



Presidential Change and Foreign Policy Role Shifts: The United States at the UN, 2013-2020

Başkanlık Değişimi ve Dış Politika Roller: BM Kürsüsü'nde Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, 2013-2020

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how presidential change affects the United States' (US) foreign policy role conceptions, with a particular focus on its orientation toward the Liberal International Order (LIO). Conventional assumptions in International Relations literature suggest that the US, as both the founder and also the defender of the LIO, maintains a relatively stable foreign policy posture regardless of leadership transitions (Ikenberry, 2011). Challenging this expectation, we investigate the transition between Barack Obama's second term (2013-2016) and Donald Trump's first term in office (2017-2020). Drawing on Role Theory, we conducted a content analysis of eight US addresses to the United Nations General Assembly, coding role conceptions into four categories: assertive, cooperative, neutral, and challenger. Our findings reveal a clear departure from cooperative foreign policy roles under the Obama administration toward challenger foreign policy roles under the Trump administration. This shift underscores that presidential leadership can significantly influence the US' stance toward the LIO, challenging the expectations of continuity of foreign policy across the US presidents. By analyzing the frequency and distribution of foreign policy roles elaborated discursively over time, this study highlights the importance of leadership styles and rhetorical choices in shaping grand foreign policy orientations. The findings contribute to debates about the resilience of the LIO and the extent to which domestic political change can influence global order commitments.

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ÖZ

Bu makale, başkan değişiminin Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin (ABD) dış politika rol tasavvurlarını nasıl etkilediğini, özellikle de ülkenin Liberal Uluslararası Düzen'e (Liberal International Order-LIO) yönelik tutumu bağlamında incelemektedir. Uluslararası İlişkiler literatüründeki yaygın varsayımlar, ABD'nin LIO'nun hem kurucusu hem de savunucusu olarak, liderlik değişimlerinden bağımsız biçimde görece istikrarlı bir dış politika duruşunu sürdürdüğünü öne sürmektedir (Ikenberry, 2011). Makalede bu beklenti sorunsallaştırılmakta ve Barack Obama'nın ikinci başkanlık dönemi (2013-2016) ile Donald Trump'ın ilk başkanlık dönemi (2017-2020) mercek altına alınmaktadır. Makale, Rol Kuramı'ndan hareketle, ABD'nin Birleşmiş Milletler Genel Kurulu'nda gerçekleştirdiği sekiz konuşmanın içerik analizini yapmakta ve dış politika rol tasavvurlarını dört kategoriye ayırarak kodlamaktadır: iddialı, işbirlikçi, nötr ve meydan okuyucu. Bulgularımız, Obama döneminde baskın olan işbirlikçi rollerden, Trump döneminde giderek artan biçimde meydan okuyan rollere doğru bir geçiş olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu geçiş, başkan değişiminin ABD'nin LIO'ya yönelik tutumunu önemli ölçüde şekillendirebileceğini ve başkanlar arası dış politika sürekliliğine dair varsayımların sorgulanması gerektiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Zaman içinde dış politika rol dağılımlarını ve sıklığını analiz eden bu çalışma, liderlik tarzlarının ve söylemsel tercihlerin dış politikanın büyük stratejik yönelimlerini nasıl etkilediğine dikkat çekmektedir. Bulgular, LIO'nun dayanıklılığına dair tartışmalara ve iç politikadaki değişimlerin küresel düzen taahhütlerini ne ölçüde etkileyebileceğine ilişkin literatüre katkı sunmaktadır.

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△ Yazarlar bu çalışmanın tüm süreçlerinin araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olduğunu, etik kurallara ve bilimsel atıf gösterme ilkelerine uyduğunu beyan etmiştir. Aksi bir durumda Akdeniz İİBF Dergisi sorumlu değildir.

1. Introduction

Understanding the relationship between leadership and foreign policy role conceptions has long posed a central puzzle in the study of International Relations (IR). A dominant assumption in the literature posits that the United States (US), as the founder and pioneer of the Liberal International Order (LIO)¹, maintains a rather stable foreign policy orientation regardless of domestic political shifts and changes in the presidential office (Ikenberry, 2011; Nye, 2017). According to this view, systemic dynamics and institutional commitments prevent significant deviations from a broadly cooperative, liberal internationalist agenda of policy makers in the US. In other words, presidential agency over the general course of US foreign policy is limited if not absent. In addition, from a structural point of view, the US is expected to act as a guardian of the LIO both because it benefits from that order, and also because the LIO is the main element of international peace and security architecture which enables the US dominance over the international system. However, recent challenges posed to the LIO question the extent to which this order has stood up both for its instrumental promise of bringing about a prosperous multilateral order (Colgan and Keohane, 2017; Lake et.al., 2021) and the normative promise of the realization of this order in an impartial, rational and just way (Newman and Zala, 2018; Lawson and Zarakol, 2023). Adler-Nissen and Zarakol (2020) argue that populists in the West and competitive authoritarian governments in the non-West work together to take advantage of the growing discontent with the LIO. Acharya (2017) places Trump's ascent to power within this larger international context of the declining power and influence of the LIO, "especially of its failure to address the concerns of domestic constituents left behind by the global power shift (p.272)". The present study is an exploratory study on the resilience of the assumed continuity in the US foreign policy in the face of important challenges posed to the LIO. The specific question it seeks to answer is the extent to which the ascendancy of a populist president in the US, Donald Trump, influence the change in US' preferences of foreign policy role conceptions, and by extension, its orientation toward the LIO? One particularly fruitful avenue for exploring these questions is the analysis of United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) addresses. As a platform that yearly gather and constitutes a global forum where states express their foreign policy positions and normative visions, UNGA speeches offer a rich source of data on how countries publicly express their foreign policy roles on the world stage (Baturo, Dasandi, and Mikhaylov, 2017; Weiss, 2016). These addresses are reflective of broader discourses about foreign policy, therefore, they constitute rich texts for identifying changes and continuities in foreign policy orientations of a country.

