VERITAS

FALL 2025

REMNANTS

Volume 2, Issue 1

“Remnants”

[“a surviving trace” / “to endure beyond”]

Statement from Editor-in-Chief

Dear Readers and Contributors,

It is with great pride that we present *Remnants,* the second volume of *Veritas*, the University of Toronto Policython's journal. Building on the foundation of Veritas's first issue, we sought to uphold Policython's commitment to rigorous, critical, and relevant scholarship that advances policy literacy within the undergraduate academic community. *Veritas* continues to serve as a platform for students to engage analytically with the forces that shape public life.

The theme of this issue is *Remnants*. This theme turns our attention to the enduring imprints of the past and how historical legacies persist within contemporary institutions, governance structures, and policy frameworks. This includes colonial administrations and inherited legal doctrines, to environmental and economic systems. We aimed to select works that move beyond mere recognition of these legacies to interrogate how they continue to structure contemporary governance critically, constrain reform, and reproduce inequality, while also exploring the possibilities for reinterpretation, resistance, and institutional change. *Remnants* asks how inherited structures shape both the limits and possibilities of contemporary policy reform. We sought contributions that engage seriously with theory and evidence while remaining responsive to the urgent political and social challenges of our time.

We would like to draw particular attention to a selection of contributions that offer analytical depth and thematic focus, directly addressing the urgent questions confronting contemporary governance. Domenico Sgambelluri's: *Canadian Responses to U.S. Protectionist Trade Policies* exemplifies how Canada's contemporary trade strategy is conditioned by inherited and longstanding trade frameworks that continue to structure its relationship with the United States. Sgambelluri critiques the effects of retaliatory tariffs as an effective response, arguing that diversifying trade and logistics beyond the U.S. and strengthening domestic economic resilience are more effective responses.

Moreover, Arash Aslan Beigi's *The Factors Perpetuating Foreign Policy Inertia in the United States of America* exemplifies how enduring institutional legacies within the United States continue to shape and constrain foreign policy across administrations. Aslan Beigi critiques the expectation of meaningful change through presidential leadership alone, arguing that the separation of powers, elite foreign policy networks, and the military-industrial complex together generate a self-reinforcing cycle of policy inertia that sustains continuity despite repeated promises of reform.

Turning to the international context, Sora Hokonohara's essay, *Applying Critical Race Theory to Sanseito's 2025 Upper House Electoral Breakthrough in Japan*, investigates the sociological drivers behind the rapid rise of Japan's newest nationalist party. Hokonohara utilizes Critical Race Theory to dissect how Sanseito capitalized on public anxieties surrounding Japan's 3% immigrant population to secure 14 seats in the 2025 elections. Sora argues that the rigid "Japanese/non-Japanese" cultural model obscures systemic injustices and allows for the scapegoating of a broad range of "othered" groups. It critiques how cultural taboos and historical narratives of ethnic homogeneity continue to fuel modern xenophobic platforms in a globalizing Japan.

Together, these featured contributions, alongside each work included in *Remnants*, reflect *Veritas*'s commitment to fostering rigorous undergraduate scholarship, while contributing to this issue's goal of interrogating how inherited institutions, policy frameworks, and power structures continue to shape contemporary governance, extending the theme beyond any single case to reveal the pervasive influence of historical legacies across diverse policy contexts.

I would like to thank all contributors for their work and perspectives in the creation of this journal. To the Editors, Jovana Radin, Anmar Attar and Briallen MacNeill, your commitment and efforts to this journal were essential to its success and creation. To the broader UofT Policython community, thank you for your support throughout the planning and creation of Remnants. Without you all, this would not have been possible.

As Editor-in-Chief, I am proud to present Remnants as the second volume of Veritas and to continue building a space for student-led policy initiatives. The contributions in this issue remind us that contemporary policy is inseparable from the legacies that shape it, and that meaningful reform begins with critical engagement with those inheritances. We hope this volume challenges readers to reflect, question, and carry these insights beyond the page. Thank you for being part of the *VERITAS* community!

Best Regards,

Dolan Côté

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Published by: *Policython,* University of Toronto

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The Naturalization of Competition: Gendered Subjectivity and Youth Precarity in Post-1997 South Korea

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How Neoliberalism Rewrites Gender and

Youth in Contemporary Korea

SAMUEL MIN

The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis marked a decisive shift in South Korea (Korea hereafter) from a developmental state toward a regime of neoliberal governmentality, and under this new paradigm, responsibility for social and economic well-being has been redistributed onto individuals. That is, individuals, especially 'youth'—best described as young, working-age adults—are asked to embody discipline, self-improvement, and meritocratic struggle in everyday life. As a result, discourse surrounding gender becomes one of the most charged arenas where such neoliberal demands are naturalized: rather than disciplining women into fixed ideals, neoliberalism mobilizes gender as a contested arena.

In other words, neoliberal governmentality in post-1997 Korea generates feminized subjects not by imposing static norms of "beauty" or "sexuality," but by orchestrating gendered arenas of struggle that redirect frustration horizontally—mutual antagonization between genders—as opposed to vertically—collective antagonization of the system itself. Many young men interpret conscription through frames of fairness and grievance, while many young women are compelled into 'beauty labour' framed as empowerment: both are made to internalize competition as a moral obligation rather than a structural condition. Through such circuits of desire, shame, resentment, aspiration, and consumption, Korean youth reproduce neoliberal values as if freely chosen. In this process, feminized subjectivity—self-disciplining, self-optimizing, aesthetically managed, and emotionally responsive—is continuously regenerated across the media and the workplace, penetrating the deepest corners of everyday life. Moreover, the very mechanisms that pit genders against one another ultimately secure neoliberalism's hegemony: structural inequalities remain unchallenged while neoliberal norms become increasingly invisible, natural, and intimate. This paper examines how such dynamics unfold and why gendered conflict functions not as a challenge to neoliberalism, but as one of its most effective mechanisms of reproduction.

Theoretical Frameworks: Situating Neoliberal Governmentality in Post-1997 Korean Society

Antonio Gramsci (1935) states that power works by securing consent through cultural hegemony, not through force (p. 10). This is reflected in Korean society today, where neoliberalism reproduces itself invisibly through culture, rather than brute coercion. Louis Althusser (1971) operationalizes Gramsci's argument, isolating ideology as the hegemonic state's tool of control over the population: ideology recruits individuals as subjects, penetrating individuals' private spheres through Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) to normalize behaviour and naturalize systemic structures (pp. 141-6). As such, in post-1997 Korea, the media plays a hegemonic role in subject formation, producing feminized subjects through 'beauty labour,' self-discipline, and consumption.

Stuart Hall (1981) extends Gramsci and Althusser's work by locating this ideological struggle within popular culture, as for him, popular culture is not a static manifestation of tradition but a site where the powerful and the powerless engage in struggle (p. 518). Therefore, hegemony is reproduced through the production of pleasure (p. 515)—where consumption, aspiration, and entertainment converge. Furthermore, he posits that cultural forms are not authentic, but they are constantly reorganized by institutions and industries that transform subjects into consumers (pp. 510-1). This framework helps explain

why practices such as ‘aegyo,’ ‘K-beauty’ routines, and mimicking idol aesthetics cannot be treated as timeless cultural expressions: they are mechanisms produced in contest with power. In this sense, gendered performances in Korea function as cultural forms where neoliberal governmentality produces feminized subjects who willingly reproduce the very norms that constrain them.

Michel Foucault’s (1973) work on the shift from punishment to surveillance—or panopticism (pp. 57-9)—explains how subjects in Korea internalize beauty norms, meritocracy, and competition as self-supervision rather than external coercion. His idea that following this shift, individuals must measure themselves against state-produced norms (p. 84) clarifies how Korean women become tethered to ‘beauty labour', Korean men to militarized citizenship, and Korean ‘youth’ to competitive self-optimization. Furthermore, Foucault’s (1976) work on the emergence of biopower—the regulation of populations through sexuality, health, and norms (p. 247)—explains how femininity, beauty, and sexuality serve as sites of self-management and neoliberal subject production at a national scale.

Neoliberal Governmentality in Post-1997 Korea: The Naturalization of Precarity and Femininity

The Naturalization of Precarity and Meritocracy

Following the Asian Financial Crisis, individual responsibility replaced structural critique, reframing systemic issues of labour insecurity, inequality, and state withdrawal from welfare as matters of personal effort, self-management, and moral character. That is, Korean ‘youth’ were interpellated to naturalize competition and thus encouraged to treat precarity and inequality as problems to be solved through self-discipline and self-improvement, rather than criticizing meritocracy. This is reflected in both genders, as most young Korean men’s views of success are bound by their belief in meritocracy (Capelos et al. 2023, p. 261), and as for Korean women, this is most clearly illustrated by some feminists who seek “to eliminate discrimination and violence that hinder an individual’s well-being and place responsibility on the individual, rather than reconstructing gender” (Choo 2020, p. 495). In other words, neoliberal governmentality renders competition and gendered subjectivity as natural and independence as a moral obligation, thereby invisibilizing the structural conditions that produce precarity and redirecting critique away from the system itself, back towards the individual.

The Production of an Ideal Female Subject

Neoliberal governmentality produces ideal female subjects as self-managing, aesthetic, and entrepreneurial through self-help books, the ‘prestige’ of K-pop idols in the media, their embodiment of feminine ideals, and match-making

services that commodify young Korean men and women's desires to find love and get married. *A Woman's Entire Life is Determined in her Twenties*, a popular feminist self-help book, tells readers "to develop high-class tastes in consumption, to sculpt a beautiful body, and to set up and execute a well-planned marriage strategy" (Cho 2009, p. 26), framing marriage as an individual project requiring entrepreneurial initiative and aesthetic self-management. Even young women who insist that marriage is optional accept that, should they pursue it, "setting up and executing a well-planned marriage strategy is an absolute necessity," as Korean women enter the marriage market "severely disadvantaged" (Ibid., p. 26). This logic extends into the commercial dating industry, where matchmaking companies quantify and rank clients' desirabilities through gender-weighted indices that prioritize women's appearance and bodily measurements (Ibid., p. 53). This perfectly mirrors Foucault's panopticism and Hall's reorganization of culture to produce consuming subjects: young women measure themselves against beauty norms and consume beauty products to live up to expectations.

The media also plays a role in the production of ideal female subjects by interpellating young women with reality shows and K-pop idols. Reality shows such as *Let Me In* champion beauty standards only achievable for many through cosmetic surgery, thereby normalizing physical alterations for aesthetic purposes (Lee 2020, p. 102). Furthermore, Kim (2018) discusses how the representation of K-pop in the media glorifies the 'prestige' of idols: "K-pop's main features consist of addictive, fast, and dynamic beats and sounds, garnished with a perfectly synchronized, mesmerizing choreography by attractive male idols or appealing, delicate, and sexy female idols" (p. 522). Here, the media interpellates viewers of both genders with flashy appeals of K-pop idols' bodies and performances, to idealize such standards of beauty—a convergence of Foucault's norms and Althusser's ISAs. This is especially effective as idols and aspiring K-pop trainees are often depicted online as hardworking to develop themselves to compete in a meritocratic society (Kim 2018, pp. 530-1; Lee and Zhang 2021, pp. 530-1). These mechanisms thus produce the moral obligation to define one's self-worth within the limitations of meritocratic competition, reproducing neoliberal governmentality at an individual level.

