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U.S. Foreign Policy as a Leadership Catastrophic System: Implications for Global Stability and Small-State Vulnerability

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Abstract

U.S. foreign policy has historically been characterised by strategic assertiveness, global military reach, and economic coercion, often projecting unilateral influence that can destabilise international systems. This study examines U.S. foreign policy as a *leadership catastrophic system*, conceptualised as a governance approach in which concentrated decision-making, limited accountability, and structural asymmetries produce unintended, destabilising outcomes both domestically and internationally. Using a qualitative, documentary, and discourse-analytic methodology, the study draws on policy statements, sanctions regimes, military interventions, and multilateral diplomatic engagements to explore how leadership decisions reverberate across global political, economic, and social systems. The integrated theoretical framework combines Critical Geopolitics, Structural Power Theory, and Complex Systems Theory to analyse the mechanisms through which U.S. policy decisions propagate systemic risk. The findings highlight patterns of unilateralism, overreach, and asymmetric intervention, demonstrating that concentrated executive authority coupled with global influence can exacerbate regional instability, undermine small-state sovereignty, and trigger cascading crises in peripheral regions. This study also illustrates that bureaucratic constraints, domestic political pressures, and elite-driven decision-making processes amplify the likelihood of policy catastrophes. Recommendations emphasise enhancing multilateral decision-making, improving systemic feedback mechanisms, and strengthening international norms to mitigate destabilising effects. Recognising U.S. foreign policy as a catastrophic leadership system provides a lens for anticipating, analysing, and managing the risks inherent in superpower interventions. This approach is particularly salient for small states and regional blocs seeking to safeguard sovereignty and stability amid asymmetric power dynamics.

Keywords: U.S. foreign policy, leadership failure, catastrophic systems, small-state vulnerability, systemic risk, international stability.

Introduction

The United States (US) has long positioned itself as a global superpower, exercising leadership through military, economic, and diplomatic instruments that shape international order. As a hegemonic actor, the US exerts disproportionate influence on global political, financial, and security systems through its foreign policy decisions (Art, 1973; Campbell, 1990; Cox & Stokes, 2018; Higgott, 2004; Hook, 2015;Mearsheimer, 2019; Nau, 2002; Page &Bouton, 2008). However, the concentration of decision-making authority within executive institutions has increasingly raised concerns about accountability, oversight, and systemic risk. Scholars argue that the scope and speed of U.S. foreign policy actions often exceed the capacity of existing institutional checks to mitigate unintended consequences (de Alteriis, 2020; Lindsay, 1994; Jentleson, 2020; Jentleson, 2020; Porter, 2018; Schroeder, 2010; Skidmore, 2005). These dynamics are particularly evident in the use of sanctions, military interventions, and coercive diplomacy. While such tools are frequently justified as necessary for maintaining global stability, their outcomes often extend far beyond intended policy objectives. Understanding the structural features of U.S. leadership is therefore essential for evaluating its broader systemic effects.

A growing body of literature highlights how concentrated leadership authority can destabilise complex global systems (Goldin & Vogel, 2010; Held, 2006; Kramskyi et al., 2024; Simai, 1994; Smith &Thompson, 2020; Wiest, 2012; Wæver, 2017). The concept of a *leadership catastrophic system* refers to governance arrangements in which high-impact decisions are made with limited feedback, delayed learning, and insufficient accountability, increasing the probability of large-scale failure (Taleb, 2012). In such systems, even rational or well-intentioned decisions can produce cascading adverse effects due to structural complexity and tight global coupling. U.S. foreign policy operates within precisely such an environment, where economic markets, security alliances, and political institutions are deeply interconnected. Small policy shifts can therefore trigger disproportionate consequences across regions and sectors. The absence of robust corrective mechanisms further amplifies systemic vulnerability. This framework offers a valuable lens for interrogating the consequences of U.S. global leadership.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that U.S. foreign policy interventions frequently generate regional instability and humanitarian crises. Military interventions in the Middle East, sanctions regimes in Latin America, and strategic pressure in Eastern Europe illustrate recurring patterns of overreach and unintended harm (Patrick, 2016). These actions often disrupt local economies, weaken governance institutions, and exacerbate social vulnerabilities. Moreover, they frequently challenge foundational principles of international law, including sovereignty and non-intervention. While the United States possesses unparalleled material and institutional power, its policy instruments are often blunt and insufficiently tailored to complex local contexts. As a result, interventionist strategies can undermine the very stability they claim to promote. This paradox underscores the need for systemic analysis rather than event-specific explanations.