The present study utilizes Role Theory in order to track the changes and continuities in US foreign policy role conceptions in a period when LIO faces challenges. Role Theory is a well-established subfield in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), and it argues that states do not solely

respond to external developments; they actively construct, perform, and negotiate their roles within a social environment, namely international society (Holsti, 1970; Walker, 1987; Harnisch, 2012). Foreign policy role conception, in this context, means policymakers' self-ascribed understandings of their state's policy behavior and normative positions in world politics (Walker, 2011). Building on the framework introduced by Holsti (1970) and later developed with the contributions of many from the literature (Wish, 1980; Walker, 1987; Chafetz, Abramson and Grillot, 1996; Thies, 2009; Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012; Harnisch, 2012; Thies and Breuning, 2012; Breuning, 2017; Walker, 2017), we categorize national role conceptions into four broad types: assertive roles (emphasizing hard power projection and leadership claims), cooperative roles (highlighting partnership and multilateralism), neutral roles (favoring nonalignment from complex global issues), and challenger roles (contesting existing international norms, institutions or status quos).

Our empirical focus is the comparative content analysis of eight U.S. presidential speeches delivered at the UNGA between 2013 and 2020. The data used in the analysis comprises of Barack Obama's addresses to the UNGA from 2013 to 2016 and Donald Trump's addresses from 2017 to 2020. This period is well-suited for the present research purposes as it captures a power transition between two presidents who represent different leadership styles and foreign policy orientations. While Obama's presidency was broadly aligned with cooperative and multilateral traditions, Trump's approach is considered unconventional as an American president, characterized by skepticism toward international institutions and a stark propensity of unilateralism. By centering the analysis on the 2013-2020 period, the study examines whether and how a shift in presidential leadership influences the US's roles on the global stage.

The findings of the study reveal a significant and sharp transformation in the US' foreign policy role conceptions with the transition of power from President Obama to President Trump. Whereas President Obama's speeches generally emphasized cooperative roles, projecting the US as a guard of multilateralism and global governance, President Trump's addresses consistently emphasized challenger role conceptions which problematized globalist and multilateral approaches to world politics. President Trump's speeches and articulated roles in them marked a departure from the cooperative US policy-making pattern toward a more unilateral and transactional approach, reflecting skepticism about multilateral institutions and a preference for the nation-state as the true bearer of states' sovereign power. President Trump's choice of strong anti-globalist role conceptions also presents a departure from the classical US foreign policy-making pattern which is mostly considered as an advocate of LIO. There are two important implications of these findings. First, they lend support to arguments that present the influence of presidential change as an important factor on changes in states' preferred foreign policy role conceptions. Second, they challenge

¹ The Liberal International Order (LIO) refers to the set of global institutions, norms, and practices established primarily after World War II to promote liberal values such as open markets, multilateral cooperation, democracy, and the rule of law. Anchored by U.S. leadership, the LIO has been institutionalized through organizations like the United Nations, the

International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. It emphasizes rule-based international engagement, collective security, and economic interdependence as pillars of global stability and prosperity (Ikenberry 2001; Ikenberry 2011; Ruggie 1982).

assumptions about the resilience of the U.S. commitment to the LIO. In this vein, the paper contributes to ongoing debates about foreign policy continuity and change, emphasizing the critical role the leadership agency plays in shaping grand foreign policy discourses (Hudson, 2005; Breuning, 2007). By utilizing Role Theory for a qualitative content analysis of US presidents' UNGA speeches, it illustrates how leadership transitions can serve as a significant catalyst for role redefinition. The paper offers an original contribution to the established body of work in the field of role theory by systematically tracing changes in foreign policy role conceptions with presidential change. Unlike most existing studies that focus on national role conceptions during one administration in isolation or emphasize policy outcomes, our study provides comparative analysis of role continuity and transformation that take place with presidential change. In this vein, it aims to show the influence of the power of agency in shaping national role conceptions. The study's focus on the speeches of two markedly different US Presidents at a time when the LIO faces grave challenges is also significant, as this type of comparison helps us to understand how leaders construct and redefine national roles in times of rapid political and ideological change.

The remainder of the paper is organized into four sections. The next section reviews relevant literature on foreign policy continuity, the presidential impact on foreign policy, and role-based approaches within FPA. This is followed by a detailed discussion of Role Theory and foreign policy role conceptions, providing the theoretical framework for the study with specific emphasis on challenger foreign policy role category. The subsequent section presents the research design, outlining the content analysis method, the coding scheme, and the empirical findings, along with a discussion of their implications. Finally, the conclusion reflects the broader significance of the findings for understanding U.S. foreign policy. The durability of the LIO in an era of political polarization and leadership volatility is also discussed in this section.

2. Making of the Foreign Policy and the Presidential Agency

The study of foreign policy-making has long been a central concern of International Relations (IR), yet traditional approaches often treat the state as a unitary, rational actor responding directly to systemic pressures. Classical realism, often "black boxing" the state (Hudson, 2005), argued that states usually act via similar patterns as they are all subject to an anarchical international order, which minimizes variations in state's foreign policy actions (Guzzini, 2001). Structural versions of the realist school of thought further emphasized systemic pressures as the main determinants of foreign policy actions and the functioning of international politics (Waltz, 1979). Such structural perspectives deliberately neglected the internal dynamics, domestic political factors, and individual leadership styles that shaped foreign policy decisions, as they advocated the determining impact of structural forces on policy outcomes. The "black box" metaphor, depicting the state as an opaque and homogenous actor, dominated much of early IR theorizing.