Contested Arenas: How Neoliberalism Produces Gendered Divides and Subjectivities

Horizontal Resentment: Male Victimhood and Redirection of Frustration

Many young Korean men define success within the meritocratic society they live in (Capelos et al. 2023, p. 261): their self-worth is defined by their market value (Ibid., p. 269), illustrating neoliberal creation and naturalization of their

precarity through the hypercommodification of their labour. Moreover, in post-1997 Korea's meritocratic economy, women are competitors to men in the job market (Choo 2020, p. 484), "which impel many to perceive the period spent fulfilling one's military service as a waste of time when it comes to preparing for the future" (Ibid., p. 494). That is, military service is seen as a "barrier towards individual goals," and the resulting frustrations are directed towards women and feminism (Capelos et al. 2023, p. 266). Their desire to succeed and their frustration towards the barriers placed between themselves and their perceptions of success converge to create resentment, which is directed horizontally towards women, their competitors, rather than towards the competition itself, which produces their hardships. Here, we see Hall and Althusser's arguments at play once again: neoliberal governmentality interpellates young men to naturalize their precarity, and popular culture provides the arena where this interpellation is lived, while the system remains largely unchallenged. Power is therefore reproduced through desire and resentment, as interpersonal conflict displaces structural critique.

Horizontal Resentment: Gender Essentialism as "Misrecognized" Oppression

While these young men redirect structural frustrations toward women, a parallel form of horizontal resentment—though differently structured—emerges among some young women. Choo (2020) states that in gendered debates over conscription, many young women respond to male accusations of female gender privilege by tying womanhood with biological experiences such as pregnancy and childbirth (p. 495). Such a stance bounds feminist arguments around real, authentic womanhood, positioning only biological women as capable of understanding gendered suffering. This produces limitations for critique: women become oriented toward defending the level of hardship in the biologically female experience, coupled with competing in meritocracy, rather than challenging the structural gender hierarchy that shapes said experience. This dynamic limits young women to problematize issues that pertain to hardships felt at the individual level, thereby placing "responsibility on the individual" (Ibid., p. 495), rather than questioning gendered subjectivity entirely. In short, women respond to male resentment with counter-resentment grounded in experiential authenticity, when both sides are trapped within the neoliberal frame that demands individualized solutions rather than structural critique.

This horizontal resentment is further intensified through "postfeminist sensibility," which imagines the ideal woman as an "active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject" whose constant self-management aligns perfectly with the neoliberal expectation to be "autonomous, calculating, [and] self-regulating" (Fedorenko 2015, p. 476). The result of this is not solidarity, but comparison and competition: many young women come to view self-improvement in meritocratic competition

and resistance against patriarchal oppression as individualized projects—morally charged obligations that signify one's value. Therefore, both men and women are interpellated into horizontal antagonisms rather than vertical: men blame women for their military burdens and declining job security, and women counter with biologically grounded claims about suffering and moral responsibility. In both cases, resentment is directed laterally rather than up, toward the neoliberal system that produces precarity: rather than challenging neoliberal governmentality, they sustain it by ensuring horizontal resentment between groups while power remains invisible.

Conquered Arenas: Governance through Desire, Consumption, and Idolization

Hypersexualization and Commodification in the Making of Ideal Female Subjects

The production of ideal female subjects can be analyzed further through gendered performances—specifically, hypersexualization in idol culture and the interpersonal enforcement of 'aegyo.' In the idol industry, young women are staged as "consumable spectacles," valued for their ability to embody traits of the "ideal girlfriend": entertainment companies deliberately construct girl groups to appeal to male fans seeking intimacy while simultaneously encouraging female fans to emulate them as models of desirable femininity (Jonas 2021, p. 10). Venters and Rothenberg (2023) show that said femininity is not only projected but enforced within the industry: trainees undergo bodily surveillance and strict dieting to satisfy "near-unattainable beauty paragons" (p. 463). Here, the key mechanism is performance, as the idols are trained to inhabit a body language, aesthetic, and demeanour that present femininity as erotic yet innocent, and disciplined.

Importantly, these logics extend far beyond idol culture, as everyday gendered practices, such as 'aegyo,' function as interpersonal mechanisms of governance. As Puzar and Hong (2018) argue, 'aegyo' is widely "expected from young women or even demanded" across both intimate and professional settings (pp. 344-5). In this context, winsomeness, emotional softness and docility (Ibid., p. 345) are normalized as natural, feminine traits, even though they are socially produced. Such interpersonal enforcement transforms femininity into a behavioural script requiring constant self-surveillance and self-management. Furthermore, none of these performances rely on overt coercion, as women are made to reproduce patriarchal and neoliberal expectations through naturalizations of feminine traits. Gender performance thus becomes a form of embodied governance: a process through which individuals regulate themselves to align with normative femininity, coerced by the illusion of choice.

K-Beauty and Cosmetic Surgery as Desired Commodities

'Beauty labour'—the constant self-management over one's looks—and cosmetic surgery function as neoliberal projects that reframe bodily modification for aesthetic purposes as personal responsibility and rational investment into one's future. Lee (2020) highlights that cosmetic procedures and 'beauty labour' are structurally required in neoliberal Korea, as acquiring information on one's physical attributes, such as weight and height, has "been [a] common practice for most job application processes" (p. 106). This, coupled with the aforementioned expectation for women to perform "naturally feminine" traits, converges to create feminized subjectivity. That is, women are made to understand 'beauty labour' not as coercion but as a moral obligation, internalizing beauty labour as part of neoliberal "Korean womanness"—to manage, discipline, and optimize her own body to remain competitive and socially legible.

'K-beauty'—an overarching term for skincare products made in Korea—operates as a form of "hegemonic hybridity," combining Westernized ideals of whiteness, slimness, symmetry, and flawless skin with neo-Confucian cultural expectations (Seo et al. 2020, p. 603). 'K-beauty' products "conform neither to Western nor traditional Asian cultural models, because they are characterized by distinctive configurations of cultural hybridity," and provide Koreans with "lifestyles that [they] can emulate" (Ibid., p. 603). This paradox creates the illusion of a diverse, modern, and flexible commodity whose 'prestige' attracts consumers (Ibid., p. 602)—mainly young women pressured to perform "naturally feminine" traits. Crucially, these products reinforce the same standardized beauty norms that reinforce hegemonic power and naturalize neoliberal governmentality (Ibid., p. 602). A parallel dynamic unfolds in the K-pop industry, where idols provide another arena in which neoliberal governmentality produces feminized subjects through aspiration, imitation, and consumption. Idols function as advertisements for neoliberal self-fashioning: fan-led online platforms document what girl groups "wore or what items they were seen with," commodifying every aspect of idol life, and teaching audiences what to buy and how to express "pseudo individualities" through consumption (Kim 2018, p. 532). That is, fans learn to shape their lifestyles and identities through curated commodities and bodily transformation, often mimicking idol procedures such as the "K-pop combo"—an operation that provides double eyelids and a higher, pointed nose associated with 'aegyo'-fied cuteness (Ibid., p. 532).

This process aligns with Althusser: K-pop becomes a cultural apparatus that not only displays ideal femininity but actively interpellates young women into performing it, transforming gender performance into an aspirational project of self-governance and continuous consumption. Hall's theory is also at work here: the commodification of both beauty labour

and cosmetic surgery creates a new mode of governance in consumption, as individuals are encouraged to understand the performance of beauty as the performance of "Korean womanhood" and to desire the subjectivity they are hailed to embody.

Consent through Conflict: Horizontal Resentment and the Invisibility of Neoliberal Power

Across both contested and conquered arenas, gendered antagonism repeatedly fails to undermine neoliberal governance and, rather, enables it. In post-1997 Korea, many 'youth' are taught to demand equal competition rather than to question competition itself, resulting in a moral vocabulary that normalizes precarity (Shim 2017, p. 216). As such, many young men interpret conscription as an individualized obstacle in a meritocratic race, thus seeing women as having a competitive advantage (Choo 2020, pp. 478-9, 494), which converts structural delays in education and employment into a grievance narrative of disadvantage and loss of privilege (Capelos et al. 2023, pp. 262-3). Yet, this grievance rarely travels upward into systemic questioning, as militarism's role in reproducing gendered citizenship remains largely unchallenged, even as it sits at the heart of disputes. Instead, what circulates is horizontal resentment: frustrations about stalled self-actualization and success are directed toward women and feminists, their perceived competitors (Ibid., p. 266), rather than competition itself.

On the other hand, feminist arguments bound by individualized experience of hardships such as pregnancy and childbirth narrow the scope of debate, preventing structural critique (Choo 2020, p. 495). This way, neoliberal governmentality secures consent, rendering structural burdens as tasks of self-regulation, detached from the institutions that produce them. Moreover, "postfeminist sensibility" reframes gendered obligations as empowerment, casting women as "active, freely choosing, self-reinventing" subjects whose self-regulation aligns with the neoliberal ideal (Fedorenko 2015, p. 476). Beauty labour (Cho 2009, pp. 26, 36; Fedorenko 2015, p. 487), self-improvement (Fedorenko 2015, p. 476), and consumption (Ibid., p. 477) become economic requirements and moral obligations rather than political problems: these horizontal antagonisms are not politically inert—they are mobilized. The 2022 presidential race demonstrates this, as political parties leveraged gender conflicts to consolidate blocs of young voters (Jenkins and Kim 2024, pp. 170-1), transforming resentment into 'electoral capital' and cementing gender as a site for polarization despite shared discontent over housing, debt, and jobs (Jenkins and Kim 2024, p. 174; Kim and Lee 2020, p. 288)—precarities produced by neoliberalism.

