

THE GREAT POWER REFLEXES OF THE UNITED STATES UNDER DONALD TRUMP'S SECOND TERM

DONALD TRUMP'IN İKİNCİ DÖNEMİNDE AMERİKA BİRLEŞİK DEVLETLERİ'NİN BÜYÜK GÜÇ REFLEKSLERİ

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ÖZ

Soğuk Savaş sonrasında ABD, kalan tek 'büyük güç' oldu ve 11 Eylül saldırıları sonrasında bu konumunu daha da pekiştirdi. Ancak, ABD'nin Afganistan, Irak, Suriye ve Ukrayna'daki tartışmalı politikaları, öncü statüsüne yönelik tanınmasında düşüşe neden oldu. ABD, bu krizlerde istikrarsız büyük güç refleksleri sergileyerek, uluslararası toplumun gidişatına yön verme, genel güç dengesini koruma, krizleri önleme ve kontrol etme ile savaşları sınırlandırma gibi bir büyük güçten beklenen sorumlulukları yerine getirmede göreceli olarak başarısız oldu. Ocak 2025'te Başkan Trump'ın ikinci döneminin başlamasıyla birlikte, ABD dış politikasında bu büyük güç reflekslerini yeniden kazanmaya yönelik, söylem değişiklikleriyle belirginleşen, yeniden düzenleme emareleri görülmüştür. Bu çerçevede, bu çalışma, ABD'nin politikalarını özellikle iki önemli vaka üzerinden değerlendirmektedir: Rusya'nın Ukrayna'daki savaşı ve İsrail-Filistin çatışması ile Orta Doğu'daki ilgili gelişmeler. Araştırma kapsamında, çalışma, "ABD'nin askeri, ekonomik ve siyasi gücüyle bir büyük güç statüsünün bir refleksi olarak ne ölçüde uluslararası olayların gidişatına liderlik ettiği ve merkezi bir yön verdiği" sorusunu yanıtlamak amacıyla 2025 yılına ait 'Bilgilendirme ve Açıklamalar' ve ilgili 'Demeçler' bölümlerindeki Beyaz Saray belgelerini içerik analizi yöntemiyle incelemektedir. Bulgular, Trump yönetiminin ikinci döneminde, genel güç dengesini sağlama, savaşları sınırlandırma ve krizleri önleme ve kontrol etme çabaları ile geleneksel büyük güç sorumluluklarıyla uyumlu hareket etme eğiliminde olduğunu göstermektedir. Ayrıca, askeri kuvvetlerin bizzat sahaya inerek yürütülen "Postallar sahada" şeklinde ifade edilebilecek politikalara karşı duyulan isteksizlik ile "Önce Amerika" politikaları doğrultusunda Ukrayna'daki sorumluluğun adil bir seviyede Avrupalı güçlere devredilmesi girişimlerinin de, uluslararası etkileşimleri karmaşık hale getirirse de ABD'nin büyük güç reflekslerini tam olarak zayıflatmadığı görülmüştür.

ABSTRACT

After the Cold War, the U.S. emerged as the 'remaining great power', and further consolidated its position after the September 11 attacks. However, disputed American policies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine led to a decline in recognition of its leading status. The U.S. exhibited turbulent great power reflexes in these crises, resulting in relative failures to uphold the expected responsibilities of a great power to give a central direction to the trajectory of the international society: preserving a general balance of power, avoidance and control of crises, and limitation of wars. With the beginning of President Trump's second term in January 2025, there have been indications of a recalibration in U.S. foreign policy, marked by a shift in rhetoric to recover these great power reflexes. Within this framework, this study evaluates the policies of the U.S. particularly towards two key cases: the Russian war in Ukraine and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and relevant developments in the Middle East. For the research involved, the study employs content analysis of official White House documents, including 'Briefings & Statements' and related 'Remarks' from 2025, in order to answer "To what extent does the U.S. by leveraging its military, economic and political power tend to lead and give a central direction to the trajectory of the international events as a reflex of its great power status?". The findings suggest that the Trump administration in its second term has inclined to align with traditional great power responsibilities - seeking for a general balance of power, limitation of wars, and avoidance and control of crises. The reluctance about the "boots on the ground" policy, and the attempt to transfer a fair level of responsibility to European powers in Ukraine in line with the "America First" policies, have complicated the interactions but not entirely undermined these great power reflexes.

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Introduction

Great power interactions tend to provide a general balance of power and give a central direction to the trajectory of international society. After the Cold War, the U.S. emerged as the 'remaining great power', and further consolidated its position after the September 11 attacks. However, disputed American policies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine led to a decline in recognition of its leading status. The U.S. exhibited turbulent great power reflexes in these crises, resulting in relative failures to uphold the expected responsibilities of a great power to give a central direction to the trajectory of the international society: preserving a general balance of power, avoidance and control of crises, and limitation of wars. With the beginning of President Trump's second term in January 2025, there have been indications of a recalibration in U.S. foreign policy, marked by a shift in rhetoric to recover these great power reflexes. Within this framework, this study evaluates the policies of the U.S. particularly towards two key cases: the Russian war in Ukraine and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and relevant developments in the Middle East. For the research involved, the study employs content analysis of official White House documents, including 'Briefings & Statements' and related 'Remarks' from 2025, in order to answer "To what extent does the U.S. by leveraging its military, economic and political power tend to lead and give a central direction to the trajectory of the events as a reflex of its great power status?"

Within this framework, the study first describes the concept of 'power' and 'great power' and explains the assumed roles of the great powers in the international society. The following part concentrates on the military, economic capacities of the U.S. along with a comparative perspective as to its great power status. The next section examines the discursive great power reflexes of the U.S. with political, economic and military engagements and evaluate its leadership role firstly in the Ukrainian Crisis. The following section is dedicated to Israeli-Palestinian Case and the relevant developments in the Middle East with the same framework, and analyzes the U.S. great power reflexes for the crises involved with some samples. In the conclusion part, this study has provided general tendencies of great power reflexes of the U.S. in a descriptive context, in relation to these two cases.