The FPA literature marked a significant effort to "open the black box of the state" (Hudson, 2005). Hudson (2005) challenged structural views by emphasizing the need to

investigate the domestic and individual-level variables that influence foreign policy behavior. FPA was born into such an agenda and emerged as a distinct subfield dedicated to this endeavor, focusing on how internal political structures, bureaucratic politics, societal forces, and leadership dynamics mediate a state's external actions (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin, 1954; Hudson, 2005). In this field, understanding foreign policy requires attention not only to international systemic constraints and power distributions within the system but also to the complex domestic processes and personal leadership styles that interact with these constraints. In other words, what comes from inside the state is considered an integral part of foreign policy.

A key conceptual tool for organizing this complexity has been the "levels of analysis" framework (Waltz, 1959; Singer, 1961). This framework focuses on three primary levels: the international system, the state (or domestic politics), and the individual decision-maker. Structural realism, emphasizing the international system, argues strongly that systemic pressures largely dictate state behavior, relegating domestic factors and individual agency to secondary importance (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 1995; Glaser, 2003; Walt, 2018). In contrast, liberal theories and FPA scholars highlight the state and individual levels, emphasizing how regime type, domestic political competition, bureaucratic politics, and leadership personalities significantly affect foreign policy choices (Rosenau, 1968; Hermann, 2001; Keller, 2005; Lai and More, 2006; Hagan, 2010).

Within this broader debate, the role of individual leaders—particularly executive heads—and their influence on foreign policy variation have attracted increasing scholarly attention. While systemic pressures set the general context for state behavior, scholars have shown that leadership matters in shaping how states interpret and respond to these constraints (Byman and Pollack, 2001). Leaders can prioritize certain threats or opportunities over others, have different strategic preferences, or articulate new foreign policy visions and orientations. Presidential leadership, therefore, can be a crucial intervening variable between systemic incentives and actual policy preferences (Greenstein, 2008; Dyson, 2009).

Several factors determine the extent of presidential influence over foreign policy. Institutional settings, such as constitutional powers and the balance of power between executive and legislative branches, define the formal scope of presidential action. Informal factors, including public opinion, elite consensus, and party dynamics, shape the political environment within which presidents operate (Neustadt, 1990; Wildavsky, 1966). Leadership traits, such as cognitive complexity, belief systems, and personality styles, further mediate presidential decision-making (Hermann, 2001; Schafer and Crichlow, 2010). In some cases, as Wildavsky (1966) famously argued with his "two presidencies" thesis, presidents may enjoy greater autonomy in foreign affairs compared to domestic issues, providing them with an even broader platform for shaping the state's international role conceptions. Hermann distinguishes between leadership styles that either support existing foreign policy patterns or reorient them through transformational change. In the case of the US, for example, the contrast between George H. W. Bush's emphasis on

multilateralism and George W. Bush's unilateral post-9/11 foreign policy exemplifies how leadership transitions can catalyze substantial role shifts from multilateral patterns to unilateral ones (Dueck, 2006). Similarly, the transition from Barack Obama to Donald Trump, representing divergent orientations toward multilateral institutions, alliance politics, and normative commitments, provides a rich context for analyzing the impact of presidential agency on foreign policy roles.

The presidential agency, however, does not operate in isolation. Leaders must navigate complex political environments where international, national, and individual-level factors interact dynamically. Systemic pressures constrain available choices and policy orientations, but domestic political configurations and leadership preferences mediate how those pressures are interpreted and acted upon. Leaders may have ambitions to revise or preserve international order, but their ability to put these in action depends on domestic political support, bureaucratic cooperation, and international receptivity. Therefore, understanding foreign policy outcomes requires a multilayered analytical approach that integrates structural, domestic, and individual-level explanations (Putnam, 1988; Checkel, 1993).

In this regard, our study also argues that leaders are agents who articulate their own respective states' foreign policy orientations in domestic, international and global platforms. Role Theory provides an integrative framework for understanding how systemic expectations (alter expectations), domestic demands (role contestations), and leadership interpretations interplay into specific foreign policy role conceptions (Holsti, 1970; Harnisch, 2012, Akbaba and Özdamar, 2019). The theory suggests that states are social actors that interact within an entangled network of international and domestic structures, but their foreign policy discourses are also shaped by self-perceptions and the influence of leadership. The leader here appears as an agent which has the capacity to voice, shape and reorient the country's foreign policy roles. Foreign policy-making is not simply the sum of reactions to systemic developments, nor is it the output of systemic imperatives or domestic constraints alone. Rather, it is a dynamic process of role construction and performance, followed by rounds of deconstruction and reconstruction, situated at the intersection of international, national, and individual-level influences. By analyzing foreign policy through the lens of role conceptions, we can better capture these complex and multilayered processes that drive change and continuity in state behavior, particularly during moments of leadership transition and global uncertainty.

3. Foreign Policy Role Conceptions

Understanding foreign policy behavior through the lenses of role conceptions offers a ground for analyzing how states perceive and present their position and responsibilities in the international system. Role Theory highlights how foreign policy is not merely reactive to structural developments and conditions but also deeply rooted in how political elites construct, perform, and sometimes contest particular roles (Holsti, 1970; Walker, 1987; Harnisch, 2012). The evolution of the theory since Holsti's seminal work has significantly expanded our understanding of the ideational, institutional, and agent-level factors that shape

state behavior. Holsti (1970) conceptualized the "national role conceptions" by defining them as policymakers' own definitions of the general decisions, commitments, rules, and functions their state should perform in the international system. These self-ascribed roles are shaped by both internal (national identity, political culture, leadership orientations) and external (systemic constraints, alter expectations) factors. In this sense, role conceptions are not just reflections of material capabilities or geopolitical constraints but are constructed through discourse, historical memory, and elite narratives (Wish, 1980; Thies, 2009; Harnisch, 2012). Also, leadership agency is significant both in determining the national role conceptions and voicing them at a global level. Different political elites may choose different role conceptions. Yet, executive heads and ministers in charge of foreign policy are the most relevant actors who have more competence to elucidate their countries' foreign policy roles (Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012).

