I know, in many cases, otherwise, other than that, whose- whose faces I get to see all the time in the newspapers, you're very- you're almost as famous as the boss, but especially this one right over here"* (CBS transcript, Aug. 15, 2025). Anchorage becomes an illustration of temporality, a designation of reciprocity over time, where a superpower like the US, in dialogue with a regional power such as the Russian Federation, minimizes its exposure in order to maximize its bargaining power. Both powers aim to persuade Ukraine to take certain military and foreign policy actions and each has its own expectations that are subject to conditionality. Progress on the international dossier through the issuance of US commitments is explicitly linked to acceptable *"conditions"* but also to the US's assessment of adequacy, because, going further in Trump's speech, we see how the

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“correctness” of the conditions remains an American prerogative, which determines asymmetrical reciprocity and, until this green light is given, the process remains frozen.

At the August 18 meeting between President Trump, President Zelensky and European leaders, conditional reciprocity appears to determine eligibility, following the formula stated by the White House leader: “*We will call President Putin immediately after this meeting... we will try to work out a trilateral agreement afterwards.*” (The White house transcript, August 18, 2025). Although the main interest was that of the Europeans in attending such a meeting, reciprocity in this case implies an ex-ante condition, delimiting European interests in terms of security, but also supporting the Ukrainian point of view. In contrast, American commitments become fluid in this dynamic of conditional reciprocity and reciprocity in transactional realism follows a path of staggered eligibility. - “*After that meeting, if everything works out OK, I’ll meet and we’ll wrap it up*” (The White house, August 20, 2025). This reflects, once more, a new procedural parameter of diplomacy, where US involvement is provisional and delayed, being unlocked only by the guaranteed compliance of the parties.

Regarding transactional reciprocity, its qualitative precision shows that partner states, in the typology of current alliances, must not only contribute, but mostly demonstrate that resources are directed towards “*real capabilities*”, beyond the internal approvals required for such measures. In this sense, conditional reciprocity can be considered as a disciplinary mechanism that transforms alliance solidarity into a continuously and dynamically monitored exchange relationship, in which obligations are not necessarily consolidated in documents and can be revoked or negotiated at any time.

Performative sequencing mechanism

Performative sequencing can be defined in granular terms as a mechanism of transactional realism through which international positions and commitments come under the auspices of a commercial choreography, whereas each performance creates a set of links in a chain of causality and legitimization of power.

Donald Trump's inaugural speech is, once again, the main reference showing that all future US support will be conditional and phased. In practice, the inauguration authorizes the scenario and represents the first step in establishing the structure of future actions on the international stage. In his inaugural address, president Donald Trump had set the stage by announcing “*America’s wealth and strength will no longer be given away freely. We will no longer subsidize others without return*” (White House, Jan. 20, 2025), as a preview of a new diplomatic chain of actions.

The desire for solemnity in agreements, even before they are signed, becomes a sine qua non condition of Trump's foreign policy. Although the February 28 meeting with President Zelensky was tense, the issue of an agreement on rare earth minerals was a focal point of interest on which he wanted to invest symbolic capital, signaling that the final result must be preceded by a ceremonial moment of image capital. “*We will sign the agreement at the conference in the East Room shortly*” (C-Span transcript, February 28, 2025). Trump becomes a proponent of connecting actors through a staged scene, where appearance and the perception of power is synonymous to the currency of legitimacy

The White House remarks on March 6 regarding NATO, “*if you don't pay, we won't defend you... and because of this, they have paid hundreds of billions of dollars*” (Times News, March 6, 2025), are intended to denote that there is a causal narrative from public threat to compliance on the part of NATO partners, an illustration of a potential for repetition in the future in such a logic that places the US on a pedestal of performative

commands, commands that no longer take place behind closed doors, but in front of television cameras that mediate the message to the public.

Trump's tendency of projecting of an image as an orchestra-conductor is enshrined in the June 25 NATO statements, where he instructs state actors on the timeline and conditions for US support within the alliance, so that, in turn, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte can harmonize his positions in a performance of role distribution, where other actors are also co-opted into replicating the script and obliged to follow the scenario (the case of Spain) - *"They'll pay more money this way. You should tell them to go back and pay... join all of those countries that are paying 5%"* (NATO News Youtube channel, Jun. 25, 2025).

