

From Eras to Episodes: Isolationism as a Foreign-Policy Response in the United States and Beyond

Michal Bula

Charles University, Czech Republic, ORCID: 0000-0001-6715-0888, corresponding address: michal.bula@fsv.cuni.cz

Abstract

The longstanding debate over U.S. isolationism has intensified amid recent foreign-policy choices, especially under Donald Trump's presidency. Yet many contemporary invocations continue to use the term without explicit criteria for identifying isolationist policy, while more analytically developed accounts disagree over its domain, manifestations, and appropriate level of application. This article reviews these competing approaches and develops a revised conception of isolationism as an episode-based foreign-policy response. Grounded in observed policy steps, this conceptualization distinguishes isolationism from adjacent terms and related grand-strategy alternatives. It also treats actor-, administration-, and period-level characterizations as inferences from patterns across foreign-policy episodes rather than as fixed and largely abstract labels. The article then assesses the revised concept against Gerring's criteria and illustrates its classificatory value through recent U.S. foreign-policy episodes. Although it does not eliminate all interpretive ambiguity, this behavior-centered conception improves definitional and domain clarity and differentiation, providing a stronger foundation for future comparative analysis of foreign-policy engagement and withdrawal.

Keywords: isolationism, conceptual debate, U.S. foreign policy, revised conception, U.S. responses to foreign-policy episodes

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Introduction

Recent U.S. foreign policy developments have intensified debate over its character. Drawing on Donald Trump's rhetoric, protectionist economic measures, and shifts in American public sentiment, many scholars have invoked isolationism and considered its implications for the international system. This raises two analytical questions: are such indicators reliable predictors of isolationism, and which policy measures should count as isolationist?

Although the concept has been applied to many countries and regimes, the United States is a particularly demanding case. As a major power with extensive capabilities, it has a wider range of feasible responses and a greater capacity to shape outcomes. Repeated choices of security non-involvement or disengagement are therefore less readily explained by incapacity than similar patterns among small or weak states. The long history of U.S. isolationism debate also allows systematic comparison across the interwar era, the Cold War, and the present. Given the United States' central role in providing security guarantees across multiple regions, assessing its willingness to engage or intervene is especially important.

At the same time, isolationism has long been contested as an analytical concept. This skepticism is understandable: despite its ubiquity, the term is often used vaguely in politics,¹ the media,² and academia,³ or simply as a pejorative label.⁴ Although it has gained renewed prominence among researchers during Trump's presidency⁵ and has often been treated as an actual policy option,⁶ it is still frequently conflated with national sentiment or blurred with adjacent concepts such

- 1 For such a use of the term in political discussions, see, e.g., Bush (2006), Haberman & Sanger (2016), George W. Bush Presidential Center (2016), etc.
- 2 For such a use of the term in the media, see, e.g., Cohen (2011), LaFranchi (2017), Carafano (2021), Thrush (2021), etc.
- 3 For such a use of the term in academia, see Gompert & Larrabee (1997: passim), Kull & Destler (1999: passim), Kull & Ramsay (2000: passim), Clark et al. (2000: passim), Hemmer (2000: 163–166, 170), Barša (2003: passim), Cameron (2007: 225–229), Mariano (2011: passim), Divine et al. (2013: 641–662), etc.
- 4 An isolationist, in this context, is portrayed as indifferent or unprofessional with regard to critical foreign issues. For passages on isolationism in this context, see Weinberg (1940: 539), Kizer (1944: 155), Dennett (1944: 135–137), Williams (1953: 391; 1954: 2), DeConde (1957: 5–6), Crabb (1963: 420, 439), Campbell (1964: 35–39), Roskin (1972: 118–119), McDougall (1997: 40), Buchanan (2002: xxiii–xxiv, 46–54), Beard (2017: 228–229, 243), and many others. This body of literature demonstrates that for *more than 80 years* – during which isolationism has been used as an insult and the problem has been repeatedly pointed out – the term has not managed to shed these connotations.
- 5 Such studies include, for example, Cha (2016: passim), Wright (2016), Brands (2017: 73–82), Dimitrova (2017: 36–42), Clarke & Ricketts (2017: passim), Berengaut & Fishman (2017), Foreign Affairs (2018), Oliva & Shanahan (2019: passim), Stranne (2020: 100, 113–116), Dufour & Ducasse (2020: 231, 236–239), White (2022: 5–6), Lindsay (2024), etc.
- 6 As an example of this, see Posen & Ross (1997: 6–16; 2000: 3–51), Buchanan (2002: passim), Art (2003: passim), Crothers (2011: 23–24), Brands (2017: passim), etc.