The impacts of U.S. foreign policy are not evenly distributed across the international system. Small states and peripheral regions often bear the most significant burdens of destabilisation despite having minimal influence over decision-making processes (Cox, 1987). Economic sanctions, for example, routinely generate spillover effects that harm neighbouring countries and

regional blocs. Similarly, shifts in U.S. security priorities can destabilise alliance systems and expose dependent states to heightened risk. These asymmetries reflect deeper structures of power embedded in the global political economy. Structural Power Theory helps explain how dominant states shape rules, norms, and institutional outcomes in ways that externalise costs onto weaker actors. Analysing U.S. foreign policy through this lens reveals patterns of systemic inequality and vulnerability.

Critical Geopolitics further illuminates how U.S. leadership constructs narratives of threat, legitimacy, and moral authority. Foreign policy discourse often frames interventions as necessary responses to security risks, democratic deficits, or humanitarian crises (Dodds& Atkinson, 2000). These narratives shape public perception and international acceptance, even when empirical outcomes contradict stated objectives. Discursive framing can obscure power asymmetries and normalise exceptional measures such as sanctions or military force. By privileging specific geopolitical imaginaries, leadership discourse narrows the range of perceived alternatives. This process reinforces interventionist tendencies while marginalising voices advocating restraint or multilateralism. Understanding the discursive dimension of leadership is, therefore, central to assessing systemic outcomes.

Despite extensive scholarship on U.S. foreign policy, existing studies often examine interventions in isolation rather than as manifestations of a broader leadership system. Much of the literature focuses on case-specific outcomes, strategic rationales, or normative debates, without sufficiently theorising systemic risk and catastrophic potential. Few studies integrate structural power, geopolitical discourse, and complex systems thinking into a unified analytical framework. As a result, the cumulative and transnational consequences of U.S. leadership remain under-theorised. There is limited empirical work examining how leadership concentration and feedback deficits interact to produce cascading global effects. This gap is particularly evident in analyses of how U.S. foreign policy affects small states and regional stability. Addressing this omission is essential for advancing both theory and policy.

The present study seeks to fill this gap by conceptualising U.S. foreign policy as a leadership catastrophic system. By integrating Dependency Theory, Structural Power Theory, Critical Geopolitics, and insights from Complex Systems Theory, the study offers a holistic framework for analysing systemic outcomes. It moves beyond event-driven explanations to examine underlying leadership structures and decision-making dynamics. Using qualitative documentary and discourse analysis, the study explores how U.S. foreign policy decisions generate destabilising effects across regions. Particular attention is given to implications for small states and regional blocs with limited agency. This approach contributes to scholarship on global leadership, systemic risk, and international stability. Ultimately, the study aims to inform more accountable, adaptive, and resilient approaches to global governance.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in an integrated theoretical framework that combines Critical Geopolitics, Structural Power Theory, and Complex Systems Theory to analyse U.S. foreign policy as a leadership catastrophic system. The integration of these perspectives enables a multidimensional

examination of power, discourse, and systemic risk in global governance. Rather than viewing foreign policy decisions as isolated or purely strategic acts, the framework conceptualises them as outcomes embedded in complex political and economic structures. This approach recognises that leadership decisions operate within tightly coupled global systems where effects often extend far beyond intended targets. By synthesising critical, structural, and systems-based theories, the framework captures both agency and constraint. It also highlights how concentrated leadership authority can magnify vulnerability across regions. Collectively, these theories provide the conceptual foundation for analysing destabilisation as a structurally produced phenomenon.