1. Great Powers and Their Functions

First of all, "power" is a very central concept in the discipline of International Relations (IR) which is widely used and often referred. It is also so common to talk about having power to implement a policy or about powerful states and great powers. Within the demarcations of IR which can be defined as "Study of the relations of states with each other and with international organizations and certain subnational entities (e.g., bureaucracies and political parties)." ("International Relations", 2006, p. 950). 'Power' is assumed to be a matter of relations that requires at least two actors. In simple, power refers to "the ability to get another actor to do what it would not otherwise have done (or not to do what it would have done)" (Pevehouse & Goldstein, 2014, p.45; Barnett and Duvall, 2005, p.39) Power can briefly be described as the ability of one actor to shape the policies and activities of another actor) In the light of the definition of the concept of power, 'great power' can be defined as the ability to shape the other actors' policies in a wider and deeper scale. "Great powers contribute to international order in two main ways: by managing their relations with one another; and by exploiting their preponderance in such a way as to impart a degree of central direction to the affairs of international society as a whole." (Bull, 2002, p.200) To summarize, the interactions among great powers are supposed to configure the general balance of power and give a direction to the trajectory of the international politics. That's why, the book of Paul Kennedy - "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers" tells the history of international politics as the history of great powers (See Kennedy, 1988).

¹ This article has been adapted from a conference paper titled "Turbulent Great Power Reflexes of the United States After 2001 and the International Order," presented at the TÜBA Conference on 'Global Transformations and Türkiye' held in Istanbul on April 18–20, 2024, and from an oral presentation entitled "Uluslararası Sistemde Büyük Güç Yönetimi ve ABD," delivered at the academic event 'Kapadokya Uluslararası İlişkiler Buluşması' held in Nevşehir on April 30, 2025.

Rather than the concept of “great power”, “super power” is adopted as a common version. Despite the fact that traditional literature of IR prefers ‘great power’ (See Wight, 2004, pp. 41-53), especially during the Cold War, this concept turned into ‘super power’. This shift was originated from the work of T.R. Fox in 1944, in which he called the United Kingdom, the United States and the Soviet Union as super powers at that time (See Fox, 1944). Today, the concept of ‘super power’ is still used interchangeably with the concept of ‘great power’. What constitutes a great power is another discussion and difficult to answer. However, there are some common points in the literature for the definition in question. Military might seems a common point for nominating a great power, along with a strong economy (For a detailed discussion about ‘great power’, see Sağsen & Demirel & Mavruk Cavlak, 2018, pp. 193-198).

It is a difficult fact to measure the level of power of one state in the international society. In order to describe one actor as “great power” is also another complicated issue. Hedley Bull as a prominent scholar who has contoured clearly the concept of “international society” and the role of great powers within this society, highlighted the significance of military superiority, and a related economy to assist it along with the willingness and recognition in order to be called as a great power (See Bull, 2002, pp. 194-199). In 1977, Bull notes that “At most, the United States, the Soviet Union and China are great powers: Japan is only a potential great power; and Western Europe, while it is not amalgamated in a single state, is not a power at all. We have also to recognize that China is less clearly a great power than the other two” (Bull, 2002, pp. 197).

Bull believes that the most effective mechanism that regulates the international order is the “balance of power”, which is designed and constructed foremost by the interactions of great powers. When it comes to special rights and duties, great powers are considered also as great responsible. This responsibility refers to the “Preservation of the general balance”, and “Avoidance and control of crises”, “Limitation of war” which are among the prominent functions of the great powers (Bull, 2002, pp. 97-121; 201-212). In Bull’s mind, with this special rights and duties, while managing a balance of power, great powers give a central direction to the trajectory of the events in the international society.

2. United States of America as a Great Power

First of all, the U.S. from the very beginning, was founded with the motives of a great power. Especially in the 19th century, in order to protect its international trade networks and missionaries, the state itself was donated with a certain level of military might and an economic accumulation to sustain it (See Coffin & Stacey, 2005, pp. 768-771; Erhan, 2015, pp. 37-96). In order to control all of these operational interactions, the U.S. has been active internationally with a will to seek for its own interest world widely. World wars in the 20th century, also approved that it was the U.S. which changed the destiny of the wars. It was clear that U.S. as a great power was an asset to shape the trajectory of international relations (See Showalter & Royde-Smith: 2025; Gopnik et al, 2025) Given this enduring dominance after the Cold War era, the U.S. was nominated as the “remaining great power” of the international society. The U.S. emerged without a peer competitor in great power management, thereby shaping the trajectory of the international order. The September 11 attacks and the subsequent “War on Terror” further consolidated the U.S. as preeminent great power status and brought a clear recognition for the matter involved, effectively cementing its leadership under the prevailing geopolitical conditions. By this recognition, the U.S. had the power of molding international order at the outset. However, there emerged a gradual erosion of support for the U.S. leadership, most notably during the 2003 Iraq War. Key allies, including France and Germany, refused to endorse the intervention, signaling a departure from established normative basis of the international relations. Subsequent developments such as the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, coupled with a reluctance to decisively counter Russia’s escalating aggression against Ukraine, demonstrated turbulent reflexes in the policies (See Witte, n.d.; Kınacıoğlu, 2012; Efeğil, 2008).

The great power status seem to rely heavily on the military capacity which is assumed to be superior to others. This superiority might have many dimensions ranging from accommodation of nuclear weapons to land, naval and air forces traditionally. It seems plausible to examine the military power of the U.S.

in a comparative analysis to underpin the superiority in question. As of 2025, the United States remains the most apparent great power in the international society, combining substantial material capabilities with demonstrated political will and broad recognition by other states.