Finally, popular culture makes ideology disappear: the "hegemonic hybridity" of 'k-beauty' ties standardized norms in national authenticity and global modernity (Seo et al. 2020, pp. 614-3), rendering governance through aesthetics as natural

and even patriotic, ultimately invisibilizing power (Ibid., p. 605). Additionally, media industries—through 'prestige' and fandom—render competitive self-fashioning as a form of citizenship (Kim 2018, p. 532), while cosmetic surgery is framed as moral progress (Lee 2020, pp. 104, 106), masking the ideology it advances. Therefore, when 'youth' demand "fairness" within competition, they reproduce the system that makes "fairness" synonymous with continuous self-discipline and consumption. Neoliberalism wins not by silencing dissent, but by organizing it: contested arenas intensify horizontal blame and convert desire, shame, resentment, and aspiration into practices that reproduce precarity and feminized subjectivity while invisibilizing power and systemic structure

In conclusion, gendered conflict in post-1997 Korea is not a deviation from neoliberalism, but one of its mechanisms. The 'youth' appear to resist, yet their resentment and frustrations are channelled into horizontal antagonisms that create interpersonal disputes, rather than challenging the governmentality that produced their precarity and insecurities. Feminized subjectivity is not naturally occurring, but is produced through media, labour, and consumption, where desire, shame, and aspiration are naturalized and organized into moral obligations, backed by the illusion of choice. Even feminist resistance is often reabsorbed into individualized narratives, fueling gendered divides and leaving the root logics of meritocratic competition, precarity, and self-management untouched. As long as fairness is demanded within competition rather than competition itself being questioned, neoliberal governmentality remains secure, continuously reproducing compliant subjects while invisibilizing its own power

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"Sanseito Member Speech in Nagoya" Source: WikimediaCommons

Applying Critical Race Theory to Sanseito's 2025 Upper House Electoral Breakthrough in Japan

How Cultural Binaries and Invisible Privilege Fuel Japan's New Nationalism

SORA HOKONOHARA

The Sanseito party's meteoric rise in the 2025 upper house elections saw the party growing from being a fringe opposition party holding just one seat, to fourteen seats (Shimizu, 2025). Now a real player in Japanese politics, Sanseito is often labelled as far-right, populist (Associated Press, 2025), and ultranationalist (Ushiyama, 2025), leading to the party's rise being a major point of contention in Japanese politics. Originating as an anti-vaccine and anti-mask wearing conspiracy theory YouTube channel in 2020 (Khalil & Ng, 2025) the party now campaigns on its anti-foreigner, anti-globalist, and anti-immigration platform (Ushiyama, 2025). Their leader, Sohei Kamiya's campaign slogan: "Japanese First" (McCurry, 2025), encourages voters to feel patriotic and proud of their cultural and ethnic identity (Ushiyama, 2025), but critics would also

label this as being xenophobic.

Sanseito's emergence can be seen as an opportunistic capitalization on the feelings of public anxieties (Ushiyama, 2025) created by the record-high numbers of foreign residents in Japan at the end of 2024 (Khalil & Ng, 2025). To combat Japan's poor economic performance and aging population (Khalil & Ng, 2025), immigration rules have been relaxed. The anxieties are caused by people in Japan feeling that foreigners can be blamed for the increase in crime and inflation, despite immigrants still comprising only 3% of the country's population (Khalil & Ng, 2025). Sanseito transformed this public outcry into political success, feeding into these narratives by sometimes spreading unfactual narratives such as foreign residents supposedly committing crimes at a mass scale, and avoiding inheritance tax (Ushiyama, 2025).

Given how enlightening critical race theory has been for North American contexts, it is worth exploring whether critical race theory can also explain racial injustices in other parts of the world, such as Japan. This paper seeks to discover whether critical race theory is a useful lens in understanding the success of Sanseito's xenophobic platform, and the prevalence of nationalistic sentiments in Japan.

From an outside perspective, this amount of anxiety and political turmoil being fuelled by a 3% immigrant population may be perplexing. However, it is important to understand Japan's unique cultural homogeneity (Wilson, 2023). There is a very uniform national consciousness, ethos, and set of distinctly Japanese characteristics due to the nation having never been colonized, being geographically isolated, and also being politically isolated between the mid-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries (Wilson, 2023). The widespread agreement of Japan's values and characteristics has led to the development of a prominent genre of Japanese literature named *nihonjinron,* which translates to the "theories of Japanese-ness" (Scroope, 2025). This literature discusses and praises Japan's ethnic homogeneity (Scroope, 2025), and works in this genre therefore helps establish the clear and identifiable 'line' that separates Japanese people from foreign residents, tourists and immigrants. The homogenous cultural identity of Japan asks individuals to be visibly, ethnically, and behaviourally Japanese by being fully Japanese and/or being born and raised in Japan. This has led to many individuals residing in Japan describing the feeling of being a 'perpetual foreigner' (Moosavi, 2022).

The slogan “Japanese First” xenophobically attacks this broad range of people on the ‘non-Japanese’ side of the ‘line’, which is substantiated further by Sohei Kamiya stating himself that foreigners ‘who cling to their own customs are not accepted’ in Japan (Associated Press, 2025). Sanseito can thus be understood as a party that has succeeded using cultural racism, which is discrimination based on the grounds of culture (Rattansi, 2007). Much of the focus of this paper will therefore be an analysis of the applicability of critical race theory to cultural racism in Japan.

Through an adaptation of Juan F. Perea’s black-white binary of race, and through an analysis of Peggy McIntosh’s work, this essay will ultimately argue that critical race theory can be used to understand much of the recent success of Sanseito in the 2025 upper house election, as critical race theory allows us to uncover how the binary paradigm for cultural identity in Japan, as well as the inability for the dominant Japanese group to recognize privilege, feeds into the cultural racism that Sanseito’s xenophobic, anti-foreigner platform succeeded off of.

The ‘Japanese’/’non-Japanese’ Binary Paradigm

Although Juan F. Perea’s criticisms of the US black/white paradigm of race cannot be directly transposed onto Japanese contexts, with some alterations, Perea’s ideas can still illuminate why Sanseito’s ‘Japanese First’ rhetoric resonated with voters. Perea argues that critical race theory literature often has the flaw of using a black/white binary paradigm of race (Perea, 2013). This paradigm leads to race in the US often being theorized with consideration of only two racial groups, those being black people and white people (Perea, 2013). This focus on just black people and white people leads to a dismissal of the complex identities, cultures, histories and adversities of the other many racialized groups that do not fit this binary, like Latinos/as, Native Americans, and Asian Americans (Perea, 2013). Perea suggests that all races other than these two are often pushed aside in critical race theory literature (Perea, 2013), and in some ways, an opposite paradigm exists in Japan. There also exists a binary in Japan, however, instead of this exclusionary North American binary that ignores many ‘inbetween’ races, the Japanese binary comprehensively captures all individuals by placing them in either the “Japanese” or “non-Japanese” group. This binary is accentuated by slogans such as “Japanese First” (McCurry, 2025), and Japan’s aforementioned *nihonjinron* cultural and ethnic homogeneity that places clear expectations and

‘guidelines’ on who is to belong in the ‘Japanese’ side of the binary (Scroope, 2025). All individuals who do not look visibly Japanese, are not ethnically Japanese, and were not born and raised in Japan, thus being unable to abide by Japan’s strict cultural expectations, struggle to belong as part of the “Japanese” binary category. From a Japanese perspective, all ‘non-Japanese’ people would be bundled into this broad, othered category of *gaikokujin* (foreigner) (Stanislaus & Alabi, 2020). Therefore, the “non-Japanese” binary includes a very wide range of peoples, including, but is not limited to, tourists, migrant workers, foreign permanent residents, and even people like the Zainichi Koreans, who look and act Japanese, but still continues to face rampant discrimination, due to their ethnic background (Ahn & Yoon, 2020).

Although it is important to note the difference between Perea’s observed binary (exclusionary) and Japan’s binary (includes all participants of Japanese society), some of the consequences of the North American binary that Perea criticizes can allow us to better understand Sanseito’s success. One implication of the black/white binary is that the lack of consideration of other non-black racialized groups leads to the full spectrum of racial domination of the power holding race over many types of racialized groups being obscured. It can be argued that therefore, the North American black/white binary is to the benefit of the holders of power, that being white people. The full extent of the oppression perpetrated by societal structures that benefit white people and harm the many racialized groups, is not understood and known, in part because of the exclusionary binary. Japan’s binary is conversely too inclusive, yet this creates a similar consequence as North America’s binary. The overgeneralization caused by the diversity of wildly different groups of people belonging to the “non-Japanese” group hides many of the complexities of the structures of racial and cultural oppression that varying identities experience in Japan. This generalization and obscured mechanisms of oppression allows political groups like Sanseito the convenience of being able to blame and point fingers towards ‘non-Japanese’ people for Japan’s national issues, before people can realize that the Japanese themselves are creating injustices for many of the ‘non-Japanese’ groups. This non-specific, broad group of people created by this paradigm also relieves Sanseito of the responsibility of making cogent and specific arguments about how groups of ‘non-Japanese’ individuals supposedly harm Japan. The vagueness of the ‘non-Japanese’ label is also a political tool that is able to mobilize a wide range of voters, as the broad category allows many grievances towards a range of ‘non-Japanese’ peoples and their ‘non-Japanese’

characteristics to be captured.

Indeed, most ‘non–Japanese’ peoples are othered and ostracized in Japanese society as they are seen to all be contributing to Japan’s declining homogeneous traditions (Moosavi, 2022), but the degree to which they experience this varies according to one’s identity. Modern Japan came of age during the rise of Western pseudoscience and notions of essentialist white supremacy (Sharpe, 2022). Fukuzawa Yukishi, a Meiji era intellectual (Sharpe, 2022) respected enough to have his face printed on the ¥10,000 bill (Bank of Japan, n.d.), popularized Blumenbach’s Taxonomy of the five races in Japan, and speculated on a racial hierarchy of civilization, where white people were at the top, followed by East Asian people, and with black people being the least civilized and progressed (Sharpe, 2022). Subsequently, racism in Japan now is tied strongly to the associated level of development of a country an individual is from (Sharpe, 2022). Thus, Europeans tend to occupy the top of the ‘non-Japanese’ hierarchy, and Africans and South Asians are closer to the bottom (Sharpe, 2022).

Accordingly, in Japan, white people, due to the high level of development they originate from, are often considered to naturally possess great intellectual capacities, and in academic spaces, white people are advantaged as they are seen to embody progressive values, prosperity and hope (Moosavi, 2022). However, because they still damage Japanese homogeneity, resentment still exists, and they are often treated as arrogant, selfish and immoral perpetual foreigners (Moosavi, 2022). White people do however also benefit from beauty standards, as since ancient times, paler skin had connoted spiritual refinement (Sharpe, 2022). Often, they make appearances in media and advertisements (Torigoe, 2012), due to their paler skin and big eyes, among other desirable features (Magnúsdóttir, 2015).

Conversely, dark skin is associated with villainy, and thus caricatures of dark skinned individuals are often used in anti-crime PSAs (Sharpe, 2022). Japanese comedians continue to use blackface for laughs, and offensive stereotypes, such as black people supposedly being violent looters, have been broadcasted on the most prominent national public broadcasting channel, NHK (Sharpe, 2022).

Despite their phenotypical and cultural similarities with the Japanese, Zainichi Koreans (individuals with

Korean ancestry living in Japan) are also a victim of oppression within the 'non-Japanese' category (Lie, 2008). The group has faced rampant discrimination, and they encounter barriers to employment, marriage and civic participation, even if their family had been in Japan for multiple generations (Lie, 2008). 349 anti-Korean marches which propagated anti-Korean hate speech occurred around the Korean embassy and Koreatown in Tokyo in the span of three years in the early 2010s (Ahn & Yoon, 2020) due to nationalistic grievances related to Japan's colonial subjugation over Korea (Sharkey, 2021).

Evidently, a broad spectrum of privilege exists within the 'non-Japanese' category, yet all of these different adversities are placed under this same banner and category, inhibiting social progress and justice. Politically, this broad 'non-Japanese' category has also allowed Sanseito to weaponize xenophobia to appeal to as many voters as possible. "Japanese First" captures the attention of Japanese people who dislike any 'non-Japanese' peoples for any 'non-Japanese' quality. The binary category also allows a lack of close focus on any one 'non-Japanese' group, which obscures the injustices they face from Japanese society. These factors explain why the 'Japanese'/'non-Japanese' paradigm allows Sanseito to continue succeeding using its xenophobic narratives.