Critical Geopolitics focuses on how political leaders construct narratives of space, threat, and legitimacy to justify foreign policy actions. Through discourse, U.S. leadership frames interventions as necessary responses to security risks, humanitarian concerns, or democratic deficits (Dodds& Atkinson, 2000). These geopolitical imaginaries shape global perceptions and normalise exceptional measures such as sanctions or military force. Discourse operates as a form of power by delimiting what policies are considered reasonable or inevitable. In this way, leadership rhetoric can obscure underlying power asymmetries and material interests. Critical Geopolitics thus reveals how language functions as a governance tool in international relations. This perspective is essential for understanding how catastrophic outcomes are discursively legitimised before their material consequences unfold.

Structural Power Theory explains how the United States exercises influence not only through direct coercion but also through control over global structures and institutions. As a hegemonic state, the U.S. shapes the rules of international trade, finance, and security in ways that privilege its interests while constraining others (Cox, 1987). These structures create asymmetrical dependencies, particularly for small and developing states with limited bargaining power. Leadership decisions taken within such a framework can therefore externalise costs onto weaker actors. Structural power operates invisibly, embedding inequality into institutional arrangements that appear neutral or technocratic. This dynamic amplifies the systemic consequences of U.S. foreign policy choices. Structural Power Theory thus clarifies why leadership failures disproportionately affect peripheral regions.

Complex Systems Theory contributes a critical understanding of how catastrophic outcomes emerge in highly interconnected global systems. In complex and tightly coupled systems, minor policy errors or unilateral decisions can cascade into large-scale instability due to nonlinear interactions and delayed feedback (Perrow, 2011; Taleb, 2012). U.S. foreign policy operates within such a system, linking financial markets, energy supply chains, migration flows, and security alliances. The absence of timely corrective mechanisms increases the likelihood of systemic failure. Leadership decisions made under uncertainty can therefore produce unintended and irreversible consequences. This theory challenges assumptions of controllability and predictability in global governance. Applied to U.S. foreign policy, Complex Systems Theory underscores how concentrated leadership authority heightens the risk of catastrophic outcomes.

Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative documentary and discourse-analytic research design to examine U.S. foreign policy as a leadership catastrophic system. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for analysing leadership behaviour, policy rationales, and systemic consequences that cannot be fully captured through quantitative indicators alone. Documentary analysis enables systematic examination of official policy instruments, including sanctions regimes, military postures, and diplomatic strategies. Discourse analysis complements this approach by interrogating how leadership language constructs legitimacy, threat, and moral justification in foreign policy decision-making. Official texts are treated as instruments of power that both reflect and reproduce structural dominance. This design aligns with Critical Geopolitics and Structural Power Theory by foregrounding narrative construction and institutional influence. Overall, the research design facilitates an in-depth exploration of how leadership decisions propagate destabilising effects across interconnected global systems (Bowen, 2009).

Data Sources

Data were drawn from a wide range of publicly available and authoritative sources to ensure analytical depth and credibility. Primary documents included U.S. Department of State reports, Presidential Executive Orders, congressional sanctions legislation, foreign aid allocations, and military engagement assessments. Multilateral sources comprised United Nations resolutions, Security Council debates (United Nations, 2020b), and statements from regional organisations. These materials were supplemented by peer-reviewed academic literature on U.S. foreign policy, interventionism, and global power dynamics. Inclusion criteria required that documents be published between 2000 and 2025 and demonstrate explicit links between executive leadership decisions and international or regional consequences. Sources lacking institutional credibility or analytical relevance were excluded. This selection strategy ensured comprehensive coverage of leadership actions within a defined historical and geopolitical scope (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2018; United Nations, 2020b).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis informed by the study's integrated theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An initial phase of open coding identified recurring concepts, including unilateralism, coercive diplomacy, sanctions, interventionism, and strategic overreach. These codes were then subjected to axial coding to generate broader analytical themes, including catastrophic leadership dynamics, regional destabilisation, and small-state vulnerability. Discourse analysis was applied to policy texts to examine how legitimacy, threat, and moral authority were framed in official rhetoric. Particular attention was paid to justificatory narratives surrounding security, democracy promotion, and humanitarian intervention. Analytical memos were maintained throughout the process to link empirical observations to theoretical constructs. This iterative analytical process strengthened coherence and theoretical integration across findings.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

The study ensured methodological rigour through established qualitative criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln &Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through triangulation across policy documents, multilateral statements, and peer-reviewed scholarship. Dependability was supported by maintaining a transparent audit trail detailing search strategies, coding decisions, and analytical steps. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive memo-writing to minimise researcher bias and ensure interpretations were grounded in the data. Transferability was strengthened by providing thick description and contextualised analysis of leadership decisions. Cross-validation with existing international relations literature reinforced analytical reliability. Collectively, these strategies ensured robustness and scholarly integrity.