Scholars have investigated how roles are enacted, challenged, and transformed over time. Walker (1987) emphasized the psychological decision-making dimensions of role performance, particularly in crisis contexts. In this regard, foreign policy roles are conceived in a social environment wherein role conceivers interact with actors both within and outside the country. Thies (2010) and Özdamar and Akbaba (2019) advanced the operationalization of roles by analyzing the domestic sources of national role conceptions and employing content analysis to trace their evolution. Özdamar (2024) further advanced the knowledge of the influence of the presidential agency on the orientation of US foreign policy and its direct influence over bilateral relations. Other studies focused on the diffusion and contestation of roles across different institutional settings and political regimes (Hermann, 2001; Brummer and Thies, 2015; Adigbuo, 2007; Nilsson, 2019; Shih and Yin, 2013). These works collectively highlighted that foreign policy roles are not solely material in nature but also shaped through institutionalized practices, elite discourses, and intersubjective understandings between actors.

The literature has also acknowledged the dual structure of role dynamics: on the one hand, roles are self-defined; on the other hand, they are shaped and constrained by the expectations of others. Hence, what Harnisch (2012) called "alter expectations" also influenced the formation of foreign policy roles. This acknowledgment, in turn, emphasized the dynamic nature of role conceptions; they evolve in response to changing international conditions, leadership transitions, and shifts in domestic political landscapes. This dynamism is crucial to understanding how the same state might perform significantly different roles-sometimes under the same presidential administrations, other times under different administrations.

3.1. Role Conception Categories and Challenger Role Conceptions

While Holsti (1970) originally proposed a set of 17 national role conceptions, subsequent research in the role theory literature expanded this repertoire significantly, introducing new roles (Wish, 1980; Thies, 2009; Harnisch, 2012). After a meticulous literature review, we designated twenty-one foreign policy roles, discussed in the literature. As a novel approach, we grouped them into four main role-sets as we

think some roles show common patterns in their practice. These role-sets are the assertive roles, the cooperative roles, the neutral roles and the challenger roles (Table.1). Assertive roles are composed of national role conceptions which emphasize foreign policy orientations that aim at actively pursuing the state's own interests. As a common feature, these roles include references to the use or threat of the use of hard power in a given international issue and seeking more autonomy or an upper status in the system. Roles in the cooperative category promote policies towards improving cooperative relations within world politics, in their regions or within a specific international organization/alliance system. These roles emphasize themes such as cooperation, diplomatic multilateralism, peacebuilding efforts and community building among a group of countries. The neutral category consists of roles that either emphasize the country's neutral position in international relations or stress its self-oriented and non-

assertive policy-making in its foreign relations. The fourth category of roles is the challenger roles. The common theme in this type of role is the leader's determination either to challenge a prevailing order or an existing status quo both on the regional and global levels.

In this study, we put specific emphasis on the challenger role conceptions due to the puzzling anti-globalist stance the US adopted with the Trump administration. This stance contests the US's guardianship of the LIO, on the one hand, and the continuity of the liberal foreign policy principles of US foreign policy, regardless of the presidential change, on the other hand. In this vein, an analysis of the separate dimensions along which Trump challenges the liberal and globalist orientations of both the US and the LIO is much needed. The present study's conceptualization of the challenger foreign policy roles, in turn, fits well for undertaking such an analysis.

Table 1. Categorization of Foreign Policy Role Conceptions

Assertive Roles	Cooperative Roles	Neutral Roles	Challenger Roles
-Regional Leader -Regional Protector -Active Independent -Developer -Defender of Faith -Global Leader	-Mediator-Integrator -Regional Sub-system collaborator -Bridge -Model/Example -Faithful Ally -Trading State -Global System Collaborator	-Independent -Isolate -Internal Development -Protectee	-Revisionist -Anti-Imperialist Agent -Anti-Globalist

As Table.1 shows, the present study identifies three main challenger role conceptions: *Anti-Imperialist Agent*, *Revisionist*, and *Anti-Globalist*. Each reflects a different type of contestation to the international system, but they all share a common feature, which is a willingness to challenge a prevailing regional or global setting in the name of national identity, sovereignty, or ideological commitment.

The anti-imperialist agent role is deeply rooted in Cold War-era politics and its saliency in contemporary foreign policy discourses is already declining, almost absent. It is a role conception which particularly becomes more salient in post-colonial and Global South contexts. In this conception, the state positions itself as resisting the imperialist powers or policies, often defined broadly to encompass international organizations, global economic practices, or hegemonic alliances. Holsti (1970: p. 264) noted that "where imperialism is perceived as a serious threat, many governments, by no means limited to communist party states— see themselves as agents of 'struggle' against this evil".

The revisionist role is centered on a state's dissatisfaction with existing international arrangements and its desire to transform them. Revisionist powers do not merely assert their interest in existing rules; they also seek to change the rules themselves. According to Schweller (1998), revisionist states "seek to undermine the established order for the purpose of increasing their power and prestige in the system" (p. 24). Taylor (2007) further distinguishes between the status quo and revisionist states, noting that the latter questions not just power dynamics but the norms and

legitimacy of the current system. For instance, Krotz and Sperling (2011) presents France's positioning in the 1960s as a revisionist foreign policy orientation. Revisionist roles may manifest in questioning territorial borders, challenging the authority of international organizations, or seeking to reorganize geopolitical and economic hierarchies. Revisionist role conceptions suggest a willingness not just to reform but to confront perceived injustices or imbalances embedded in the international order. In this regard, irredentist discourse is a prominent indicator of revisionist roles as well, such as criticism of treaties and prevailing border arrangements.