The Inability to Recognize Japanese privilege

Proponents of critical race theory also often argue that dominant groups are socialized and taught to not recognize their own privilege. Peggy McIntosh argues that White people, in much of the western world, do not recognize their own privilege, as discussions of white privilege and advantage are designated as taboo (McIntosh, 2003). For Japan, a country known for having many strict taboos and social codes, this theory of dominant groups reinforcing their own privilege with taboos rings true (Yaping and Xiao, 2015). The *kanji* character that is used to denote things Japanese is *wa* (和). For example, *wa shoku* means 'Japanese food'. Interestingly, this same character, *wa* (和), also means peace or harmony. Japan holds harmony to be a significant part of its national ethos, which is also well illustrated by the name of Japan's current imperial era, *rei wa* (令和), which means 'ordered/beautiful harmony'. A brief analysis of Japanese *kanji* characters illuminates how heavily harmony and order are entrenched and valued within Japanese culture. Japan's culture values

harmony, unity and conformity above all (Scroope, 2025) and as one may therefore expect, many of Japan's taboos make it socially unacceptable to discuss topics that disrupt the status quo (Yaping and Xiao, 2015). Under such conditions, it is highly uncomfortable for people to discuss, for example, how unjust it is to be hateful towards Zainichi Koreans who are historical victims of Japan (Lie, 2008). These taboos allow Sanseito to continue their xenophobic rhetoric with less pushback. The taboos also prevent people from using each other as sounding boards to critically analyze the extreme narratives of organizations like Sanseito, which allows extreme perspectives to continue to spread.

An absence of critical conversations regarding the race and privilege of racialized groups in Japan, due to taboos, also reinforces the aforementioned 'Japanese'/'non-Japanese paradigm', as the unique experiences and challenges a group may encounter is not discussed. This binary paradigm is, as previously mentioned, very harmful and has partially contributed to the rise of Sanseito.

I argue the inability for the dominant Japanese group to not be able to recognize their own privilege is also a consequence of the legacy of the historic normalization of Japanese superiority and cultural racism. The purity of Japanese blood, and the undisrupted continuity of Japanese culture is an area of pride, and is sometimes a source of nationalistic and xenophobic sentiments (Wilson, 2023). In the Meiji era, uprisings erupted after it was thought that Westerners were being given governing power in Japan (Wilson, 2023). The rejection of 'non-Japanese' peoples is deeply rooted in Japan's history and ethos. It is then no wonder that the 'Japanese' power holders can often be complacent, or even approving of 'non-Japanese' people in Japan being subjected to unequal treatment. A conscious or subconscious belief in Japanese superiority also likely makes it more difficult to be cognisant of the unjust power the 'Japanese' hold over the 'non-Japanese', as these privileges may feel natural and thus difficult to register. Sanseito's anti-foreigner rhetoric resonates with voters much more profoundly when Japanese people cannot recognize that they already hold significant privilege over 'non-Japanese' people.

To conclude, critical race theory is useful in shedding light on the recent alarming success of Sanseito in the 2025 upper house election. Although Perea's exclusionary racial paradigm does not exist in Japan, his work allows us to detect an ethno-sociocultural, overgeneralized binary. Perea's arguments on the consequences of the

black/white binary work also allows us to understand the consequences of this ‘Japanese’/’non-Japanese’ binary in concealing the unique oppression of many ‘non-Japanese’ groups. This lack of awareness and concealment allows Sanseito to continue to blame and scapegoat a broad range of peoples for political gain. Peggy McIntosh’s theories that oppressors are less able to detect their own privilege also helps to explain Sanseito’s rise. Due to cultural taboos that uphold harmony at all costs, and a history of Japanese supremacy, the Japanese power holders are less able to recognize their own privilege and power. This makes Sanseito’s anti-foreigner messaging much more palatable and convincing, as Japanese people become more susceptible to believing that the powers and privileges of the ‘non-Japanese’ are encroaching on their own.

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President Trump at the EU-US Leaders Meeting: WikimediaCommons

The Factors Perpetuating Foreign Policy Inertia in the United States of America

How Institutions, Elites, and Industry Lock U.S. Foreign Policy in Place

ARASH ASLAN-BEIGI

Over the last three administrations, Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden have made campaign promises to change US foreign policy, such as ending the War on Terror, the War in Ukraine or the conflict in the Middle East. Yet, regardless of political party or agenda, once the candidate is elected as President, their promises fail to become policy. This essay argues that American foreign policy inertia, regardless of administration, is a result of three underlying factors: the separation of powers between the legislative and

executive branches; the elitist foreign policy experts and their institutions, such as the Council on Foreign Relations; and finally, the military-industrial complex and its lobbyists. These forces create a feedback loop, as they reinforce one another, leading to a self-sustaining cycle that converts the President's foreign policy promises into disappointment. Using President Trump as a case study, this paper will show how he has attempted to change his governing approach to break this cycle, and how, regardless of the President, the three underlying factors will always stall foreign policy.

Articles I and II of the Constitution divide the powers of the legislative and executive branches. The President is Commander-in-Chief and may declare wars (US Constitution, 1787, art.2, sec.2, cl. 1). Thus, the War Powers Resolution of 1973 attempted to contain Presidential overreach, ensuring congressional approval for military operations. Specifically, "the President shall terminate any use of United States Armed Forces…unless the Congress has declared war or enacted a specific authorization" (U.S. Congress, 5 § b 1, 1973). Yet following September 11, Congress expanded Presidential power with the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), allowing force against any contributors to the 9/11 attacks (US Congress, 2 § a, 2001). Essentially, the legislative branch gave up its Article I right, allowing the President to exercise military operations. President Obama used the AUMF to attack Libya, and President Trump attacked ISIS (Scott and Rosati 2024, 370). While these actions were well received, Trump's withdrawal from Syria was not. The AUMF weakened the *War Powers Resolution* by granting broad authority to use and, theoretically, withdraw military forces. Thus, it shifted power away from Congress while the Resolution remained. Therefore, tension exists between congressional expectations and presidential actions. This tension results from the constitutional division of power, but has created a stalemate where both branches are legally correct. This stalemate prevents real foreign policy change, as the separation of powers, which was designed as a check, rather creates gridlock.

The gridlock in Washington is further aggravated by elite institutions that influence the decisions of the President regarding their foreign policy. Nearly all U.S. presidents have lacked foreign policy experience before their presidency; moreover, American policymakers often disagree over goals and objectives (Scott and Rosati 2024, 80). Thus, the President must appeal to authority, such as the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) or Ivy League professors in corresponding programs (Scott and Rosati 2024, 407). The President's appeals to authority

led to the creation of "the blob," where more than 50% of both Mr. Obama's and President Trump's foreign advisors affiliated with CFR (Brands, Feaver, Inboden, 2020). Moreover, members of "the blob" have economic ties to companies that profit from America's foreign policy. Therefore, there is a clear "revolving door" between Washington, universities, and think tanks, which perpetuates a cycle of policy inertia, as all the officials follow the same ideologies and values, like liberalism and military superiority, regardless of administration (Scott and Rosati 2024, 460). This means that despite the President's campaign promises, the "revolving door" and "the blob" are committed to the continuation of U.S. foreign policy. For example, when President Obama wanted to close the prison in Guantanamo Bay, members of the CFR in Obama's government rejected the idea (Nemish, 17, 2009). Therefore, when Presidents want to change the status quo, they are met with resistance from members of elite foreign policy institutions, causing another stalemate. The tension between the CFR/blob and former President Obama represents a struggle in which an often-inexperienced leader promises new foreign policies when campaigning, but is then met with strong resistance from experts. In practice, this resistance is reflected in internal advisory processes, where experts frame proposed changes as impractical or dangerous, thereby preventing policies, such as Obama's effort to close Guantanamo Bay from advancing beyond the planning stage. Those struggles, just like the division of powers across levels of government, create a stalemate, not a balance of powers, instead resulting in policy continuity regardless of the administration.

The policy inertia problem in the United States is further exacerbated by the military industrial complex (MIC). The extensive influence of the MIC is rooted in the first section of the United States Constitution, where the legislature has the "power of the purse," meaning they approve how much is funded and where the funding goes (US Constitution, 1787, art.1 sec9, cl 7). The problem arises when the MIC enables Congress members to approve military contracts that spread jobs and production across electoral districts. The distribution of jobs raises the Congress members' votes, as constituents want representatives to deliver employment. As a result, both constituents and Congress members are dependent on private military companies to generate employment using public money. This dependence creates a pattern where the United States is economically sustained by the MIC and policies which allow for the MIC to grow. For example, in 2024, 3% of the US GDP was spent by the government on the MIC (Allen, Berenson, 2024). This funded projects like the F-35 program, which was spread

across 1,650 American manufacturers in 47 states (U.S. Congress, 2024). Therefore, the MIC's political and economic influence in America limits the President's suggestions and ability to implement foreign policy. For example, in 2018, when President Trump wanted to reduce American activities in Syria, Secretary of Defence James Mattis resigned and went to work in the MIC at General Dynamics (Scott and Rosati 2024, 206) (General Dynamics, n.d.). The relationship among Congress, interest groups, and bureaucracy is called the iron triangle, in which all parties gain, whether it be politically or monetarily (Scott and Rosati 2024, 507). The core of the iron triangle relies on conflicts and the threat of conflict, which allows interest groups to lobby for increased spending on defence, which is then incentivized by electoral support via job creation. Therefore, the military-industrial complex is an engine of economic production, which creates a self-sustaining feedback loop as private companies fund think tanks, who then lobby Congress, which then approves the Department of Defence's budget. Therefore, this iron triangle frames the President and their foreign policy aspirations as the dependent variable, as it is Congress that has the power of the purse. Thus, should the President's foreign policy goals go against the goals of the MIC, the iron triangle will do everything to create a stalemate where nothing changes, which leads to policy continuation regardless of the President.

As this paper has demonstrated, there are three factors that principally contribute to US foreign policy inertia. The division of powers between the legislative and executive branches of government, the elite institutions such as CFR and Ivy League professors and the MIC. Together, these three forces form a self-sustaining cycle that serves as a functional extension of the "iron triangle," where policy inertia exists regardless of the President's goals. In the example of the War on Terror, when Congress approved the Authorization for Use of Military Force of 2001, it allowed the executive branch to operate without Congress in the War on Terror. Simultaneously, Congress had to pass defence budgets to protect district jobs, as seen by Lockheed Martin's F-35, which cost 2 trillion dollars (GAO, 2024). Then, interest groups such as think tanks and elite institutions like the Council on Foreign Relations argued for the status quo of U.S. foreign policy via "the blob" and "the revolving door." Finally, the scenario ends with companies such as Lockheed "lawfully engaging in the legislative process to communicate its views on legislative and regulatory matters affecting the company's business" (Lockheed Martin, N.D.)—or, simply put, lobbying Congress to benefit Lockheed Martin. These three forces are reinforced through a

self-sustained cycle, and by consequence, US foreign policy is stuck in a state of inertia. This inertia means that continuity will often prevail over Presidential desire. The compounding effect of the three pillars in the creation of U.S. foreign policy "is so broken, corrupted, and deceitful that it is burying the government in debt while pushing the world closer to nuclear Armageddon" (Sachs, 2024).