Considering the military capacities of the U.S., it is remarkable to note the installation of the American Army at a global scale. “The U.S. has about 750 bases in at least 80 countries around the world. It has approximately 173.000 troops deployed in 159 countries”(Hussein & Haddad, 2021). The Armed forces of the United States was designed with a capability to make operations all over the world, of which headquarters are focusing on distinct geographies. Geographic Combatant Commands operate not only within the boundaries of the U.S. but working at a global scale: CENTCOM - U.S. Central Command in Florida, AFRICOM - U.S. Africa Command in Stuttgart, EUCOM- U.S. European Command in Stuttgart, NORTHCOM- U.S. Northern Command in Colorado, INDOPACOM- U.S. Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii, SOUTHCOM- U.S. Southern Command in Florida, SPACECOM- U.S. Space Command in Colorado. The U.S. military forces have a global focus in terms of responsibility, beyond the borders of the U.S. As a great power, the U.S. seems to have the capacity to act world widely. Command Centers have the responsibility to deal with the developments related to the countries in different geographies. For instance, CENTCOM’s area of responsibility “covers 21 nations in the Middle East, Central and South Asia, and the strategic waterways that surround them” (US Central Command, n.d.). Or the EUCOM focuses on the European continent as whole including Iceland and Türkiye, along with Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan (See United States European Command, n.d.). Here is the map of the aforesaid geographical Command Centers:



Figure 1: The map of the aforesaid geographical Command Centers

Resource: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/65617.pdf>

Along with this global focus, the military capacities of the U.S. present the leading structure in the world as well. According to the military expenditures and exports, the U.S. seems to maintain its undisputed leadership with spending \$916 billion in 2023. This figure surpasses the combined spending of the next ten countries, including China (~\$296 billion) and Russia (\$109 billion), reflecting the overwhelming superiority of the U.S. in military capacity and global defense policies (SIPRI, n.d.) Similarly, it follows from the NATO’s official figures that the defense expenditures of the U.S. equates to 875 billion for

2023 and 967 billion for 2024 (NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2024). Roughly with a one trillion dollar military expenditure, the U.S. takes the lead for military spending.

According to arms exports, SIPRI emphasizes that “the 25 largest suppliers accounted for 98 percent of the total volume of exports, and the 5 largest suppliers in the period—the United States, Russia, France, China and Germany— accounted for 76 percent of the total volume of exports.” Within this framework, the U.S. is also the world’s leading arms exporting country making nearly 40% of the world's total arms exports (SIPRI, 2023 p. 11).

In terms of the nuclear capacities, the U.S. has a similar status. The U.S. has become the world's first nuclear power following the development of atomic bombs under the Manhattan Project. The subsequent use of these weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 precipitated Japan's surrender, effectively ending the Second World War. The Soviet Union subsequently became the second state to acquire nuclear capabilities, marking the beginning of a nuclear arms race during the Cold War era. By the late 1960s, all five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council had developed nuclear arsenals while simultaneously seeking to prevent further proliferation through the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Despite these efforts, four additional states; India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea successfully developed nuclear weapons in the course of time. In the contemporary security landscape, Iran's nuclear program remains a subject of international concern, with ongoing uncertainty regarding both its weapons capability and current stockpiles (See Norris & Cochran, 2025; “Manhattan Project”, 2025; Freedman, 2025).

In 2025, it is clear that along with Russia, the U.S has a leading position in the inventories of nuclear warheads. These two states have rendered their superiority after the Cold War for the matter involved. The estimated inventories of global nuclear warheads are remarkable according to the data of the Arms Control Association which is an expert NGO in this realm. According to the 2025 factsheet, it is noted that “The world’s nuclear-armed states possess a combined total of over 12,400 nuclear warheads; nearly 90 % of belong to Russia and the United States. Approximately, 9,700 warheads are in military service, with the rest awaiting dismantlement.” According to the current estimated data; Russia assumes to have 5,580, United States 5,225, China 600, France 290, United Kingdom 225, India 172, Pakistan 170, Israel 90, and North Korea 50 nuclear warheads in 2025 (Arms Control Association [ACA], 2025).

The military power of the U.S. sustained by a leading defense expenditure and exports; along with geographically expanded structure of its combatant capabilities, and nuclear inventories provides an apparent American superiority in the military sector. Crucially, this military superiority is underpinned by **economic primacy as well**. As of 2025, the U.S. maintains its position as the world’s largest economy by GDP current prices of \$30.51 trillion. China with \$19.23 trillion, Germany with \$4.74 trillion, India with \$4.19 trillion, Japan with \$4.19 trillion, United Kingdom with \$3.84 trillion, France with \$3.21 trillion, Italy with \$2.42 trillion, Canada with \$2.23 trillion, and Brazil with \$2.13 trillion follow the U.S. (International Monetary Fund - IMF, 2025).

According to the data of CIA (2023) the leading exporting country in the world is China. Chinese figure of \$3.51 trillion is followed by the U.S. – \$3.07 trillion. Germany with \$1.94 trillion, France with \$1.05 trillion, United Kingdom with \$1.50 trillion, Netherlands with \$1.02, Singapore with \$0.97 trillion, and Japan with \$0.92 trillion, South Korea with \$0.83 trillion, and Italy with \$0.7 trillion follow the list (CIA, n.d.). According to the data of 2023 U.S. dollar is still the leading currency with the rate of 59 % as the most foreign exchange reserve (See Anshu Siripurapu and Noah Berman, 2023). Similarly, the amount of U.S. foreign direct investments (FDI) abroad is about \$6.68 trillion, while the FDI in the U.S. equates to \$5.39 trillion taking the 2023 data into consideration (See Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2024). With these figures, the U.S. has also a significant impact on the global financial markets. Within this framework, Konnings argues for

an account of the social and historical construction of US financial power through the emergence, over the course of the 20th century, of a high degree of institutional connectedness, relational density and infrastructural capacity. It has been shown that these processes have shaped the dynamics of globalisation to their core; in an important sense, financial globalisation is better understood as a process through which the dramatic expansion of American finance began to assume international dimensions than as the re-emergence of global finance (Konnings, 2009).

In addition to this background, it follows from the 2022 data of the U.S Energy Information Agency that the U.S is also the leading oil producing country, having world's 14.7 %, and followed by Saudi Arabia – 13.2 %, and Russia – 12.7 % (U.S. Energy Information Agency, 2023). These capacities in production, trade, finance and energy bring about independency and economic power, which cements the U.S. as the core architect of global economic order as a great power.

On the other hand, today, Russia demonstrates a clear ambition to reclaim its great power status of the Cold War era in spite of major economic gaps. Basic Russian foreign policy behavior seems to be often acting in defiance of the established international norms, which have resulted with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russia seems to be an emerging long term threat for the U.S. and its Allies. In 2025, NATO frames the conflict in Ukraine as a preliminary phase of a long term confrontation between the Allies and an emerging axis comprising Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. From NATO's point of view, Chinese technology, Iranian drones and missiles, North Korean troops have given support to Russia's illegitimate war in Ukraine (See NATO, [February 20,] 2025; NATO [January 13,] 2025). In sum, Ukrainian crisis beyond its borders is seen as the fledgling steps of a global rivalry to a certain extent.