The anti-globalist role is the most contemporary among challenger roles, emerging mainly in the post-Cold War context and gaining significance with the rise of populism. The populists pit the nation-state and the state's sovereign rights against globalization, inter-state cooperation and transnational activism, and they frame the latter as processes and actors that undermine the primacy of the former (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2016; De Vries, 2018; Rodrik, 2021). In their antagonistic political frame, the executive heads stand as the leaders representing the "pure people" against the long-term abuses of the cosmopolitan and corrupt elites, who feature either as technocrats or oppositional, liberal mainstream political elites in both national and international/supranational institutions, as well as global transnational networks (Müller, 2016; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). First conceptualized in a TÜBİTAK-1001funded project², the anti-globalist role conception is among the challenger role conceptions, and it captures the populists' contemporary stance of resisting the

² The project is supported by Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye's (TÜBİTAK) 1001 program with the project code 221K029 between April 2022 and April 2025.

socio-economic and cultural effects of globalization: erosion of state sovereignty, mass migration, international trade regimes, cosmopolitanism, and the influence of supranational institutions.

4. Research Design, Findings and Discussion

4.1. Research Design

In order to account for the transformation of US foreign policy role conceptions with Trump's presidency, we compare the foreign policy roles Trump emphasized in his UNGA addresses with his predecessor Barack Obama's UNGA addresses in his second term of presidency. By limiting the analysis only to the second term of the Obama presidency, we aim to compare equal numbers of UNGA addresses from two consecutive presidents. In this vein, the study covers the 2013-2020 time periods. This periodization allows us to observe continuity and change between two markedly different leadership styles and foreign policy orientations. By focusing on UNGA speeches, we aimed at standardization of the speech texts utilized in the analysis. UNGA speeches are particularly valuable in this regard, as they offer a formal setting in which heads of state or their representatives articulate their country's global outlook, priorities, and strategic self-conceptions.

The method employed in this study is directed content analysis, which is well-suited for research informed by established theoretical frameworks and seeking to identify concept-driven patterns in texts (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Manifesto Project, 2024). In our case, coding is guided by a theoretical framework comprised of 21 foreign policy role conceptions building on Holsti (1970) and further expanded with the contributions from the role theory literature. As it is already explained, these roles are categorized into four broader types of assertive roles, cooperative roles, neutral roles, and challenger roles in the present study. The unit of analysis is the presidential speech, and the unit of coding is the quasi-sentence. A quasi-sentence is a single proposition or an argument in a sentence. This means that all sentences in a speech text are at least one quasi-sentence, yet sentences which include more than one verb can be divided into more than one quasi-sentence (Manifesto Project, 2024). By following this procedure, we first divided each UNGA speech into quasi-sentences. Then we coded each quasi-sentence either as a foreign policy role conception, when the quasi-sentence indicated a specific foreign policy role, or a null statement, when the quasi-sentence did not indicate any foreign policy roles.

All eight UNGA addresses were retrieved from the official United Nations archive to ensure textual consistency and reliability. The coding process followed a structured approach, guided by a detailed codebook developed from previous theoretical and empirical studies in the role theory literature. Each foreign policy role category and its sub-dimensions are explained in detail in this codebook. The texts were coded by multiple coders who underwent extensive training through pilot coding exercises conducted prior to the main coding phase. To ensure consistency and methodological rigor, inter-coder reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha, with scores exceeding 0.70, proof of a high level of agreement across coders and robustness in the application of the coding scheme.

Once the coding is completed, the data is aggregated into percentages per text. In other words, the percentage of each role conception in a given speech is calculated separately. For analytical purposes, individual role types are also summed into their respective macro-categories. For instance, the total percentage of *Revisionist*, *Anti-Globalist*, and *Anti-Imperialist Agent* roles in a single speech is aggregated to generate the overall percentage for the *Challenger Role* category. These quantified role distributions serve as the basis for the present comparative analysis. The next section presents findings and discusses the changing trends in US presidents' foreign policy discourses.

4.2. Findings and Discussion

The comparison of the US foreign policy role conceptions in the UNGA speeches for the 2013-2020 period yields stark differences between the foreign policy priorities of President Obama and President Trump. Figure.1 below displays those differences visually. President Obama emphasizes cooperative foreign policy roles in his UNGA speeches over other roles for the 2013-2016 period. Indeed, President Obama's preference for cooperative foreign policy roles is three times more than his preference for assertive roles in 2014 and 2015. The percentage difference between these two role categories is twofold in 2013 and in 2016. In comparison with cooperative roles and assertive roles, President Obama's preference for challenger foreign policy roles is quite low. The percentage of challenger roles is less than five percent in 2013 and 2014. Further, President Obama did not use any challenger foreign policy roles in his 2015 UNGA speech. The percentage of challenger foreign policy role increases to 7.4% in 2016. Yet compared to the percentages of both cooperative foreign policy roles and assertive foreign policy roles, this percentage remains low.