Since there is a clear stalemate within the creation of U.S. foreign policy, when President Trump was first elected, he needed to disrupt the institutions that perpetuate the problem if he wanted to change U.S. foreign policy effectively. Starting with who gets promotions and how, President Trump completely overrode the system that rewards talent in favour of one that rewards loyalty. This went against the standard operating procedures of bureaucracy and created a "buck-passing" effect, where important tasks were given to those loyal to the President (Scott and Rosati 2024, 143). An example of President Trump rewarding loyalty over talent comes from Mr. Pompeo's position as CIA Director, when Mr. Trump hired him during his first term, as Mr. Pompeo "represented him in the most positive light in his public comments" (Scott and Rosati 2024, 186). Moreover, President Trump's hiring of Mr. Bolton as National Security Advisor resulted in Mr. Bolton replacing his staff with those more aligned with himself and the President (Scott and Rosati 2024, 285). However, as the President surrounded himself with loyalists, the loyalists clashed among themselves, leading to a cycle of firings and then hirings of new loyalists, creating institutional instability, as loyalists were more focused on being loyal to the President than on their performance regarding foreign policy (Scott and Rosati 2024, 285).

Trump also tried other strategies to influence foreign policy beyond changes to bureaucratic standard operating procedures. The MIC is a major institution that opposed Trump's proposed policies. Before Trump's first term, during the election campaign, he stated that the F 35 project was a waste of billions of dollars, hinting at cutting funding for all future F-35-related expenditures (CBC News, 2016). As a result, during the President's midterm, Lockheed Martin and its employees contributed 3.2 million USD to legislative candidates and more than 10 million USD to lobbying groups in order to stay in the good graces of those with the "power of the purse" (Scott and Rosati 2024, 512). Regardless of President Trump's attacks on the military industrial complex, the defence budget increased year over year during his first term in office, and Congress approved future F-35

expenditures (Department of Defense, 2023, 286).

Since the President is also a domestic actor, Mr. Trump's two terms demonstrate that the decision-making power, especially regarding foreign policy, needs to be delegated. The President cannot deal with all the issues and actors in the international arena, which directly affects his effectiveness in the creation of foreign policy. The effectiveness of the President is directly reliant on the President's power to persuade, as per Neustadt (Scott and Rosati 2024, 115). So far, President Trump has persuaded the people to elect him a second time, but he has failed to persuade those who can deliver the foreign policy promises he made. He failed to convince influential people in government and the CFR, such as Mr. Mattis and Mr. Kelly, who did not last his full term (Scott and Rosati 2024, 186). Furthermore, this lack of persuasion extended to the international sphere, as Trump's tactics failed to convince allies or adversaries to accept his terms, leading instead to increased global friction. When a President like Mr. Trump fails to persuade, he may use the power of the executive branch to issue executive orders. In regard to international politics and foreign policy, "Congress is more likely to defer to the President's policy," as per Howell, Jackman, and Rogowski (Scott and Rosati 2024, 361). An example of the President acting without Congress is Trump's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with European allies and Iran (Scott and Rosati 2024, 375). Furthermore, he declared a state of emergency regarding the U.S.-Mexico border, allowing President Trump to take actions without congressional approval (Scott and Rosati 2024, 135).

President Trump is a clear example of a President who attempted to change the nature of U.S. foreign policy. His actions fundamentally changed the bureaucratic norms he adopted; he attempted to alter the very institutions that create U.S. foreign policy by filling his administration with loyalists, which broke procedures, as loyalists were fired and new ones hired within months, leading to chaos and buck-passing. He critiqued the military-industrial complex for excessive costs, as exemplified by the F-35 project. He withdrew from treaties and Syria without congressional approval and consistently clashed with institutions such as the CFR—all in an attempt to increase executive leverage over the creation of foreign policy. However, ultimately, he failed; both his first administration and his current one have continued to struggle with the institutions that shape foreign policy, as proven by the fact that he has failed to end the war in Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East within his first

day in office, as promised.

Regardless of campaign promises to change U.S. foreign policy by former Presidents Obama, Biden, and President Trump, each administration has faced resistance that ensures policy continuation. As this paper demonstrates, U.S. foreign policy inertia does not stem from the failures of the Presidents but rather from the core structure of U.S. foreign policy creation. Within the system that creates American foreign policy, there exists a clear dynamic of power between the legislative branch—as it holds the power of the purse, foreign policy institutions such as the Council on Foreign Relations, and the ever-growing military-industrial complex. Together, these three institutions maintain the status quo thanks to a revolving door between them, which ensures ideological unity and policy continuity.

The President is often a foreign policy novice upon entering office; therefore, the President must rely on advisors to guide foreign policy creation. As a result of the complex nature of foreign policy and the role of the United States on the global stage, the standard operating procedures of institutions involved in policy creation often resist change. Therefore, impactful change rarely occurs, regardless of the administration in the White House.

Should any President wish to change the nature of the U.S. foreign policy, they must engage in transformative actions rather than reactionary ones. So far, the President has merely reacted to a system that is long-standing and will endure beyond his administration. “The Iron Triangle” is intact, “the blob” is still active in the President’s administration, Congress members are still funded by lobbyists, and the stocks of companies within the American military-industrial complex have increased (Yahoo Finance, 2025, ITA). The Constitution clearly defines the President as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, but this does not make the President the independent variable in policy creation. Instead, all Presidents are dependent variables that must operate within a system that produces militarized, interventionist, and economically tied policies. Therefore, until the iron triangle, the revolving door, and congressional lobbying are meaningfully challenged, the President will not have any effective means of reshaping U.S. foreign policy.

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"Mark Carney and Donald Trump Oval Office Meeting" Source: WikimediaCommons

Retaliation or Resilience: Canada's Trade Strategy in an Era of U.S. Protectionism

Why Resilience and Diversification Matter more than Retaliation for Canada

DOMENICO ALEJANDRO SGAMBELLURI

The trade relationship between Canada and the United States is characterized by deep economic integration and a long history of tensions between competing ideals of liberalization and protectionism. As Canada faces the Trump administration's protectionist policies and rising nationalist rhetoric, it becomes crucial to assess whether Canada can respond effectively while safeguarding its economic interests and trade relationship with the United States. Considering Canada has a significantly smaller economy deeply enmeshed with its larger neighbour, its response must rely on a multi-faceted approach that recognizes its historical trade agreements and inherent asymmetry (Bow and Chapnick 2016, 302). In this essay, I argue that in response to US protectionism, rather than resort to reciprocal tariffs—which risk significant self-harm

due to an asymmetrical relationship—Canada must prioritize bolstering domestic economic resilience through an expansionary fiscal policy and a reduction in interprovincial trade barriers, and actively diversify trade beyond the US to lessen dependency on American suppliers and re-establish logistical trade routes.

The recent resurgence of protectionist policies in the United States, particularly under the Trump administration, highlights the enduring significance and inherent tensions within the Canada-United States trade relationship, which historically varied between periods of liberalization and protectionism. The United States' trade policies have been characterized by economic nationalism since the Civil War, a perspective that governments should engage in competitive behaviour and pursue relative economic development and autonomy (Rioux 2019, 33). However, Canada also engaged in protectionist policies with initiatives such as the Foreign Investment Review Agency and National Energy Program in the 70s and 80s, exerting significant effects on trade relations between the two states (Rioux 2019, 32). In fact, for much of the 20th century, Canada was more protectionist than the United States in its use of import tariffs. Conversely, periods of relative liberalization have occurred through agreements such as the Reciprocity Treaties of 1854 and 1935, and later the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (CUFTA) after 1988 and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 (Rioux 2019, 31).

A key feature of this trade relationship is the two nations' structural asymmetry, where Canada is much more reliant on the American economy for exports and imports (Singh 2025, para. 14). The Canadian government has sought to address their extreme dependency on America in the past, such as in the 1970s where they sought to diversify their trade by expanding their economic relationships with Europe and Asia (Estrada, Koutronas, and Quali 2025, 5). However, to this day, more than 77% of Canadian imports are tied to the United States, either because the goods are produced there (55% of Canadian imports are produced in the US) or because the goods cross the United States to get to Canada (Martin and Mayneris 2022, 361). This reliance severely limits Canada's economic leverage, as the relationship is defined by unequal dependence. As Bow and Chapnick (2016, 303) state, "the Canadians certainly needed the Americans more, but America needed Canada just the same".

Contemporary US–Canada trade relations are defined by renewed tensions and uncertainty, driven by the

resurgence of American protectionism under President Donald Trump's "America First" agenda. On April 9th, 2025, Trump imposed a 25% tariff on all imports from Canada that do not comply with CUSMA, along with a 10% tariff on potash and energy products that fail to meet the agreement requirements (CFIB, 2025). The existing 25% tariff on steel and aluminum was maintained, and a new 25% tariff was applied to all cars and trucks not manufactured in the United States (CFIB, 2025). Canada's response via retaliatory tariffs has sparked renewed concerns about a trade war and immediately presented challenges like slower economic growth, rising unemployment, and higher inflation (Singh 2025, para. 3). This underscores Canada's structural vulnerability stemming from its heavy reliance on the US market, including essential logistical routes that pass through US territory. This context requires a critical evaluation of how Canada should respond to the protectionist measures while balancing the defence of its domestic economic concerns and maintaining its vital trade relationship with the United States.

The Instinctive Response: Tit-for-Tat Retaliation

Canada's use of retaliatory tariffs in response to Trump's import duties reflects a longstanding strategy of countering American protectionism by leveraging the strong linkages between their economies. Canada has a history of responding to American tariffs with their own tariff increases. Notably, with the Hoover administration's decision to implement the Smoot-Hawley Tariff (1930), the Mackenzie King government responded with the most aggressive retaliatory tariffs out of any other country, which saw a collapse of international trade (Rioux 2019, 41). More recently, when the Trump administration imposed additional duties on Canadian aluminum and steel in 2018, Canada immediately adopted surtaxes on $17 billion worth of American imports for select goods (Rioux 2019, 50).

In the past, Canada's tit-for-tat strategy created enough disruption in key American industries to make continued trade conflict economically irrational, thereby pressuring the United States to withdraw its protectionist measures and return to the negotiating table (Ciuriak 2025, 2). Moreover, polling data indicates that the Canadian public also largely supports retaliatory tariffs, with 49% of Canadians surveyed arguing that the government should "play hardball" and not allow Canada to be bullied in the face of American tariffs (Gatz et al. 2025, 14). Thus, through a historical lens, retaliatory tariffs are viewed as a necessary lever to defend Canadian interests and

restore trade normalcy.