as unilateralism or neutrality. The recent revival of the debate has made these unresolved conceptual weaknesses more acute. Nevertheless, the literature contains precise accounts that identify analytically traceable components or synthesize useful observations; however, these elements remain dispersed among opposing camps. By applying broad labels to actors and periods, scholars conceal substantial variation across individual episodes. An operationalized definition within a unified framework anchored in observable policy measures is therefore needed to answer the questions above and clarify isolationism's contemporary relevance.

The paper responds by developing a revised, operationalized conception of isolationism as an episode-response stance: non-intervention and political or diplomatic disengagement where the United States could act, combined – when citizens or assets face an imminent threat – with a conditional willingness to intervene unilaterally. The approach distinguishes isolationism from related policies, and treats the concept as varying in degree across administrations rather than as a fixed attribute of presidencies or eras. It thus replaces rhetoric-based claims and broad historical labels with a behavior-centered approach. By synthesizing competing literatures and reassessing the revised concept against Gerring's criteria, the article improves definitional clarity, differentiation, and operationalizability. In doing so, it engages core questions in the scholarship (see Johnstone 2011: 7) about isolationism's defining components, temporal scope, and continuing analytic value, even though the United States has never been literally isolated. Although illustrated through the U.S. case, the concept is portable to other states that, despite meaningful capabilities, choose non-involvement in others' security affairs.

The paper proceeds in three substantive sections. The first reviews comparative and U.S.-centered usages of isolationism and evaluates the concept's weaknesses through Gerring's concept-building framework. The second develops the revised operationalized conceptualization, specifying its domain, unit of analysis, core components, and boundary conditions. The third demonstrates the analytical value of the revised concept in two steps: first, it illustrates the updated conception through recent U.S. foreign-policy episodes, with particular attention to variation across the Trump presidencies, and second, it reassesses the revised concept under Gerring's criteria. The conclusion summarizes the article's contribution and the broader implications of treating isolationism as an episode-based, behavior-centered concept.

Conceptions of isolationism

The term "isolationism" is widely used, but its treatment across research traditions is uneven. The difficulty diagnosed in this section is not that the field lacks careful accounts – several are engaged in detail – but that precise usages coexist with considerably vaguer and historically contingent ones, and that even the careful accounts diverge on the concept's domain, temporal scope, and differentiation

from neighboring terms. The result is a rich but fragmented literature in which no operational definition has gained shared acceptance.

The section therefore proceeds in two steps. It first maps prominent uses of isolationism beyond the U.S. debate to clarify recurring conceptual problems. Then, it proceeds to the U.S.-centered scholarship – where the debate is most developed and where a long-time discussion allows comparison across historical periods – before advancing an operationalized definition.

Comparative usages across literatures and conceptual consequences

Although isolationism is most closely associated with U.S. foreign-policy debates, the term is also applied to other political units and historical contexts. These usages are introduced not as a comprehensive survey, but because they highlight how differently the term's boundaries, meanings, and relations to neighboring concepts are drawn across different bodies of literature. This range of variation must be confronted by any operational definition and motivates the explicit scope conditions adopted below.

One influential usage applies isolationism to smaller or weaker states that seek to “opt out” of international society in ways extending beyond episodic security non-involvement. For instance, Turku (2016: 7–8) contrasts U.S.-centered usage with communist Albania, North Korea, and Burma, where isolationism extended across social, political, ideological, cultural, security, and economic policy and formed the sociopolitical basis of the regime. She links isolationism to authoritarian regimes and self-serving leadership, defining it as a foreign policy that combines a non-interventionist military posture with state-centered economic nationalism and protectionism, including avoidance of entangling alliances and wars not directed at immediate territorial self-defense (Turku 2016: 6, 10–11). This widens the concept's domain and helps explain why isolationism is often treated as regime-wide closure.