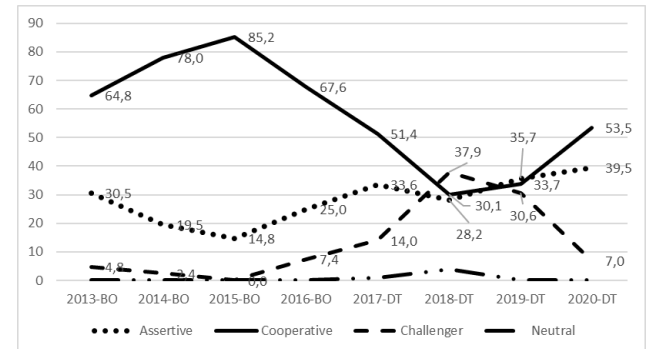


Figure 1. The US Foreign Policy Roles in UNGA Speeches, 2013-2020 (%)

In Figure.1, President Trump's preferences for foreign policy role conceptions stand in contrast to President Obama's preferences. Between 2017-2020, we observe a simultaneous decline in cooperative foreign policy roles and an increase in challenger foreign policy roles. Approximately 38% of all foreign policy roles are challenger roles in President Trump's 2018 UN speech, which is the highest observed percentage of challenger roles for the 2013-2020 period. Alternatively, President Trump uses only approximately 30% of cooperative roles in the same speech, which is the lowest observed percentage of this type of role for the same period. Though we observe a contrasting trend in President Trump's 2020 UN speech, where the percentage of cooperative roles increases and

challenger roles decreases, we tend to treat this speech as an outlier speech. All leaders delivered their 2020 UNGA speeches in an online format due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the circumstances of this period, the 2020 UNGA speeches were comparatively shorter, and they also displayed comparatively higher percentages of cooperative remarks to emphasize human solidarity in the face of a global pandemic.

In this framework, the most important finding of Figure.1 is President Trump's alteration of the US foreign policy role priorities from a cooperative tone to a challenger tone. This finding becomes the more interesting when the analysis focuses on the different types of challenger roles both President Obama and President Trump expressed in their speeches. Below Figure.2 displays a striking difference between both presidents' preferences for different types of challenger roles. According to this figure, President Obama mostly used the revisionist role conception as his preferred type of challenger roles. Alternatively, President Trump used the anti-globalist role conception as his preferred type of challenger role.

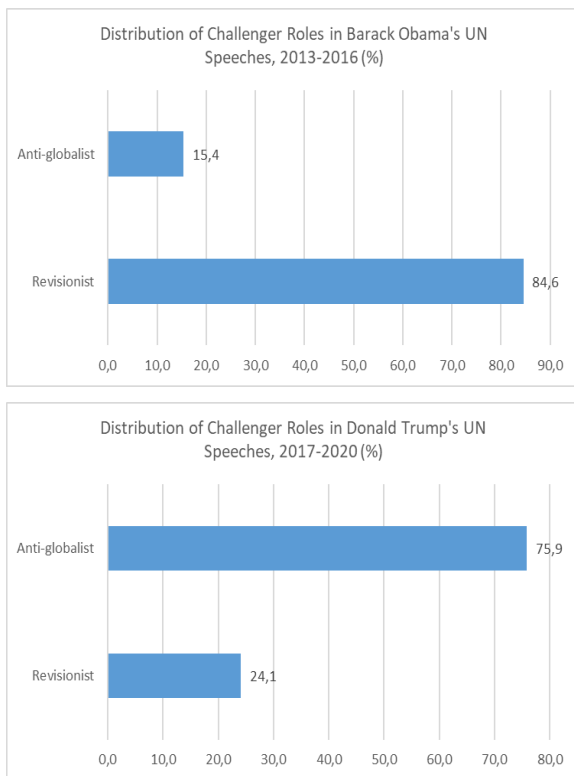


Figure 2. Distribution of Challenger Roles in the UN Speeches of President Obama and President Trump

As noted previously, the challenger role conceptions were not among President Obama's preferred foreign policy role conceptions. Also, when he used this type of role, he predominantly selected revisionist roles (84.6%) rather than anti-globalist roles (15.4%). Further, all the revisionist roles President Obama mentioned in his 2013 and 2014 speeches were about the US's support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East. The following quote from his 2013 UNGA speech captures the US's revisionist stance on this issue quite clearly:

Friends of Israel, including the United States, must recognize that Israel's security as a Jewish and democratic State depends upon the realization of a Palestinian State, and we should say so clearly. Arab States, and those who have supported the Palestinians, must recognize that stability will be served only through a two-State

solution and a secure Israel (UNGA Speech, 2013, A/68/PV.5: 14/56).

Only in his 2016 speech, President Obama mentioned an anti-globalist role in two of a total of sixty-eight quasi-sentences on US foreign policy:

All too often, those trumpeting the benefits of globalization have ignored inequality within and among nations, have ignored the enduring appeal of ethnic and sectarian identities, and have left international institutions ill-equipped, underfunded and underresourced for handling transnational challenges... (UNGA Speech, 2016, A/71/PV.8: 14/56).

Yet despite President Obama's criticisms of globalization's influence on growing inequalities, he invited for "a correction" to the globalization process via "new models for the global marketplace, models that are inclusive and sustainable" (UNGA Speech, 2016, A/71/PV.8:15/56). These remarks, in turn, made up the revisionist stance President Obama proposed for the reformation of the global order.

The US's anti-globalist stance became much more frequent, more articulated, multi-dimensional and strong with President Trump. As shown in Figure.1, the percentage of challenger foreign policy roles increased in the US's 2017 UNGA speech, which was President Trump's first address to the General Assembly. Three anti-globalist themes come to the fore in this speech, which are further developed in the latter speeches. These themes include: (1) an emphasis on state sovereignty over global governance; (2) a preference for managing migration and immigration issues at the state level rather than through international cooperation; (3) a lack of trust in global institutions to effectively advance American interests. Consequently, these themes underpin a perceived need for the US either to withdraw from or to reform existing international institutions. Hence, while President Obama's anti-globalist stance reflected a criticism of globalization's influence on growing inequalities *at a global level*, President Trump's anti-globalist stance was shaped from the unique vantage point of the so-called American interests. Also, while President Obama suggested rather a *globalist*-leaning solution to reduce global inequalities by re-modeling "the global marketplace", President Trump frequently pit patriotism and state sovereignty as alternatives to globalization. In other words, there is a big leap forward from the Obama administration to the Trump administration in terms of the changing tones of challenger roles the US adopted in its UNGA Speeches.