Retaliation as Self-Harm

However, many perspectives argue that the reciprocal tariff approach is not the optimal strategy for Canada to combat American tariffs this time around, as they would risk significant self-harm. Given the economic asymmetry between Canada and the United States, where Canada's economy is one-tenth the size of their neighbours and much more dependent on America for both exports and imports, and even logistical trade pathways, imposing dollar-for-dollar tariffs would have only a marginal economic impact on the US economy while inflicting substantial damage on Canada (Martin and Mayneris 2022, 363). Martin and Mayneris (2022, 363) find that Canada's reliance on the US as its main supplier is 37 percentage points higher than the average, a reliance comparable to much smaller/poorer nations with the exception of Mexico, whose leading supplier is also the United States. Canada's extreme dependence on the United States for direct and indirect imports severely limits its bargaining power within the asymmetric relationship, rendering genuine retaliation difficult.

In addition, imposing reciprocal tariffs would have detrimental effects on both nations domestically, with Canada facing asymmetrical consequences due to its smaller economy. The self-inflicted harm would manifest domestically through slower economic growth, rising unemployment, and higher inflation. Moreover, Singh (2025, para. 17) demonstrates that the cost of living would go up with Canadian retaliatory tariffs, as US imports constitute 13% of household expenditures, and imposing tariffs would increase the cost of these essential items. Furthermore, Canadian industries—24% of whose inputs come from the US—face rising production costs and declining competitiveness because of their deep integration with American supply chains in manufacturing and heavy machinery (Martin and Mayneris 2022, 360; Singh 2025, para. 11).

As Estrada, Koutronas, and Quali (2025, 13) argue, a turn toward stricter Canadian protectionist measures risks triggering "stagpression", a harmful mix of economic stagnation and inflation. While reciprocal tariffs have historically been used to compel the withdrawal of US trade barriers, analysts like Dan Ciuriak suggest that such measures are unlikely to be effective in the current context. The recent wave of US protectionism, he contends, is not merely tactical but rooted in a broader shift toward populist trade economics in which tariffs are deployed as an ideological cornerstone rather than a temporary negotiating tool (Ciuriak 2025, 3). This view is reinforced by

Pujolas and Rossbach's (2024, 3) quantitative modelling, which finds that Canada suffers economic losses across all simulated trade war scenarios, with or without retaliation. Therefore, reciprocal tariffs seem less like a viable strategy and more like a counterproductive response, as they risk worsening the domestic economic fallout of American protectionism without providing any real leverage to influence U.S. trade policy.

Strength From Within: Build Domestic Economic Unity

A key component of a multi-faceted response to America's protectionist measures would be to fortify its own economic base. As mentioned previously, Canada's import dependence on America is far greater than that of most developed countries, making Canada susceptible to significant supply disruptions should it pursue a trade war with the United States. Instead of engaging in a costly trade battle with the United States, Canada should pivot to a strategy focused on enhancing its internal capacity and reducing structural vulnerabilities.

A critical component of this domestic focus is the pursuit of an expansionary fiscal policy that would buffer the economic disruption of Trump's tariffs while better supporting the Canadian public as opposed to counter-tariffs, which would significantly raise consumer costs and hurt working-class households. Executing this involves providing direct support for working-class incomes and making substantial investments in social safety nets and public infrastructure, which Singh (2025, para. 25) claims should be financed through heavier taxation on the wealthy as they have a lower Marginal Propensity to Consume (MPC) compared to the working class. Taxing the working class is not a viable solution because since they have a larger MPC, it would suppress demand and further increase the government's fiscal deficit, leading to reduced economic growth and higher interest rates. Investing in transport infrastructure can also enhance domestic connectivity and productivity, potentially reducing reliance on cross-border transit points for internal trade (Martin and Mayneris 2022, 371).

Another crucial aspect of strengthening the domestic economy lies in the need to dismantle inter-provincial trade barriers. Canada's government is widely decentralized, leading to the difficulty in adopting national programs for coordinating inter-provincial trade and equally allocating resources among all provinces and territories (Greenaway 2025, slide 35). Under the 1867 Constitution Act, Section 91(2) gives the government full control over "trade and commerce", and Section 121 states that goods should be admitted freely across provinces (Alvarez, Krzmnar, and Tombe 2022, 26). Hence, in theory, the federal government should be able to secure free trade

amongst all provinces. But, in reality, federal jurisdiction is historically limited by the judiciary. For instance, in 2018, the court noted that Section 121 of the constitution should be interpreted in light of the principle of federalism, "which allows for provincial and territorial diversity and provincial regulation of local concerns" (Alvarez, Krzmnar, and Tombe 2022, 26). As a result of Canada's judiciary's preferential treatment towards provincial powers, adopting a national plan for trade liberalization proves incredibly difficult.

However, Trump's tariffs present an opportunity for the provinces to engage in cooperative federalism and move towards a national policy that would stimulate domestic economic growth. Trump's threats toward Canadian sovereignty could actually serve to cultivate a national sentiment of collaboration. As Muzafer Sherif's *Robbers Cave Experiment* demonstrates, intergroup hostility can generate stronger internal cohesion and cooperation within groups facing a common external threat (Sherif 1961, 207). Similarly, rising US protectionism may act as an external economic threat that encourages Canada to foster greater internal unity, potentially making provinces more willing to dismantle interprovincial trade barriers in pursuit of a stronger, unified economic front.

In Canada, non-tariff barriers (NTBs), stemming from differing provincial regulations on everything from professional licensing to agricultural products, are a significant factor behind Canada's lagging productivity growth. Progress in reducing interprovincial barriers has been slow, with Alvarez, Krzmnar, and Tombe (2019, 6) revealing that in some cases, even foreign countries have better access to Canadian markets than Canadian companies themselves. They estimate that fully liberalizing internal trade in goods could boost Canada's GDP per capita by roughly 4% (Alvarez, Krzmnar, and Tombe 2023, 2). This gain could offset the potential losses of a trade war with the United States, which Pujolas and Rossbach (2024, 8) estimate at around a 2% reduction in GDP per capita. Thus, by investing in social and physical infrastructure and dismantling internal trade barriers, Canada can build a more resilient and less vulnerable economy capable of withstanding external economic pressures without resorting to potentially damaging external trade conflicts.

Rebuilding Autonomy: Diversifying Trade and Logistics

Alongside the pressing need to strengthen its domestic economy, Canada must also work to diversify its trade relationships beyond the United States, focusing not only on who it trades with but also on how goods and services are imported and exported. Diversifying trade partners means continuing efforts beyond the traditional

focus on Canadian goods and instead prioritizing leveraging their trade agreements, such as the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with the European Union and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) with Asia-Pacific countries. These trade agreements offer avenues to increase market access for Canadian services, leading to increased domestic competition and driving down the cost of services at home (van der Marel 2016, 10). While trade complementarity scores are high for partners in these agreements, suggesting a good fit for Canada's services export basket, Canada's actual services export intensity is much lower with the European Union than with its USMCA partners (van der Marel 2016, 6). Pursuing deeper services trade through these agreements is a direct way to lessen dependence on the US market (Martin and Mayneris 2022, 368).

A key aspect of Canada's trade diversification efforts, van der Marel (2016, 1) argues, should be its services, which have grown faster than its goods trade and have proven to be less volatile. Although van der Marel's paper predates the 2018 US tariffs on Canadian aluminum and steel, his argument for prioritizing service exports offers a compelling response to the blow Canadian goods exports face under Trump-era protectionism. Gravity analysis shows that Canada is significantly undertrading its services with the US—despite the US receiving over half of its service exports—and several EU nations, indicating substantial untapped potential (van der Marel 2016, 3-4).

Moving away from exports, Martin and Mayneris' findings on Canada's significant import dependence on the US hub necessitate actively seeking ways to re-establish logistical trade routes that allow imports from non-US suppliers to reach Canada directly. The reliance on the US for non-US imports is linked to cost-efficiencies for smaller shipments that do not fill an entire container or to facilitate just-in-time deliveries, which would be impossible considering Canada's lack of transport infrastructure (Martin and Mayneris 2022, 361). In order to address this, policy efforts should be directed to incentivize Canadian companies to pool their purchases to facilitate larger, direct shipments (Martin and Mayneris 2022, 361). In addition, strategic investment in Canadian transport infrastructure, including ports and cargo airports, and streamlining customs facilities could enhance Canada's capacity to receive direct international shipments efficiently (Martin and Mayernis 2022, 371). This logistical diversification complements trade partner diversification by ensuring that alternative sources of supply

can reliably reach Canada without supply disruption, which is increasingly likely with the threat of trade restrictions from the US. By combining deliberate diversification of trade partners (especially in services), re-establishment of direct logistical routes for goods, and investment in logistics infrastructure for both goods and services, Canada can build greater resilience and lessen its disproportionate dependence on the United States.

Canada's response to rising US protectionism must be shaped not by reactive impulses, but by a strategic effort to reduce structural vulnerabilities. While retaliatory tariffs may satisfy calls for reciprocity, they risk deepening Canada's economic fragility given its asymmetric dependence on American supply chains. A more sustainable approach lies in strengthening domestic economic resilience—through coordinated interprovincial integration and investment—and pursuing meaningful trade and logistical diversification. In doing so, Canada can reposition itself not as a subordinate partner, but as a more autonomous actor capable of navigating global trade on its own terms.

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“The Pentagon, Headquarters of the US Department of Defense (later Department of War) Source: WikimediaCommons

Why the United States Can't Seem to Quit the "Forever Wars" in the Middle East

America’s Quest to Leave the Middle East: Why Bureaucracy and Political Culture Keep the U.S. Militarized

ZAINAB IBRAHEEM

In 2008, Barack Obama campaigned on a promise to reduce America’s footprint in the Middle East, diverging from his predecessor’s War on Terror (De Groot and Regilme 2020, 169). Likewise, Donald Trump had long called for retrenchment, decrying wasted efforts in the region (Scott and Rosati 2024, 150; Dombrowski and Reich 2018, 67). Joe Biden, too, declared it was time to end the “forever wars” and finally bring American troops home (Wise et al. 2021). Despite several American presidents indicating this desire, none of these aspirations translated into a lasting shift away from militarized involvement in the Middle East. This paper argues that despite changes in administration, the continuity of U.S. intervention persists as the bureaucratic systems guiding the government, and the core beliefs of American political culture embedded within them, endure. Foundational beliefs, such as the deep distrust of diplomacy and myths of American exceptionalism and benevolence, steer administrations and bureaucracies towards a foreign policy that views the U.S. as one that is carried out through militarized intervention.

Bureaucratic Permanence and the Production of Foreign Policy Continuity

While presidents may enter office with sincere intentions to change course, their actions are often constrained by external forces which limit their capacity to achieve their goals. The paradox of presidential power explains this dynamic, noting that although presidents are seemingly all-powerful, they often lack the expertise, time, and/or information required to independently shape foreign policy (Scott and Rosati 2024, 56, 59-60). As such, presidents depend on the foreign policy bureaucracy, which is composed of institutions like the Department of Defense, Department of State, and Central Intelligence Agency, among others (Scott and Rosati 2024, 96). However, this reliance complicates presidents' ambitions to alter policy because two key characteristics of bureaucracies make continuity likely: their expertise grants bureaucrats significant influence over decision-making, and their permanence means that the same individuals and practices persist across administrations. As a result, even when presidents desire change, they may be unable to enact said change due to constraints produced by the bureaucratic system within which they operate (Dombrowski and Reich 2018, 61).