Ethical Considerations

This study relied exclusively on publicly available secondary data, eliminating ethical risks associated with human participants. As no interviews, surveys, or confidential materials were used, formal institutional ethical approval was not required. Ethical responsibility was upheld through accurate representation of source material and adherence to APA 7thedition citation standards. Care was taken to avoid misinterpretation or selective use of policy texts. The study also acknowledges the researcher's positionality and potential interpretive lenses when analysing U.S. leadership behaviour. Transparency in methodology and analysis further supports ethical integrity. Overall, the research adheres to principles of academic honesty, accountability, and critical reflexivity.

Findings and Analysis

Patterns of Unilateralism

The findings reveal a persistent pattern of unilateralism in U.S. foreign policy, particularly through the expansive use of executive authority to implement sanctions, deploy troops, and grant diplomatic recognition. These actions are frequently undertaken with limited consultation with multilateral institutions or affected regional actors, prioritising speed and strategic signalling over consensus-building. While unilateral decision-making enables rapid policy execution, it also bypasses mechanisms for corrective feedback that could mitigate unintended consequences. Scholars argue that this concentration of authority heightens systemic risk by reducing institutional checks and deliberative restraint (Patrick, 2016). In practice, unilateralism often produces destabilising ripple effects that extend well beyond the intended policy target. Allied and peripheral states are drawn into crises without meaningful participation in decision-making processes. This pattern reflects a leadership structure prone to overreach and insufficient accountability within a tightly coupled global system.

Sanctions and Systemic Spillover

Sanctions emerge as a central instrument through which U.S. leadership decisions generate systemic spillover effects across regions. Cases involving Venezuela (US Congress, 2025a), Iran

(US Congress, 2025b) and North Korea (US Department of State, 2025) demonstrate that sanctions frequently extend their impact beyond governing elites to affect civilian populations and neighbouring states. Energy disruptions, trade dislocation, and inflationary pressures are common outcomes, particularly for small states embedded in regional economic networks. These unintended effects undermine regional stability and exacerbate humanitarian vulnerabilities, despite sanctions being framed as targeted or "smart" tools (Lopez, 2020). The findings show that sanction regimes often neglect structural interdependencies within the global economy. As a result, peripheral states absorb secondary shocks without the compensatory policy capacity to offset them. This reinforces asymmetrical risk distribution inherent in hegemonic leadership systems.

Military Interventions

Military interventions represent another domain where concentrated leadership authority amplifies systemic risk. U.S. military engagements are often justified through narratives of counterterrorism, democracy promotion, or humanitarian responsibility. However, these interventions typically rely on executive discretion, limiting opportunities for institutional correction once operations are underway. The absence of sustained multilateral oversight increases the likelihood of mission creep and strategic overextension (Jentleson, 2020). Findings indicate that military actions frequently destabilise regional security environments rather than resolving underlying conflicts. Spillover effects include refugee flows, arms proliferation, and weakened state institutions in adjacent regions. These outcomes illustrate how tightly coupled global systems magnify leadership errors into cascading crises. Military intervention thus exemplifies a catastrophic leadership dynamic rather than a contained policy instrument.

Information, Discourse, and Legitimacy

Discourse analysis reveals that U.S. leadership consistently frames foreign policy interventions through narratives of threat, moral obligation, and exceptional responsibility. Such framing constructs simplified geopolitical imaginaries that obscure local complexity and regional agency. By presenting interventions as necessary and urgent, leadership discourse limits public and institutional debate over alternative approaches. Critical geopolitics highlights how these narratives shape perceptions of legitimacy and normalisethe use of coercive action (Dodds& Atkinson, 2000). Findings indicate that threat-based discourse often exaggerates risks while marginalising diplomatic or multilateral solutions. This rhetorical strategy contributes to escalation rather than conflict resolution. Consequently, legitimacy becomes performative rather than substantively grounded in international consensus.