Meanwhile, China has experienced rapid economic growth and a significant military expansion. According to NATO estimates, China's level of production is six times faster than the U.S.. China is also projected to possess approximately 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030, alongside pursuing clear superiority in naval capabilities and economic influence in the coming decades (See NATO, [January 23,] 2025; NATO, [12 Feb,] 2025). Nevertheless, Chinese policymakers do not tend to be part of the discussions about 'the great power status of China', and Beijing remains hesitant to engage directly in global conflicts.

In this vein, the U.S. identifies China as a principal future rival. The developments in Ukraine and the Middle East also have presented some contradicting policies between China and the U.S. which would have potential reflections on Indo-Pacific policies in the near future as well (NATO [Press Conference], [April 4,] 2025). After Israeli strikes to many targets in Iranian cities in June 2025 ranging from many residents of high commanders to nuclear plants, President Trump gave support to Israel while China revealed that Israeli attacks were unacceptable which violated the sovereignty of Iran (McCarthy, 2025). A defining characteristic of a great power lies in its willingness to engage in crises—wherever they may occur—to shape the trajectory of international interactions in alignment with its strategic interests. Such engagement typically manifests in efforts to mitigate tensions and maintain control over conflicts, thereby preserving the stability of the system itself. That's why, great powers are highly inclined to intervene in disputes, even those unfolding far beyond their homelands.

The United States, with its formidable military capabilities and supporting economic strength, possesses the necessary conditions to sustain its role as a great power in the international society. Despite these huge capacities of the U.S, the tendency of the last decade was to withdraw troops from the conflict zones, hesitation "to act against and prevent" the offensives of competing powers which can be called as turbulent great power reflexes. However, President Trump's second term in 2025 started with great commitments about the conflict zones such as in Ukraine and the Middle East and with some unexpected claims on several territories such as Panama, Suez, and Greenland (See "Trump says US ships should have free use of Panama and Suez canals.", 2025; Aikman, 2025). This discourse, despite its imbalanced

nature, seems totally coherent to a great power behavior, carrying tones of leadership and dominance to a certain extent. the U.S. President Trump's second term seems to become a candidate during which the great power reflexes may precede. In this vein, the following section explores the great power reflexes of the Government of the U.S. under Trump's second term in 2025 toward the crises of Ukraine and Israeli-Palestinian issue related developments.

3. Great Power Reflexes of the United States during Donald Trump's Second Term: Russian War on Ukraine

In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, which turned into large-scale war. The US government has given continuous support to Ukraine from the very beginning against this illegitimate Russian aggression. Also, President Trump continued this support when he came into power in 2025. But the 'discourse' was changed slightly with a focus basically on questioning the U.S. interests thereabout. For Trump, Biden failed to play the role of a great power and could not prevent this war. His related comment is as follows: "Ukraine is a very serious, very tough, situation. And this is Biden's war. This is not my war, but I want to see if I can solve it" ("Trump Oval Office Interview", 2025).

Immediately after taking the Office, Trump came to exert efforts to break the deadlock in Ukraine and give central direction to the conflict towards peace talks. In his inaugural speech, President Trump reaffirmed his "America First" doctrine, while not specifically quoting the Ukrainian or any other crisis directly. His own words of "We will measure our success not only by the battles we win but also by the wars that we end — and perhaps most importantly, the wars we never get into...", "My proudest legacy will be that of a peacemaker and unifier. That's what I want to be: a peacemaker and a unifier" indicated that there is no willingness for a "boots on the ground" policy in the conflicts but a tendency for diplomatic settlements (See The White House, [January 20,] 2025). In essence, this attempt reflects a clear great power reflex: to minimize the frictions and give a central direction to the flux of the events. The U.S. exerted efforts to mediate between the delegations of Ukraine and Russia by negotiating with them distinctly. At the end, these delegations gathered at a diplomatic table in Istanbul with the leadership of the U.S. and the efforts of Türkiye. Only the U.S. appeared to possess the necessary leadership to foster negotiations between the conflicting parties, which gave its outcomes as US-Russia Summit in February 2025, and the U.S.-Ukraine Summit in March 2025 in Saudi Arabia, and also in the Russian-Ukrainian direct talks in May and early June 2025 in Türkiye (See Troianovski et al, 2025).

On March 11, a statement was published according to the talks between Ukrainian and American delegations about the future of the Russian War in Ukraine. It is said that the senior officials "significantly helped in moving toward ending the war". In a phone call, "President Zelenskyy thanked President Trump for the support of the United States, especially the Javelin missiles that President Trump was first to provide, and his efforts towards peace" It is noted that "President Trump fully briefed President Zelenskyy on his conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin and the key issues discussed.", and "They agreed all parties must continue the effort to make a ceasefire work" (See The White House, [March 19,] 2025).

On March 25, a statement was made about the outcomes of the United States and Russia Expert Groups meeting on the Black Sea in Riyadh (23- 25 March 2025). In this statement, it is noted that "The United States and Russia have agreed to ensure safe navigation, eliminate the use of force, and prevent the use of commercial vessels for military purposes in the Black Sea", "The United States and Russia agreed to develop measures for implementing President Trump's and President Putin's agreement to ban strikes against energy facilities of Russia and Ukraine", and also "The United States and Russia will continue working toward achieving a durable and lasting peace" It is also noted that "The United States will continue facilitating negotiations between both sides to achieve a peaceful resolution, in line with the agreements made in Riyadh" (The White House, [March 25,] 2025). In diplomatic talks and correspondences, the U.S. is noted to have broken the deadlock and opened a door for diplomacy in Ukraine. On April 18, after the meeting of American- and Italian delegations at White House, a statement

was issued which notes that “The U.S. and Italy underscore that the war in Ukraine must end, and fully endorse President Trump’s leadership in brokering a ceasefire and delivering a just and lasting peace” (The White House, [April 18,] 2025a). Trump’s diplomatic efforts, in most of his diplomatic interactions reserve a room for peace in Ukraine, after taking his Office, during which his leadership has been recognized and prevailed. As seen, the role for minimizing the frictions and seeking for alternative models for peace works in Ukrainian Crisis by the leadership of Trump in the first six months of his power.