The first significant dimension of President Trump's anti-globalist stance is his antagonistic view of state sovereignty and globalism. In this view, the relationship between state sovereignty and globalism reflects a zero-sum logic:

Wise leaders always put the good of their own people and their own country first. The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots. The future belongs to sovereign and independent nations that protect their citizens, respect their neighbours and honour the differences that make each country special and unique (UNGA Speech, 2019, A/74/PV.3: 11/60).

In another example, Trump explicitly challenges the globalist agenda and calls on other states to do the same:

We reject the ideology of globalism and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism. Around the world, responsible nations must defend against threats to sovereignty not just from global governance, but also from other new forms of coercion and domination (UNGA Speech, 2018, A/73/PV.6: 17/53).

Similarly, Trump underscores sovereignty as the core principle of foreign policy-making, stating in his 2017 address:

In foreign affairs, we are renewing this founding principle of sovereignty... As President of the United States, I will always put America first, just as the leaders of the countries present will always and should always put their countries first (UNGA Speech, 2017, A/72/PV.3: 11/24).

Last but not least, in his 2019 UN address, Trump frames authenticity of national pride and sovereignty as the moral imperatives of global leadership. He calls upon other leaders to prioritize their own nations' strength, dignity, and prosperity as the foundation for a more optimistic future:

I invite all the leaders present here today to join us in the most fulfilling mission a person could have, the most profound contribution anyone can make — lift up your nations, cherish your culture, honour your histories, treasure your citizens, make your countries strong, prosperous and righteous, honour the dignity of your people, and nothing will be out of your reach. When our nations are greater, the future will be brighter, our people will be happier and our partnerships will be stronger (UNGA Speech, 2019, A/74/PV.3: 15/60).

These remarks are the anti-thesis of the LIO, which sees states' global cooperation as the basis for a more peaceful, prosperous and just global order in which states better preserve their sovereignty as they feel more secure. Also, the rule-based international order, which ensures the sustainability of the LIO, constitutes a global tier of protection for state's sovereign rights. Given the prominence of the US in LIO, President Trump's antagonistic understanding of state sovereignty and globalism constitutes a significant and a rather paradoxical fallout from the US liberal foreign policy principles.

President Trump's deliberate pitting of state's sovereignty against globalism has spill-over effects on transnational issues, where the US conventionally adopts a liberal stance as well. International migration, which has increased in the last three decades, is among those transnational issues. President Trump's mention of this issue also reflects another diversion from the US's conventional, liberal stance towards a more securitizing stance. This new stance, in turn, reflects strong anti-globalist tones. Hence, migration constitutes another dimension of President Trump's anti-globalist foreign policy position:

We recognize the right of every nation in this Hall to set its own immigration policy in accordance with its national interests, just as we ask other countries to respect our own right to do the same — which we are doing ... Migration should not be governed by an international body that is unaccountable to our own citizens. Ultimately, the only long-term solution to the migration crisis is to help people build more hopeful futures in their home countries, to make their countries great again (UNGA Speech, 2018, A/73/PV.6: 18/53).

Similar examples can also be seen in President Trump's 2019 UNGA address:

Every country has the absolute right to protect its borders. And so, of course, does our country... In the United States we have taken unprecedented action to stop the flow of illegal immigration. I implore anyone thinking of crossing our border illegally to please hear these words: do not pay the smugglers; do not pay the coyotes; do not put yourself in danger; do not put your children in danger because, if you make it here, you will not be allowed in; you will be promptly returned home; you will not be released into our country. (UNGA Speech, 2019, A/74/PV.3: 14/60).

The last dimension of President Trump's anti-globalist foreign policy stance is his explicit voicing of the lack of

trust in global institutions to advance American interests. Being among the architects of the LIO, the US Presidents before Trump have always been staunch supporters of global institutions as they make inter-state cooperation possible, lock-in states for positive-sum returns, iron out information asymmetries and foster a civic culture that emphasizes norms such as solidarity, reciprocity and trust. In other words, the architects of the LIO have never promoted it as an instrument of any state, let alone the US, to realize their particularistic interests. On the contrary, LIO has always been projected as ensuring the common good of all states via internationalization and globalization of both inter-state and transnational relations. In this framework, the LIO's *raison d'être* is in stark contrast with President Trump's reduction of global institutions to mere instruments for the advancement of American interests. This reductionist view of global institutions constitutes the third dimension of President Trump's articulation of his anti-globalist foreign policy stance:

For too long the American people were told that mammoth multinational trade deals, unaccountable international tribunals and powerful global bureaucracies were the best way to promote their success. But as those promises flowed, millions of jobs vanished and thousands of factories disappeared. Others gamed the system and broke the rules, and our great middle class, once the bedrock of American prosperity, was forgotten and left behind. But they are forgotten no more, and they will never be forgotten again (UN Speech, 2017, A/72/PV.3: 14/24).

International trading system upheld by LIO and WTO in particular has also been subject to Donald Trump's critique in his 2019 address:

For decades, the international trading system has been easily exploited by nations acting in very bad faith... Globalism exerted a religious pull over past leaders, causing them to ignore their own national interests. But as far as America is concerned, those days are over. To confront those unfair practices, I placed massive tariffs on more than \$500 billion worth of Chinese-made goods (UN Speech, 2019, A/74/PV.3: 12/60).