Small-State Vulnerability

The analysis demonstrates that small and peripheral states bear disproportionate costs arising from U.S. foreign policy interventions. These states experience economic disruption, security pressures, and diplomatic constraints despite lacking influence over policy formulation. Allied states are often compelled to comply with sanctions or military strategies due to dependency on trade, aid, or security guarantees. This asymmetry reflects structural power dynamics in which

risk is externalised downward within the international system (Cox, 1987). The findings show that small states function as shock absorbers within catastrophic leadership systems. Their vulnerabilities are intensified by limited fiscal space and constrained diplomatic leverage. Ultimately, these patterns underscore how leadership decisions at the core systematically reproduce instability at the periphery.

Discussion

The findings confirm that U.S. foreign policy operates as a leadership-catastrophe system, in which concentrated authority and limited feedback mechanisms amplify systemic risk. From a complex systems perspective, tightly coupled global political, economic, and security networks magnify the effects of unilateral decisions beyond their original scope (Perrow, 2011; Taleb, 2012). Minor miscalculations, such as sanction design flaws or rhetorical escalation, can cascade into regional crises through delayed and nonlinear feedback loops. The persistence of unilateralism reduces opportunities for adaptive correction, reinforcing path dependency in policy execution. This dynamic aligns with Taleb's argument that systems dominated by centralised decision-making are especially vulnerable to catastrophic failure. Rather than functioning as isolated policy errors, destabilising outcomes emerge as structurally predictable consequences. The findings thus shift the analytical focus from intent to system design in evaluating U.S. leadership behaviour.

Critical Geopolitics provides further insight into how leadership discourse legitimises systemic overreach. The framing of interventions through narratives of threat, moral exceptionalism, and urgency narrows the epistemic space for alternative policy responses (Dodds& Atkinson, 2000). Such discursive practices construct geopolitical imaginaries that privilege coercive action while marginalising diplomacy and regional agency. The findings demonstrate that legitimacy is often produced rhetorically rather than negotiated multilaterally. This process obscures local complexity and suppresses dissenting interpretations of security and sovereignty. As a result, interventions appear necessary even when their systemic consequences are poorly understood. Leadership discourse, therefore, functions as a mechanism that stabilises catastrophic systems rather than correcting them.

Structural Power Theory further explains why destabilising outcomes persist despite repeated evidence of harm. The United States' dominance over international institutions, financial systems, and security regimes enables it to externalise costs while internalising benefits (Cox, 1987). This asymmetry weakens incentives for restraint, recalibration, or accountability. The findings show that peripheral and allied states absorb economic and security shocks without meaningful influence over policy formation. Dependency relationships constrain resistance, reinforcing compliance even when consequences are severe. Structural power thus converts leadership decisions into systemic imperatives for others. Catastrophic outcomes are therefore embedded within institutional hierarchies rather than accidental deviations.

For small and vulnerable states, particularly in the Global South and the Caribbean, these dynamics pose existential challenges to sovereignty and stability. The findings demonstrate that such states function as shock absorbers within hegemonic leadership systems, bearing

disproportionate risks without compensatory safeguards. This confirms long-standing critiques of international order as structurally unequal and crisis-prone (Cox, 1987; Patrick, 2016). The study contributes to this literature by conceptualising U.S. foreign policy not merely as hegemonic but as systemically catastrophic. It highlights how leadership concentration, narrative dominance, and structural asymmetry converge to reproduce instability. Importantly, these outcomes are not inevitable but contingent on governance design. This creates a critical opening for the current study to advance alternative leadership frameworks grounded in multilateralism, adaptive governance, and systemic resilience.