Indeed, rather than investing more on such kind of regional conflicts, as a great power reflex, the U.S. seems to orientate his threat perceptions and activism towards the balance of power strategies for the global competition in the near future. Considering the planning of the budget of 2026, it is declared that U.S. Budget “prioritizes investments to strengthen the safety, security, and sovereignty of the homeland, deter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific, and revitalize [U.S.] defense industrial base” (White House, [May 2,] 2025). The defence secretary, Pete Hegset in February 2025 declared that “US was no longer ‘primarily focused’ on European security and that Europe would have to take the lead in defending Ukraine.” While defending his thesis, he noted the focal point by the following words: “The US is prioritizing deterring war with China in the Pacific” (Sabbagh, 2025). This speech also seems to be a sign for the main navigation of the U.S. policy is on function for global competition, estimated to emerge in Asia-Pacific. Trump’s enforcement of European powers to embrace Ukrainian case more closely, and seeking for a lasting and just peace as soon as possible grows out of a great power reflex to concentrate more on general balance of power in the global competition.

Willingness and effectiveness to act for shaping the interactions as a great power reflex can be followed in the highly debated meeting of President Trump along with JD Vance – the Vice President of the U.S. with President Zelenskyy of Ukraine on February 28, 2025. This meeting has become a milestone in American-Ukrainian relations. This press meeting lasted about one hour, with question and answer session, which witnessed high tension between the leaders. Trump’s words and behavior, despite its undiplomatic nature seems convenient for the role of a great power with a dominance on the interactions: “You are not in a good position. You don’t have the cards right now. With us you start having cards....You are gambling with lives of millions of people, you are gambling with World War III...your country is in a big trouble...you have a damn good chance of coming out okay because of us” (The Telegraph, 2025).

Within the borders of a great power mindset, Trump believes, he changed the trajectory of the war in Ukraine: “ I think if I didn't win the election, he would have gotten all of Ukraine. I think he would have taken all of Ukraine.” (“Trump Oval Office Interview”, 2025). The primary U.S. policy for Ukraine consists clearly of “no boots on the ground” while giving military equipment and weapons to Ukraine, such as even Javelin missiles (See The Telegraph, 2025 [, min. 4.41]). As a responsible great power, the U.S efforts were shaped firstly to make ceasefire and provide peace talks which in essence is in conjuncture with the responsibilities of a great power to ‘avoid and control of crises’, and to ‘limit wars’. However, it seems also remarkable that the U.S. concentrates more on China to seek for a general balance of power in international society particularly for a near future, tendency of the U.S. decision makers has been to attach responsibility to European Powers for the Ukrainian case involved, with the institutional capacities of the EU and the NATO. For instance, NATO seems to be at the forefront of this security matter under the leadership of the U.S. both in military and economic terms, especially under the American nuclear umbrella (See NATO, [March 26,] 2025). As a result, the U.S. can be said to perform great power reflexes in Russian War in Ukraine, by seeking for limitation of war and peace deals, through economic and military means, without ignoring the general balance of power in international society.

4. Great Power Reflexes of the United States during Donald Trump's Second Term: The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and the Relevant Developments in the Middle East

October 7th attacks of Hamas and the subsequent human right violations against Palestinians by Israel, and the following Israeli military interventions in Syria, Lebanon and Iran have become an intractable puzzle for the Middle East in 2025. With an argument of eliminating all the potential threats against Israel, international politics witnessed the Israeli occupation of Syrian territories, intervention and military operations in Lebanon and Iran, all of which seemed to have started by the October 7th events. The limits of the ongoing crises in the Middle East seem to stretch beyond the reflexes of Israel to eliminate its perceived threats. Current events seem to constitute a new trajectory for the region, which have been re-shaping the political and military dynamics with the help of a great power- the U.S. It is clear that with the American staunch support, Israel has become capable of doing all the aforesaid interventions and operations.

Indeed, it appears that there has been a sharp decline in American citizens' trust in Netanyahu's policies. According to the polls, many Americans believe that 'President Trump is favoring Israelis too much,' and nearly half of U.S. citizens have an unfavorable opinion of Israel (See Silver, 2025). Despite this fact, the U.S. seems to be in a tendency to render its international support to Israel clearly, both on the battle grounds and at diplomatic corridors. As a reflection of this policy, In June 2025, Trump administration opposed the attempts for international negotiations for a two-state solution for Palestine on the UN platform, stating that such an attempt could result in legal and political obstacles to a final resolution of the conflict (Irish and Pamuk, 2025), and also did not hesitate to launch airstrikes on Iran's nuclear facilities in coordination with Israel as well (Lopez, 2025).

In 2025, there has still been no stability in the region, which is full of conflicts and harsh confrontations. Amidst these events, the U.S. is expected to take a leading role to give central direction to the subsequence of events related to Israel-Palestine issues and beyond. Salem summarizes the basic policy outline of Trump's second term towards the Middle East as follows:

...a strong commitment to Israel's security along with a desire to bring its recent conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon to an end; a prioritization of a tripartite deal between the US, Saudi Arabia, and Israel that features Saudi-Israeli normalization but would require some concessions from Israel to the Palestinians; a high valuation of US economic and technological relations with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as an end in itself as well as a way to contain China; and a strong desire to reach a negotiated deal with Iran (Salem, 2025).

On contrary to the expectations from a great power, which would be focusing on remote geographies and drawing of a global vision, "America First" campaign of Trump basically has concentrated on domestic dynamics. In his inaugural speech, Trump did not focus heavily on foreign policy matters and even did not mention any international crisis. Besides his words on Panama, he only touched upon the hostage crisis, which would be seen as a sign of his leadership in the conflict: "I'm pleased to say that as of yesterday, one day before I assumed office, the hostages in the Middle East are coming back home to their families". Trump shared a positive development with his audience, implying the Israeli hostages. On the other hand, such as the case in Ukrainian crisis, Trump's bid for being a peace maker seems also valid for the cases in the Middle East as well (The White House, [January 20,] 2025) Similarly on 25 January, the White House Statement on Hostage Release reveals that

"Today the world celebrates as President Trump secured the release of four more Israeli hostages who were, for far too long, held against their will by Hamas in horrific conditions. The United States will continue with its great partner Israel to push for the release of all remaining hostages and the pursuit of peace throughout the region" (The White House, [January 25,] 2025).