To further corroborate how bureaucratic expertise can limit a president's ability to pursue retrenchment, one can point to Barack Obama's 2009 review of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. General Stanley McChrystal, commander of the International Security Assistance Force, submitted a report arguing that, without 40000 more troops, a U.S. counterinsurgency mission would likely fail (Brooks 2020, 38). When Vice President Joe Biden proceeded to propose a more restrained approach, consisting of drone strikes and a smaller force to train Afghan soldiers, McChrystal dismissed the idea as unworkable (41). Additionally, although the Joint Chiefs of Staff later drafted a plan aligned with Biden's vision, it was reportedly blocked by Chairman Admiral Michael Mullen, who also advocated for a large troop surge (39, 41). Evidently, Obama was "boxed in" by a militarized bureaucracy that framed increased military presence as the best path forward (Brooks 2020, 7). This case highlights how a reliance on the expertise of bureaucracies, which possess their own preferences and habits, can lead to militarized intervention persisting, regardless of the president's stance.

Turning to the element of bureaucratic permanence and how it may likewise generate policy continuity, Donald Trump's selection of key advisors during his first term can provide insight. Trump appointed General

James Mattis as Secretary of Defense, General John F. Kelly as Secretary of Homeland Security, and Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster as National Security Advisor — three career military officials deeply immersed in the national security establishment (Dombrowski and Reich 2018, 61). Additionally, Trump had welcomed several of the architects of the Iraq War to work under his administration (Walt 2021). Reflecting the same deference to bureaucratic expertise as seen in Obama's case, Trump delegated significant decision-making power to these advisors and gave the military extraordinary autonomy "to do its job" (Brooks 2020, 30–31). Within months, Mattis and McMaster pushed for a deployment of up to 5000 troops to Afghanistan, thereby replicating the very orientation Trump had criticized (Dombrowski and Reich 2018, 67). This case encapsulates how the enduring presence of familiar figures within the foreign policy bureaucracy helps lock in past interventionist policies, irrespective of a new president's stated intentions to undo them.

With all the above said, this discussion of bureaucratic knowledge and permanence does not seek to suggest that presidents entirely lack agency in the face of these institutions. Rather, this overview merely serves to explicate why bureaucracies are naturally predisposed to promote policy continuity. Nevertheless, the question of why said continuity specifically takes the form of militarized intervention in the Middle East remains unanswered. It would be insufficient to claim this is solely due to bureaucratic interests or inertia. Instead, one must consider the deeper political culture and national myths that shape the thinking of presidents and bureaucratic institutions alike.

American Political Culture and the Distrust of Diplomacy

To start this second discussion, political culture can be understood as the shared beliefs, values, and assumptions within a society that form how its members perceive themselves and their role in the world (Scott and Rosati 2024, 372). In the foreign policy context, political culture affects how policymakers view the international environment, thus influencing what policies are seen as necessary or preferable (372). In the case of the U.S., this essay posits that the persistence of militarized intervention in the Middle East stems from a political culture marked by a profound distrust of diplomacy alongside the unquestioned myths of American exceptionalism and benevolence.

To begin, the presence of significant distrust in diplomacy within American political culture dates back to the founding era. Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, warned against foreign entanglements, believing diplomacy posed a threat to American sovereignty and democracy (Scott and Rosati 2024, 17). Over time, this disillusionment with diplomacy became formative, contributing to the marginalization of the State Department within the larger foreign policy bureaucracy (Jürgensen 2025b). This is illustrated by the lack of funding given to the State Department: unlike the Department of Defense and intelligence agencies, which are consistently well-funded and politically prioritized, the State Department has continuously lacked comparable resources and clout (Jürgensen 2025c; Scott and Rosati 2024, 115, 118). As a result, when foreign policy concerns emerge, presidents and their advisors have tended to fall back on the most developed and readily available instruments: military force and covert operations (Boyle 2017, 12). In this way, the cultural distrust of diplomacy has not only diminished diplomatic institutions' influence, but it has also elevated the military and intelligence community to the state of being the default tools of American foreign policy — an arrangement that extends to the Middle East.

In examining how the cultural distrust of diplomacy has translated into persisting militarized interventions in the Middle East, one can look to Obama's drone strikes in Pakistan. In October 2013, newly elected Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif visited the White House and urged the Obama administration to cease its drone operations, citing the need to respect Pakistan's sovereignty and allow attempts at negotiations with the Pakistani Taliban (BBC 2013; Quest for Peace 2014, 85). These concerns had been echoed by the U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Anne Patterson and her successor Cameron Munter, as they too had previously criticized the drone program (Rohde 2012). Despite continuous objections from a regional partner and the State Department, the CIA proceeded with a drone strike in November 2013 that killed a senior Pakistani Taliban leader (Rohde 2012; Riedel 2013). This demonstrates the distrust of diplomatic channels and the willingness to sideline them in pursuit of foreign policy objectives. In doing so, it reinforces the notion that the historic and culturally-institutionalized distrust of diplomacy has ensured the dominance of the military and intelligence agencies. For this reason, presidents who campaign on non-intervention naturally end up perpetuating the very militarized, interventionist patterns they pledged to break.

American Political Culture and the Myth of American Exceptionalism

Aside from the distrust of diplomacy, U.S. political culture is also shaped by the myth of American exceptionalism, which facilitates policy continuity regarding the Middle East. This myth lies in the belief that the U.S. is the "city upon a hill," an exemplar for other nations as it holds unique status, morality, and capacities that give it the exceptional authority and responsibility to stabilize, protect, and lead the rest of the world (Scott and Rosati 2024, 372-375). This line of thinking sets up the U.S. to be permanently on a mission, making intervention in unstable regions a duty. This was showcased under the Biden administration, wherein a withdrawal from Afghanistan was completed, but U.S. military engagements in the broader Middle East remained unchanged (Kaye 2022, 10). In fact, three years later, thousands of U.S. troops were redeployed to the Middle East amid escalating tensions between Israel and Iranian proxy groups, with the stated aim of deterring a wider regional war from breaking out (Lamothe 2024). While it is reasonable for allies to support partners in times of crisis, the continued presence and redeployment of American forces reflect the exceptionalist belief that only the United States can and must play the role of global stabilizer. This is still the prevailing mindset, irrespective of past failures to bring stability to Afghanistan and Iraq, underlining how strongly the myth is embedded within the foreign policy bureaucracy. The myth of American exceptionalism thus makes it almost inconceivable for the U.S. to divert from a policy of militarized intervention in the Middle East.

The myth of exceptionalism within American political culture also ties into the myth of benevolence, which is the belief that the U.S. is ethical and good-natured in its global affairs (Scott and Rosati 2024, 373-374). The U.S. does not enter or create conflicts recklessly; it enters when the state has a moral purpose to foster ideals like freedom and peace (372, 374). This myth facilitates policy continuity because it casts interventions in the Middle East as altruistic and morally justified—a framing that leaves little room for reflection due to such policy being seen as inherently righteous and therefore beyond reproach (Scott and Rosati 2024, 375).

One example of the myth of benevolence in action is exemplified by Obama's drone program that was used across the Middle East in pursuit of suspected terrorists (De Groot and Regilme 2020, 170). His administration viewed this strategy as a means of correcting the Bush-era counterterrorism tactics, which were seen as

compromising U.S. values and moral standing (190-191). Obama's targeted strikes were promoted as the cleaner, more moral alternative that respected human rights and the rule of law (190). Nonetheless, the notion of a "clean war" proved contradictory. In Afghanistan, for instance, it was found that among those killed by drone strikes, 90% were not the intended targets (Lachmann 2020, 335). Furthermore, the program resulted in the confirmed deaths of hundreds of civilians, a figure that may be significantly undercounted as the U.S. designates any military-age males killed as "enemies killed in action" unless proven otherwise (335). Still, drone operations have continued under both the Trump and Biden administrations, most notably with the former's 2020 assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in Iraq as an exercise of self-defense—a strike later deemed an unlawful killing and a violation of Iraq's sovereignty (Scott and Rosati 2024, 205; Horton and Kelly 2024; Chappell 2020). Evidently, the myths of benevolence and exceptionalism can mask the ethical and legal concerns associated with militarized intervention in the Middle East, thereby enabling its continuity.

Donald Trump and Foreign Policy Continuity

All in all, this discussion aimed to illuminate that bureaucracies and the cultural beliefs they are founded on work collectively to preserve a policy of militarized intervention in the Middle East. To add, because these beliefs form the core of American political culture and that culture is also most internalized by elites who craft foreign policy, it is unsurprising that interventionist policies persist (Scott and Rosati 2024, 351; Jürgensen 2025d). Yet, this longstanding relationship between bureaucratic elites and foreign policy appears to be transforming Trump's second term, with ramifications that are presently uncertain but still warrant attention.

Since taking office, Donald Trump's approach towards bureaucracy has been characterized by distrust and cynicism. More specifically, he has invoked the term "deep state" to describe bureaucracies staffed by career experts that allegedly hinder him from advancing his objectives, including in the foreign policy realm (Jürgensen 2025a). To counter the "deep state," he has weakened the influence of careerists by initiating layoffs through the Department of Government Efficiency, creating conditions for employees to leave voluntarily, while also increasing the number of political appointees that may not possess expertise but are loyal and ideologically similar (Jürgensen 2025a). One such example is the appointment of Pete Hegseth as Secretary of Defense, who lacks political experience but was a staunch defender of Donald Trump's policies as a Fox News host (McCausland and

Halpert 2024). This is all to say that Trump has targeted policy continuity at its source — the bureaucracy, its experts, and their permanence. Given this, the cultural beliefs that underpin the bureaucracy and lead it to a militarized posture towards the Middle East should technically fall as well, but this assumption would disregard the fact that Trump's governance is still rooted in American political culture and its accompanying myths (Scott and Rosati 2024, 376).

To clarify, while Trump may undermine the foreign policy bureaucracy and denounce previous administrations' interventions in the Middle East, he is not immune to the pull of interventionist policies framed around global protection and stability. This fact is evidenced by his escalation of airstrikes in Yemen in confrontation with the Houthis, where the communicated goal of protecting global commerce and freedom of navigation in the Red Sea has since resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties (Sabbagh 2025). Clearly, while Trump's rhetoric and bureaucratic dismantling may appear transformative, the pervasiveness of the distrust of diplomacy and myths of exceptionalism and benevolence prevail in reproducing a pattern of interventionist policy. Whether this will continue to be the case or whether Trump's expressed aversion to intervention will translate into an actionable shift in policy remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Ultimately, from an examination of Obama, Trump, and Biden's policies, it is clear that bureaucracies and the American political culture they are infused with play a crucial role in the maintenance of interventionist policies in the Middle East. Namely, the distrust of diplomacy and myths of American exceptionalism and benevolence paint a picture in which military force is considered the most viable option, U.S. involvement is seen as a duty, and American intervention abroad is presumed to be inherently ethical. Recognizing that such invisible influences and assumptions exist and endure delivers a deeper explanation besides presidential failure for why promises go unfulfilled, and may also serve as a starting point for a more conscious rethinking and restructuring of American foreign policy towards the Middle East.