Similarly, important global governance bodies such as Human Rights Council and International Criminal Court have been explicitly problematized in Trump's UN addresses.

I spoke before this body last year (see A/72/PV.3) and warned that the Human Rights Council had become a grave embarrassment to this institution, shielding egregious human rights abusers while bashing America and its many friends... The United States took the only responsible course. We withdrew from the Human Rights Council, and we will not return until real reform is enacted. For similar reasons, the United States will provide no support or recognition to the International Criminal Court (ICC). As far as America is concerned, the ICC has no jurisdiction, no legitimacy and no authority... We will never surrender America's sovereignty to an unelected, unaccountable global bureaucracy (UN Speech, 2018, A/73/PV.6: 17/53).

The findings illustrate a marked transformation in the US' foreign policy role conceptions between the Obama and Trump administrations. While President Obama largely adhered to a cooperative and internationalist role set, President Trump's use of a predominantly challenger role-set underpins a significant departure toward a more confrontational and anti-globalist stance. By articulating the US as a sovereignty-centered actor, skeptical of multilateral institutions, international migration regimes, and global governance frameworks, Trump recasts the US role from the architect and defender of the LIO to one of its most vocal challengers.

5. Conclusion

This study delved deep into the question of the extent to which presidential leadership affects the US's foreign policy role conceptions, particularly with respect to country's position vis-a-vis the LIO. For this purpose, it content-analyzed the UNGA addresses of Obama's second term of presidency and Trump's first term of presidency (2013-2020). Challenging the assumption of continuity in US foreign policy regardless of presidential change, and in particular with respect to the US's long standing support for LIO, the findings showed the significant role the presidents played as strong agents for reconfiguring national role conceptions.

By categorizing foreign policy roles into four groups, namely assertive, cooperative, neutral, and challenger, the study systematically examined shifts in the rhetorical construction of the US's foreign policy role conceptions. In doing so, it brought Role Theory into a dialogue with broader debates about leadership, agency, and the durability of the LIO. The findings provided strong support for the argument that the transition from President Obama to President Trump entailed not just a change in tone or emphasis, but a substantial reorientation of how the US envisioned and articulated its role in world politics from a global platform, the UNGA.

Findings of the study can be summed up with respect to three main points. Firstly, our analysis revealed a consistent dominance of cooperative role conceptions in Obama's UNGA speeches between 2013 and 2016, reflecting a commitment to multilateralism, institutional engagement, and global governance. In fact, cooperative foreign policy roles set out the main scene for Obama's UNGA speeches. In contrast, Trump's speeches from 2017 to 2020 are characterized by a significant rise in challenger roles, peaking at 38% in 2018. These speeches corresponded to a deliberate distancing of the US from multilateral cooperation by focusing on themes such as state sovereignty, nationalism, and unilateralism in foreign policy-making. This rhetorical transformation demonstrated the fluidity of national role conceptions and highlighted the significance of presidential agency in redefining foreign policy role conceptions.

Secondly, although both presidents used challenger roles, the intensity and the type of challenger role conceptions they preferred differed starkly. Obama used challenger roles with quite low frequency, and when he used this type of role, he preferred revisionist roles, focusing on rebalancing or reforming elements of the existing international order. His advocacy of the two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict is a case in point. Trump's use of challenger roles, on the other hand, was much more frequent. Also, Trump preferred overwhelmingly anti-globalist type of challenger roles, reflecting an ideological opposition to various aspects of globalization such as cosmopolitanism and the increased role played by international institutions in policy-making. Trump's use of anti-globalist roles emphasized themes such as national sovereignty, border protection, and distrust towards international organizations. These themes, in turn, presented a clear and explicit challenge to the LIO.

Finally, this study particularly contributed to the literature on foreign policy role conceptions via its identification and elaboration of anti-globalism as a distinct foreign policy role conception within the broader challenger category. Trump's presidency gave shape to a consistent anti-globalist narrative relying on the problematization of globalism at large. This role conception not only framed globalism as incompatible with national interests but also sought to delegitimize the LIO's normative claims such as reciprocity, collaboration and trust.

The study affirmed the centrality of agency in Role Theory and contributed to ongoing efforts to link role conceptions to broader questions of international order (Ryu, 2023). In this context, the study makes an original contribution to the literature by systematically comparing US national role conceptions, articulated by two different US Presidents in a major international setting, the UNGA. The study's comparative and longitudinal approach is novel, and it helps to uncover how role conceptions are discursively constructed, redefined, and contested with presidential transitions. It also addresses a key gap in the literature by explicitly linking rhetorical role performance to debates on international order and populism. While structural approaches to IR have long held that systemic constraints impose foreign policy behavior on actors, our analysis provided support for the argument that leaders enjoy a significant agential space in how they interpret, perform, and transform foreign policy roles. In this context, the US case showed how a change in leadership can produce discursive discontinuity. The findings also support the view that foreign policy is not simply a rational endeavor in the pursuit of national interests, but also a discursive construction of the self in a dynamic context. Last but not the least, the present study's novel classification of national role conceptions via a comprehensive literature review and the use of the designated role-sets in content analysis show the wide array of role repertoire the leaders use in their speeches. Similar studies may serve as a useful basis for further studies that investigate foreign policy role change across years and administrations.

In terms of policy implications, the findings raise important questions about the stability of the LIO especially in a time when its constitutive norms and institutions are debated and targeted more than ever. If the US, its main architect and promoter, can adopt a strong challenger position with the advent of a populist politician as the US president, the foundational consensus behind LIO may be more contingent and fragile than often assumed. This may indeed be the case these days when Trump is back in office from January 2025.

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