Recommendations: Toward Adaptive And Non-Catastrophic Leadership

First, U.S. foreign policy leadership should be restructured to incorporate stronger multilateral consultation and institutional feedback mechanisms prior to major interventions. Complex systems theory demonstrates that decentralised decision-making and redundancy reduce the likelihood of catastrophic failure in tightly coupled systems (Taleb, 2012; Perrow, 2011). Embedding structured consultation with regional organisations, affected states, and international institutions would expand the range of information inputs and improve policy calibration. Such mechanisms would slow decision velocity in high-risk contexts, reducing escalation driven by urgency narratives. This approach aligns with adaptive governance models that prioritise learning and correction over control. Multilateral deliberation should be institutionalised rather than left to discretion. Doing so would transform leadership from a unilateral command system into a resilient governance network.

Second, sanctions policy requires fundamental redesign to account for systemic spillover and humanitarian externalities. Sanctions should be preceded by comprehensive regional impact assessments that evaluate effects on energy markets, food security, migration flows, and allied economies (Lopez, 2020). Automatic humanitarian exemptions and regional compensation mechanisms should be embedded in sanction regimes due to sanctions' humanitarian effects (United Nations, 2020a). This would reduce secondary harm to small and vulnerable states while maintaining diplomatic leverage. Structural Power Theory holds that hegemonic actors bear responsibility for mitigating harms arising from institutional dominance (Cox, 1987). Transparent monitoring and sunset clauses would further prevent policy inertia. Sanctions should thus function as adaptive instruments rather than blunt systemic shocks.

Third, military intervention doctrines must be recalibrated to prioritise restraint, regional consent, and exit accountability. Executive authority over military action should be balanced by stronger legislative oversight and multilateral authorisation. The findings demonstrate that prolonged interventions thrive under conditions of limited feedback and diffuse responsibility (Jentleson, 2020). Mandated post-intervention impact reviews should assess regional destabilisation, civilian harm, and institutional erosion. These assessments must inform future policy decisions rather than remain symbolic exercises. Regional security organisations should play a formal role in authorising and evaluating interventions. This would reduce the likelihood of leadership-driven mission creep and systemic overextension.

Fourth, leadership discourse must shift away from threat inflation and moral exceptionalism toward contextualised and pluralistic geopolitical narratives. Critical geopolitics underscores how language structures policy possibilities and legitimises coercion (Dodds& Atkinson, 2000). Leaders should be institutionally required to articulate multiple policy pathways, including non-coercive alternatives, when framing foreign crises. Transparent acknowledgement of uncertainty and regional agency would enhance legitimacy and trust. Media briefings and official statements should reflect complexity rather than simplification. This discursive recalibration would weaken the dynamics of escalation driven by urgency framing. Legitimacy would thus be grounded in deliberation rather than rhetorical dominance.

Finally, greater protection mechanisms must be established for small and peripheral states affected by hegemonic leadership decisions. Regional blocs and international institutions should develop collective buffering arrangements to mitigate economic and security spillovers. These may include energy pooling, migration support frameworks, and coordinated diplomatic bargaining platforms. The findings show that small states disproportionately absorb systemic shocks despite minimal policy influence. Addressing this asymmetry is essential for restoring equity and stability within the international system (Patrick, 2016). Leadership responsibility must extend beyond intent to encompass systemic consequences. A non-catastrophic leadership model, therefore, requires shared risk, shared voice, and shared accountability.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that U.S. foreign policy operates as a leadership catastrophic system characterised by concentrated authority, structural power asymmetries, and limited corrective feedback. Drawing on Critical Geopolitics, Structural Power Theory, and Complex Systems Theory, the analysis shows that destabilising outcomes are not aberrations but predictable products of system design (Cox, 1987; Dodds& Atkinson, 2000; Taleb, 2012). Unilateral decision-making, sanctions regimes, military interventions, and legitimising discourse collectively amplify risk across interconnected global systems. The findings reveal that small and vulnerable states disproportionately absorb the economic, security, and humanitarian consequences of these leadership practices. Rather than enhancing stability, hegemonic leadership frequently externalises costs while insulating decision-makers from accountability (Patrick, 2016; Jentleson, 2020). This pattern undermines sovereignty, weakens multilateral institutions, and erodes trust in international governance. Sustainable global leadership, therefore, requires a paradigmatic shift toward adaptive, multilateral, and system-aware governance that prioritises resilience, equity, and shared responsibility.

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