At Anchorage on August 15, the discursive sequences indicate that the spectacle can even surpass the notion of consolidated security, as the performative desire of concluding the agreement is not subordinate, at least rhetorically, to security — *"There were many, many points that we agreed on, most of them, I would say, a couple of big ones that we haven't quite gotten there, but we've made some headway. So there's no deal until there's a deal"* CBS transcript, Aug. 15, 2025). This reshuffling of positions on the international stage is a novelty, as it shifts diplomacy from an approach based on material negotiations to one based on staging acts, where legitimacy results from the appropriate sequence of performance with content being added later. This turns the negotiating table into a platform with a built-in timer and any deviation from the script is costly because it would disrupt the expected order.

Later, the structure of the August 18 meeting between the US president, the Ukrainian president, and European leaders NATO and the EU indicates a preference for linear drama, with American landmarks reflected in Volodymyr Zelensky's statements (in contrast to the discussions in February 2025) and a nuance from European leaders in which the order of actions becomes as binding as their content. The prevalence of deadline drama is a constant feature of Trump's speeches - *"In a week or two weeks, we're going to know whether... we're going to solve this"* (CBS transcript, Aug. 15, 2025). By introducing a limited time frame, placed inside the window of time dedicated to media coverage of the meeting, Trump sets a coercive diplomatic clock, forcing his interlocutors to fit into a compressed performance cycle, in which progress must be visible, otherwise the action is considered a failure. Performative sequencing attempts, at least through rhetoric, to make temporal order itself the binding force of a potential agreement.

In the recapitulation of August 20, the use of metaphors such as *"two to tango"* (a Trumpian leitmotif) or transactional expressions such as *"wrap it up"* (The White house, August 20, 2025) give the same direction to the performative sequential mechanism of a theatrical finale, where diplomacy is treated as a performance with a final scene and the president reserves for himself the role of finisher who has the ability to reach a clear and visible conclusion to a military conflict.

Unlike the other two mechanisms mentioned above, sequencing shows how the choreography of the acts themselves becomes causal and time intervals imposed by the leader's voice are intended to establish a suspense, an ultimatum, although they are often changing. The management of such stagings can have a causal substance in a complementary way with mechanisms such as pricing of commitment and conditional reciprocity. In the end, performative sequencing refers to a visible order of acts, which no longer manifest themselves behind closed doors, but in the boundless space of the media, with the aim of creating conformity by increasing the reputational costs of potential deviation.

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Conclusions

Beyond the unpredictable nature, both at the rhetorical level and in terms of the signals transmitted to partners, examining Donald Trump's foreign policy through the lens of this new mutation that we have called transactional realism, shows a series of changes of interest for the scientific community concerned with international relations.

The most important aspect that derives from the present article refers to the ontological status of obligations, the so-called pricing mechanism. We were used to underline specific guarantees enshrined in agreements and treaties or traditional policies, but instead, as the new American diplomatic approach shows, these concepts transform into saleable, negotiable goods, mostly with restricted access. They are released only if a set of conditions, publicly stated, was satisfied. This realist typology does not exclude the structural perspective, as well as aspects related to the perception of the leader, but all these aspects are circumscribed by market logic, in which the act of re-evaluating commitments itself becomes an affirmation of authority.

Conditional reciprocity, in turn, has demonstrated that such commitments have never been automatic, but conditioned by a demonstrable counter performance, a form of negotiation that does not simply encourage cooperation, but imposes it through the threat of revocability.

The most representative innovation, however, is the logic of performative sequencing that designates an advertising and dramaturgical order of diplomatic moments, in contrast to the rigor, cost-benefit ratio and identification of windows of opportunity in classic international relations procedures. The public statements of US President Donald Trump, in his second term, have transformed diplomacy into a staged process that includes symbolic places, tight yet not constant deadlines and final acts. Although the results are often not the expected ones, this reputational cost is an element worth taking into account when the foreign policy signal is born.

Strictly speaking and linking all this palette of concepts, the pricing of commitment is intended to redefine the nature of pledges as commodities, conditional reciprocity establishes the set of conditions on which access to commitments depends and performative sequencing has a more symbolic and organizing role. Of these, the price of commitment seems to exert the most profound structural influence and to have the most complex causal capacity, because it resets the baseline from which reciprocity and sequencing can operate.

Although I have stated from the beginning that this article does not aim to illustrate a new theoretical construct, but to focus on some features that can easily be attached to realism in international relations, this transactional form therefore indicates a new way of theorizing foreign affairs when it comes to a hegemonic power. Under the sign of transactional realism, the hegemon maintains its power by redefining commitments as commodities to be bought, conditions to be met and performances to be staged for a gradual release of the signal and the foreign policy measures. This configuration only completes a rich repertoire of meanings of states' behaviors in the international arena, highlighting how power in the current century can be exercised not only through material resources or institutional frameworks, but through the systematic management of commitment itself.

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