This statement highlights that the release of the hostages was provided by Trump. This text also calls Israel as the great partner of the U.S. On February 12, after a meeting with Jordanian delegation, it is declared that “King Abdullah thanked the President for his leadership in securing the release of hostages from Gaza and a temporary pause in hostilities.”, “...The President reiterated that Hamas must release all hostages, including all Americans...”, which highlighted the role of the U.S. especially about the release of the hostages. Similarly on March 5, “President Trump took time to meet with eight of the released hostages from Gaza. The President listened intently to their heartbreaking stories” (See The White House, [February 12,] 2025; The White House, [March 5,] 2025). The release of the hostages has become one focal point signifying the leadership role of the U.S., which could be considered as a great power reflex as well. Rather than keeping indifference to the developments, exerting efforts for the releases of hostages emerged as the prominent policy of recently elected Trump’s Government.

In fact, as Trump began his second term, he supported efforts initiated by his predecessor to establish a ceasefire, which held for just over a month—from mid-January to early March (Katulis, 2025b). Trump’s main policy seemed to be “an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, centered on a tripartite US-Saudi-Israeli deal that would include Saudi-Israeli normalization, and an agreement between the US and Iran.” (Salem, 2025). Within this respect, the discourse of Trump bears the lines of giving a central direction to the trajectory of events. In his sentences, he prefers to use “we”, implying joint activities done by the U.S. and Israeli forces, which has brought an amount of “change” to the region. Trump notes that “Together, we defeated ISIS. We ended the disastrous Iran nuclear deal, one of the worst deals ever made by the way, and imposed the toughest ever sanctions on the Iranian regime. We starved Hamas and Iran's other terrorist proxies, and we starved them like they had never seen before, resources and support disappeared for them.” The response from Netanyahu approves this collaboration in his words: “‘Haniyeh is gone. Sinwar is gone. Nasrallah is gone. We've devastated Hamas. We decimated Hezbollah. We destroyed Assad's remaining armaments, and we crippled Iran's air defenses. And in doing this, we've defeated some of America's worst enemies” (“Trump and Netanyahu Speak to Press”, n.d.). In Netanyahu’s words: “Israel’s victory will be America's victory. We'll not only win the war. Working together, we'll win the peace. With your leadership, Mr. President, and our partnership, I believe that we will forge a brilliant future for our region and bring our great alliance to even greater heights” (“Trump and Netanyahu Speak to Press”, n.d.)

It follows from these statements that the U.S. and Israel have similar perceptions of threats in the region and share a common vision. Netanyahu mentions about reshaping the Middle East for peace, and demands support from the U.S., by quoting the future of Gaza. Netanyahu notes “Mr. President, to secure our future and bring peace to our region, we have to finish the job. In Gaza, Israel has three goals. Destroy Hamas's military and governing capabilities, secure the release of all of our hostages, and ensure that Gaza never again poses a threat to Israel... This is the kind of thinking that will reshape the Middle East and bring peace.” (“Trump and Netanyahu Speak to Press”, n.d.). This so-called ‘reshaping’ can be counted for Gaza, which Trump notes “The only reason the Palestinians want to go back to Gaza is they have no alternative. It's right now a demolition site...They, instead, can occupy all of a beautiful area with homes and safety, and they can live out their lives in peace and harmony, instead of having to go back and do it again” (“Trump and Netanyahu Speak to Press”, n.d.). This policy implies providing of alternative settlements for Palestinian residents of Gaza in favor of Israel. In his visit to Middle East on May 13-16, 2025 President Trump attracted attention with provocative proposals, such as the so-called “Gaza Riviera” plan, and pursued investment opportunities and economic agreements with major regional powers. However, he has yet to fulfill many of the promises he made during last year’s presidential campaign, including his pledge to broaden the scope of the 2020 Abraham Accords (Katulis, 2025a).

On the other hand, in consideration with giving a central trajectory to the events, or in other words ‘reshaping’ the region, the U.S. presented leadership and collaboration with Israel, took place in Yemen. On March 28, upon the developments in Yemen and broader Middle East, President Trump wrote a

letter to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate. In this letter, Trump notes the attacks of Houthi militants in Yemen threatening the interest of the U.S. and the lives of the American citizens. In this text, Trump notes “I will no longer allow this band of pirates to threaten and attack United States forces and commercial vessels in one of the most important shipping lanes in the world. We will act to keep Americans safe”. Following these words, Trump explains about the military deployments in the Middle East along with some references to the American support to Israel as well. The following are Trump’s own sentences:

“I directed the Department of Defense to move additional forces equipped for combat into the Middle East to enhance the defensive capabilities available to United States forces and facilitate necessary military actions. These forces include capabilities for air and missile defense of Israel and of locations hosting United States forces as well as fighter, support, and reconnaissance aircraft to enable strikes on Houthi targets” (The White House, [April 22,]2025)

As a result, The Trump administration, during its second term, carried out airstrikes targeting Houthi forces in Yemen and extended unconditional backing to Israel's military operations in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria (Katulis, 2025a). It is remarkable that unlike the case in Ukraine, Trump answers positively as to any possibility to deploy troops in Gaza. Upon a question of “...should the U.S. send troops to help secure the security vacuum?”, Trump replies that “As far as Gaza is concerned, we'll do what is necessary. If it's necessary, we'll do that” (“Trump and Netanyahu Speak to Press”, n.d.).

Besides the military cooperation, Trump is acting for the military aid to Israel, and for resisting any criticism even for human rights as well. Trump states “I ended the last administration's de facto arms embargo on over \$1 billion in military assistance for Israel. And I'm pleased to announce that this afternoon the United States withdrew from the anti-Semitic UN Human Rights Council and ended all of the support for the UN Relief and Works agency, which funneled money to Hamas and which was very disloyal to humanity” (“Trump and Netanyahu Speak to Press”, n.d.).