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Vietnamese Protest for Human Rights and Democracy in 2012 Source: WikimediaCommons

The Land Remembers: How Vietnam's Past Still Claims Its Future

Customary Land Rights, International Norms, and the Limits of Decolonization in Vietnam

CHLOE GERGI

I. Introduction

In Ninh Thuan, the ancestral homeland of the Cham Indigenous people, plans to construct nuclear power plants threaten to sever a community's centuries-old connection to its sacred lands. This conflict between development and cultural preservation is depicted in Nguyễn Trinh Thi's *Letters from Panduranga,*[1] a poetic narrative that intertwines personal reflections, ethnography, and archival traces. The artwork reveals the enduring struggles of Indigenous communities in Vietnam face to protect their ancestral lands from state-led development projects, reflecting a broader, systemic tension between centralized governance and the preservation of cultural and land rights.

Land in Vietnam is not merely an economic resource; it forms the foundation of identity, culture, and spirituality, especially for its 53 recognized ethnic minority groups. However, this connection has been

systematically eroded through colonial, post-colonial, and modern policies. French colonial rule disrupted communal land systems and entrenched centralized ownership models that disregarded Indigenous practices and created enduring inequalities. Post-colonial reforms, such as collectivization and economic liberalization, have sidelined Indigenous customs, alienating ethnic minorities from their ancestral territories. These historical legacies persist in contemporary land governance, where state policies often prioritize economic growth and national control over the recognition of customary land rights.

Despite resistance from the government, international advocates have increasingly called for the protection of Indigenous land rights. This paper investigates the role that international human rights norms play in shaping Vietnam's approach to customary land rights and questions how this influences the country's land decolonization process. It argues that while international frameworks have prompted policy initiatives, structural barriers—such as centralized governance, economic priorities, and resistance to participatory reform—limit their practical impact, hindering meaningful land decolonization. The paper examines historical contexts, analyzes Vietnam's law reform and assesses the role of international advocacy, concluding with actionable recommendations.

II. The Historical Context of Land Rights in Vietnam

Understanding Vietnam's historical land rights is crucial in analyzing its current challenges and the influence of international human rights norms as historical shifts in land governance—rooted in colonial policies, post-colonial reforms, and state-driven economic strategies—continue to shape the legal and cultural frameworks governing land today. Pre-colonial Vietnam managed land communally through local customs, particularly among highland ethnic minority groups with spiritual ties to ancestral lands.[2] This practice was disrupted during French colonial rule in the 19th century, which imposed centralized land administration to maximize resource extraction. The introduction of private ownership, land appropriations for plantations, and heavy taxes dispossessed rural and indigenous communities, eroding customary practices and exacerbating social inequalities.[3] A landholding elite, loyal to the colonial administration further marginalized the peasantry and entrenched disparities that persisted in

subsequent regimes.

After independence in 1954, post-colonial reforms aimed to address colonial inequalities but often neglected ethnic minorities' customs. Northern land redistribution programs and post-1975 collectivization declared land state property under the 1980 Constitution, alienating indigenous communities whose practices did not align with collectivist models.[4] The Đổi Mới (Renovation) reforms of 1986 introduced a market-oriented approach, followed by the establishment of land use rights in the 1993 and 2003 land laws.[5] However, these laws retained state ownership, thus failing to recognize communal ownership and leaving ethnic minorities disconnected from their ancestral lands.[6] This historical trajectory highlights the persistent struggle to reconcile state laws with customary practices, a critical barrier to Vietnam's land decolonization process.

III. Vietnam's Commitments to International Human Rights Norms: The Government's Obligations and Shortcomings

Vietnam's engagement with international human rights frameworks, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), establishes important obligations regarding customary land rights. UNDRIP provides globally recognized standards affirming Indigenous peoples' rights to their ancestral lands,[7] while the ICCPR, ratified by Vietnam in 1982, imposes binding obligations.[8] Specifically, Article 27 of the ICCPR, as interpreted by the Human Rights Committee, protects minorities' cultural practices, including land and resource rights integral to their way of life.[9]

Vietnam demonstrates its commitment to these norms through periodic reporting to the United Nations and participation in Universal Periodic Reviews.[10] The government frequently highlights its efforts to address land-related disparities, including policy initiatives aimed at safeguarding ethnic minorities' rights. However, as Nguyen (2021) argues, these commitments consist of symbolic gestures rather than substantive actions, revealing a persistent disconnect between international obligations and domestic implementation.[11] For example, the Forest Land Allocation (FLA) program criminalizes traditional practices like swidden cultivation (slash and burn),

framing indigenous land use as incompatible with state priorities. Under this program, forest land, including traditional swidden areas, was reassigned—often to individual households—without consulting or obtaining the consent of affected communities; these actions constitute a clear violation of the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) principle established by UNDRIP.

The consequences of these violations are evident in Ban Tat village, where the replacement of communal land systems with individually assigned plots disregarded indigenous land management practices and created significant hardships. Over 50% of households in Ban Tat faced food shortages for up to five months annually, as the reassigned plots failed to sustain traditional agricultural cycles.[12] Villagers were forced to shorten fallow periods—a critical practice for restoring soil fertility—resulting in the degradation of their land and diminished livelihoods.[13] By implementing such policies without allowing for meaningful consultation with, or participation of, Indigenous peoples, Vietnam undermines its commitments to UNDRIP, by failing to protect Indigenous traditions and cultivate equitable land-use practices.

These actions reflect systemic flaws in Vietnam's land governance, rooted in its prioritization of centralized control over customary practices, which was codified in the 2013 Land Law.[14] By requiring formalized Land Use Rights Certificates (LURCs), the law formalizes land tenure in ways that prioritize individual and organizational ownership over collective and communal land traditions, thereby alienating Indigenous practices. By failing to recognize these rights, Vietnam's policies fundamentally contradict UNDRIP's principles of preserving Indigenous land traditions and ICCPR's emphasis on inclusive governance. For instance, the 2013 Land Law's allowance for land seizures under ambiguous terms, such as "socio-economic development," has been used to reallocate forestlands in the Kon Tum province to private enterprises. Through this law, the government disregards local communities' spiritual and cultural ties to the land.[15] In turn, these policies perpetuate legacies of state control established during Vietnam's collectivization efforts of the 1950s and 1970s, where centralized governance marginalized communal land systems in favour of national economic priorities.

IV. Positive Influence of International Human Rights Norms on Vietnam's Land Policies and Local Initiatives

Despite systemic challenges, international human rights frameworks and global advocacy have influenced Vietnam's land policies at both national and grassroots levels, aligning governance with global norms while empowering local initiatives to protect customary land rights. Global organizations have been instrumental in advocating for Vietnam's alignment with international human rights norms. The Mekong Region Land Governance (MRLG) project, which emphasizes land tenure security, equitable access, and improved governance, has been a key contributor to Vietnam's land reforms. Alongside the World Bank's Land Governance Assessment Framework (LGAF), MRLG provided recommendations that were implemented in the 2024 Land Law.[16] These recommendations focused on transparency, democratic decision-making, and recognizing customary land rights. The amended law explicitly incorporates these principles, safeguarding the rights of smallholder farmers, ethnic minorities, and women while ensuring their participation in land policy processes.

Similarly, at the local level, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has promoted inclusive development in Vietnam's ethnic minority regions, emphasizing participation, accountability, and non-discrimination. For example, UNDP initiatives with Dao women have increased incomes through cooperative selling, enhancing their economic influence over land-use decisions. These efforts also preserve traditional knowledge of medicinal plants and promote sustainable forest management, strengthening the Dao people's connection to ancestral lands. Commune-level cooperatives further align with customary land rights by reducing reliance on slash-and-burn agriculture, addressing poverty, and fostering sustainable livelihoods.[17]

V. Challenges and Limitations of Integrating International Norms in Vietnam

Vietnam's integration of international human rights norms remains limited due to structural resistance and the suppression of civil society, which stifles grassroots advocacy and silences independent voices critical of land governance practices. A key obstacle is the state's emphasis on sovereignty, which leads to selective adoption of international norms. This selective implementation perpetuates inequities, particularly through the repression of

activists and grassroots organizations, whose work to challenge inequitable land policies is systematically silenced.

The suppression of civil society compounds these limitations, restricting grassroots advocacy and silencing independent voices that could otherwise support reforms. Vietnam has imprisoned individuals for exercising basic civil rights, fostering a climate of fear that discourages dissent. This environment undermines the participatory governance principles central to international human rights frameworks and necessary for any reforms, including land government reforms. A striking example concerns Can Thi Theu, a prominent land rights activist, and her son Trinh Ba Tu, who actively criticized illegal government land grabs in Duong Noi and Dong Tam.[18] They documented land disputes, advocated for fair compensation, and demanded the return of confiscated lands. In response, the government arrested them and sentenced them to lengthy prison terms under Article 117 of Vietnam's Penal Code, which criminalizes "anti-state propaganda".[19] Their experiences highlight the state's deliberate efforts to suppress activism, enforce centralized control, and disregard the international principles of freedom of expression and engagement.

The influence of NGOs in Vietnam is also significantly limited by systemic barriers; centralized governance and restrictive policies hinder governments' efforts to promote human rights and equitable land management. For example, the Centre for Sustainable Rural Development (SRD), involved in Vietnam's Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation plus (REDD+) initiatives, has introduced community-based forest management models to empower local communities.[20] However, their work is often undermined by centralized decision-making, which restricts their ability to push for comprehensive policy reforms. This highlights how structural constraints hinder grassroots initiatives while underscoring the critical yet restricted role NGOs play in advancing equitable land governance. As a result, the long-term effectiveness of these efforts remains uncertain without meaningful changes to the governance framework.

VI. Conclusion

Vietnam's engagement with international human rights norms has set important benchmarks for reforming its approach to customary land rights. Instruments like UNDRIP and ICCPR, along with global advocacy, have

spurred policy initiatives. However, the suppression of civil society and the state's emphasis on economic growth and centralized control continue to limit the full realization of these reforms, perpetuating structural barriers and leaving Indigenous communities marginalized. To address these persistent gaps, Vietnam must shift from symbolic commitments to meaningful action. Establishing independent monitoring bodies with representation from international observers, civil society organizations, and Indigenous leaders could enhance accountability, ensure compliance with international obligations, and counter the suppression of independent voices.[21] Additionally, fostering participatory governance through strategies—such as creating local councils with binding authority over land disputes and involving indigenous representatives in decision-making bodies—could decentralize control, empower communities to shape land-use policies, and ensure that land governance reflects the needs and rights of marginalized groups.[22]

While initiatives such as Global organizations-supported land redistribution demonstrate the potential for progress, these successes remain limited in scope without structural reforms to address the root causes of inequities. Future research comparing Vietnam's efforts with those of neighbouring countries like Cambodia and Laos could provide valuable insights into best practices for integrating customary land rights and advancing decolonization, particularly by examining how these countries have navigated similar post-colonial challenges and balanced state control with indigenous land governance.[23] Although Vietnam has made significant strides in aligning with international standards, sustained implementation and comprehensive reforms are critical to achieving equitable land governance and ensuring the full realization of its international commitments.

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