In addition to Gaza, Israel and the U.S. share the same views on Iran as well. Rather than interpreting these policies as Israeli reactive plans, it would be plausible to identify them as the policies of a great power- the U.S. that is shaping the trajectory of international relations in the region in collaboration with Israel. Trump notes that “I also took action to restore a maximum pressure policy on the Iranian regime. And we'll, once again, enforce the most aggressive possible sanctions, drive Iranian oil exports to zero and diminish the regime's capacity to fund terror throughout the region and throughout the world.” (“Trump and Netanyahu Speak to Press”, n.d.). In parallel to this discourse, in June, 2025 Israel began air strikes and operations against Iran, which turned into mutual air campaigns with missiles and drones between Iran and Israel. At the beginning of the events, a statement came from Secretary of State Marco Rubio on June 12:

“Tonight, Israel took unilateral action against Iran. We are not involved in strikes against Iran and our top priority is protecting American forces in the region. Israel advised us that they believe this action was necessary for its self-defense. President Trump and the Administration have taken all necessary steps to protect our forces and remain in close contact with our regional partners. Let me be clear: Iran should not target U.S. interests or personnel” (The White House, [June 12,] 2025)

As a result, according to Israel-Palestine issues in the Middle East, the U.S. as a great power seems to give central direction to the trajectory of the events, or in other words “reshaping” the dynamics of the region, with a recognized leadership. Trump’s own policies to preserve the interests of the U.S. and protecting American soldiers and citizens match with a primary collaboration with Israel. Within this framework, the U.S. utilizes its military, political and economic tools to give support to Israel, and tends

to lead the developments with a great power reflex. It is remarkable that the U.S. seems determined to render support for Israel at the cost of opposing the international organizations such as UNHR or having protests from its Allies.

Conclusion

‘Power’ in International Relations is a central term which is simply referred to as a capability of one actor to shape the policies of the other actors. When comes to great powers, this capability assumes to work at a high strength to shape the general direction of international politics. After the demise of the Soviet Union, the U.S. survived as the ‘remaining’ great power with enormous military and economic capacities, along with incentives embedded in a liberal discourse. The first decade of the post-Cold War, empowered by the September 11 attacks, the U.S. consolidated its great power status in the international society. However, the Iraq War in 2003 and the following developments put the status of the U.S. into question in terms of recognition, due to its disputed policies in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. The turbulent reactions of the United States to Russia—following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent war in Ukraine in 2022—have complicated its great power status and the strategic reflexes associated with it. The gradual increase in the reluctance about the “boots on the ground” policies presented itself in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan as withdrawal of U.S. troops. This fact seems to have limited the impact of the U.S. in shaping the overall interactions, and trajectory of the international society.

However, in 2025, Trump seems to have opened a new phase in the U.S. foreign policy. As a leader, difficult to estimate, claimed many assertive policies over Panama, Suez and Greenland and gave pledges for immediate peace processes in the Middle East and Ukraine. These arguments seemed very convenient for a great power, with a capacity to make changes in the reality of IR. Trump, himself quotes this fact, by criticizing his predecessor- Joe Biden. Trump maintains that the failures of the Biden’s government changed the destiny of the world politics negatively. Withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russian War in Ukraine and October 7th attack of Hamas became consequences of Biden’s misguided policies.

In relation to the fundamental responsibilities of a great power - preserving the general balance, avoidance and control of crises, and limitation of wars, Trump seems to undertake these duties as much as possible. Firstly, it is clear that the U.S. does not keep indifference to the developments in Ukraine and any development concerning Israel in the Middle East. On contrary, in both of the cases, whether it is ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia, or developments in Yemen or Israel’s attacks on Iran, the U.S. tend to play a leadership role and give a central direction to trajectory of events clearly. While doing so, the U.S. has used its economic and military tools as well. The submitting of Javelin missiles to Ukraine, or joint operations made with Israel, or aiding 350 billions of dollars to Ukraine can be counted as samples for the supports involved.

Two reservations seem to exist in the U.S. great power reflexes. Firstly, the U.S. does not eager to make military engagements as much as possible which would bring financial burden and a risk for the lives of American soldiers and civilians. “America First” doctrine emphasizes the significance of “defending homeland” rather than the other countries. Despite this fact, Trump nodded for providing military troops for Gaza, if required. In this sense, the U.S. signals to use military force if necessary, along with a reluctance to do so. Secondly, taking the Ukrainian crisis into account, the U.S. acts for more active participation of European powers rather than counting on the great power status of the U.S. This reality is also fundamentally related to the “America First” policy that the U.S. does not want to pay major portion of the NATO spending, particularly for the European defense. These two reservations or reluctances do not fundamentally undermine the U.S. great power reflexes, but they challenge and complicate the interactions involved.

As a result, this study has found out that after taking the Office in January 2025, Trump has been a key figure with a tendency to give a central direction to the trajectory of events both in Ukraine and the Israel-Palestine related issues in the Middle East. Trump appears willing to further the United States’ leadership role as a great power, and there seems to be no effective opposition capable of undermining

this recognition. It follows from the developments that neither Russia nor China have showed the capacity to stop the U.S. from shaping general trajectory for the matters involved. When Trump offers peace talks for Ukraine, even Russians does not oppose it. When Trump supports Israel for any of its action, no other actor in the international society seems to have the capacity to stop Israel even though it makes human rights violations that undermine very deeply the normative roots of IR. To conclude, the U.S. Government under the second term of Trump, tends to act in line with the responsibilities of a great power status, which are basically seeking of general balance of power, limitation of wars and avoid and control of crises. The U.S. reluctance to pursue “boots on the ground” policies, along with efforts to shift a fair share of responsibility to European powers in the Ukrainian crisis, reflects elements of the “America First” doctrine, while challenging the interactions relatively, but not fundamentally undermining the great power reflexes of the U.S..

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GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Soğuk Savaş sonrasında ABD, kalan tek 'büyük güç' oldu ve 11 Eylül saldırıları sonrasında bu konumunu daha da pekiştirdi. Ancak, ABD'nin Afganistan, Irak, Suriye ve Ukrayna'daki tartışmalı politikaları, öncü statüsüne yönelik tanınmasında düşüşe neden oldu. ABD, bu krizlerde istikrarsız büyük güç refleksleri sergileyerek, uluslararası toplumun gidişatına yön verme, genel güç dengesini koruma, krizleri önleme ve kontrol etme ile savaşları sınırlandırma gibi bir büyük güçten beklenen sorumlulukları yerine getirmede göreceli olarak başarısız oldu. Ocak 2025'te Başkan Trump'ın ikinci döneminin başlamasıyla birlikte, ABD dış politikasında bu büyük güç reflekslerini yeniden kazanmaya yönelik, söylem değişiklikleriyle belirginleşen, yeniden düzenleme emareleri görülmüştür. Bu çerçevede, bu çalışma, ABD'nin politikalarını özellikle iki önemli vaka üzerinden değerlendirmektedir: Rusya'nın Ukrayna'daki savaşı ve İsrail-Filistin çatışması ile Orta Doğu'daki ilgili gelişmeler. Araştırma kapsamında, çalışma, "ABD'nin askeri, ekonomik ve siyasi gücüyle bir büyük güç statüsünün bir refleksi olarak ne ölçüde uluslararası olayların gidişatına liderlik ettiği ve merkezi bir yön verdiği" sorusunu yanıtlamak amacıyla 2025 yılına ait 'Bilgilendirme ve Açıklamalar' ve ilgili 'Demeçler' bölümlerindeki Beyaz Saray belgelerini içerik analizi yöntemiyle incelemektedir. Güç, bir aktörün diğer bir aktörün politikalarını ve faaliyetlerini şekillendirme yetisi olarak tanımlanabilir. Bu tanım ışığında, "büyük güç" terimi, diğer aktörlerin politikalarını daha geniş ve derin bir ölçekte şekillendirme yeteneği olarak tanımlanabilir. Büyük güçler, aralarındaki ilişkileri yöneterek ve kendi baskınlıklarını, uluslararası toplumun işlerine belirli bir merkezi yön verme vererek uluslararası düzeni kurgularlar. Hedley Bull, uluslararası toplum kavramını net bir şekilde tanımlayan bir akademisyen olarak göre, uluslararası düzeni düzenleyen en etkili mekanizmanın "güç dengesi" olduğunu belirtir. Uluslararası toplumdaki genel güç dengesi, öncelikle büyük güçlerin etkileşimleri tarafından şekillendirilir. Büyük güçler, aynı zamanda özel haklar ve yükümlülükler taşıyan "büyük sorumlular" olarak değerlendirilir. Bu sorumluluk, "genel dengenin korunması", "krizlerin önlenmesi ve kontrolü" ve "savaşların sınırlandırılması" gibi işlevlerin yönetilmesi ve bu kapsamda uluslararası toplumda olayların gidişatına merkezi bir yön verilmesidir. Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, büyük askeri kapasitesi ve onu destekleyen ekonomik gücü ile uluslararası toplumda büyük güç olma rolünü sürdürmek için gerekli koşullara sahiptir. Donald Trump'ın 2025'teki ikinci dönemi, Ukrayna ve Orta Doğu gibi çatışma bölgelerinde büyük taahhütlerle başlamış ve Panama, Süveyş, Grönland gibi çeşitli topraklar üzerinde iddialarda bulunmuştur. Bu tutum, dengesizliğine rağmen, büyük güç reflekslerine uyumlu görünmektedir. ABD'nin Ukrayna'ya ilişkin politikası açıkça askeri olarak müdahil olmama, ama Ukrayna'ya desteği sürdürme üzerine kuruludur. Bu kapsamda ABD, Ukrayna'ya askeri teçhizat ve silah sağlamaktadır. Büyük güç olarak ABD'nin çabaları, büyük güçlerin "krizleri önleme ve kontrol etme" sorumluluklarıyla örtüşür şekilde bir ateşkes sağlamak ve barış görüşmeleri yapmak üzerine şekillenmiştir. Ancak dikkat çekici bir şekilde, ABD'nin özellikle yakın gelecekte güç dengesini sağlamak amacıyla daha çok Çin'e yoğunlaştığı, Avrupa güçlerine Ukrayna konusundaki sorumluluğu yüklemeye yönelik bir eğilim gösterdiği anlaşılmaktadır. İsrail-Filistin meseleleri açısından ise, ABD, büyük bir güç olarak olayların seyrine merkezi bir yön vermekte ve bölgenin dinamiklerini "yeniden şekillendirmektedir". Trump, ABD'nin çıkarlarını koruma ve Amerikan askerleri ile vatandaşlarını koruma amacı güden politikalar geliştirmiştir ve bu bağlamda İsrail ile işbirliği yapma eğilimindedir. ABD'nin, uluslararası organizasyonlar olan BM İnsan Hakları gibi kuruluşlarına karşı muhalefet göstererek İsrail'i destekleme kararlılığı dikkat çekicidir. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma, Trump'ın Ocak 2025'te göreve başladığında hem Ukrayna'daki hem de Orta Doğu'daki İsrail-Filistin meseleleriyle ilgili olayların gidişatına merkezi bir yön verme eğiliminde kilit bir aktör olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Trump, büyük bir güç olarak liderlik rolünü ileri taşıma eğilimindedir. Bulgular, Trump yönetiminin ikinci döneminde, genel güç dengesini sağlama, savaşları sınırlandırma ve krizleri önleme ve kontrol etme çabaları ile geleneksel büyük güç sorumluluklarıyla uyumlu hareket etme eğiliminde olduğunu göstermektedir. Ayrıca, askeri kuvvetlerin bizzat sahaya inerek yürütülen "Postallar sahada" şeklinde ifade edilebilecek politikalara karşı duyulan isteksizlik ile "Önce Amerika" politikaları doğrultusunda Ukrayna'daki sorumluluğun adil bir seviyede Avrupalı güçlere devredilmesi girişimlerinin de, uluslararası etkileşimleri karmaşık hale getirirse de ABD'nin büyük güç reflekslerini tam olarak zayıflatmadığı görülmüştür.