The literature also blurs the distinction between deliberate isolationism and externally produced isolation. Turku explicitly notes that states may involuntarily find themselves cut off from trading partners or “subject to isolationism,” even though they retain degrees of freedom regarding engagement and withdrawal (Turku 2016: 10). Maller (2010: 61–62) views “isolation” as a coercive instrument applied to others. In her account, diplomatic sanctions represent a form of political disengagement (e.g., recall of ambassadors, embassy closure, withholding recognition) that is treated as a low-cost means of “isolating and delegitimizing” regimes. Such diplomatic isolation has primarily been used to target “rogue nations” for issues related to terrorism, proliferation, and dictatorship (Maller 2010: 63–64). These usages highlight a recurring inferential problem: a state may be labeled “isolated” because others sever ties, because channels collapse, or because the target lacks the capability – not because its leaders choose to abstain. Without a

voluntariness condition, non-involvement risks being misclassified as isolationism when it reflects exclusion or incapacity rather than purposeful abstention.

Another strand applies the label primarily to external economic relations, especially in discussions of Mao-era China. Reardon (2002: 4–5) contends that, although Cold War conditions, the UN trade embargo, and the Sino–Soviet split constrained China’s policy options until the late 1970s without fully isolating it from the global marketplace, the decision to limit dependence on foreign trade was ultimately made by Chinese elites in the 1950s. Naughton (2007: 379) notes that imports and exports together accounted for only about 5 percent of GDP in 1970–1971 and characterizes this as a policy of “extreme self-reliance.”⁷ However, Zhang (1998: 17, 21) argues that it is misleading to treat China’s isolation as wholly self-imposed and highlights Western strategies of isolating China from the non-communist world in the 1950s–1960s. Taken together, this literature shows why an operational definition must specify domain – economic versus security-political – and distinguish strategic choice from externally induced isolation.

A closely related literature equates isolationism with protectionism or broader economic nationalism, but this usage raises a different problem. Economic history shows that the Great Depression was marked by a severe wave of tariffs, import quotas, exchange controls, preferential blocs, and bilateral clearing arrangements – a “scramble to close markets” shaped by monetary restrictions and the gold standard (Eichengreen & Irwin 2009: 1–4). Helleiner further contrasts autarky (or self-sufficiency), which seeks to minimize international economic linkages, with neomercantilist nationalists, who pursue strength within an open world economy (Helleiner 2021: 935, 951). This distinction is especially important in contemporary debates on Trump, where America First rhetoric and trade skepticism have often encouraged the inference that protectionism implies foreign-policy isolationism (Dufour & Ducasse 2020: 231, 236–239). Yet that inference is conceptually unsafe. Protectionism may coincide with active – and sometimes escalatory – security policy, and economic nationalism by itself does not indicate whether a state will abstain from, reduce, or actively shape security outcomes abroad. Economic closure therefore becomes an unreliable descriptor of isolationist foreign policy.

Diplomatic history offers parallel examples of why broad period labels require greater conceptual discipline. Late-Victorian Britain is often described as practicing “splendid isolation.” Yet Fata (2022: 2–3, 6–7, 8–11) shows that Britain was far from static or isolated: its diplomacy remained active, interest-driven, and global, while Salisbury’s preference for a “free hand” reflected reluctance to accept binding commitments or intervene in some regions and circumstances. A similar

7 The inherited foreign-trade system tightly regulated cross-border flows of goods and money in order to shield the domestic economy from world-market prices, while allowing only carefully selected external exchanges. (Naughton 2007: 380).

problem appears in scholarship on Tokugawa Japan, where *sakoku* has often been misread as total closure despite Edo Japan's structured external relations through Dutch and Chinese trade and formal ties with Korea and the Ryukyus (Kazui & Videen 1982: 283–285). Toby (1977: 324–327, 329–331) likewise shows that Tokugawa diplomacy and security remained politically significant and selectively engaged. These cases show how labels of “isolation” can obscure selective external activism and abstention and compress heterogeneous behavior into a single period-wide characterization.

Taken together, these cross-context usages show that “isolationism” shifts meaning across domains (security-political posture and non-entanglement; economic closure and self-reliance; broader cultural and societal insulation), levels of analysis (issue-specific stances versus regime-level projects of separation), agency (self-imposed versus externally produced isolation), and temporal scope (discrete events versus entire eras). The comparative cases therefore show why the concept performs unevenly in terms of domain stability, consistency, and differentiation, motivating the paper's focus on definitional scope and operationalization. The United States is a particularly demanding case: as a major power with extensive capabilities, its recurrent non-involvement is harder to explain by incapacity than comparable patterns in small or weak states. The U.S.-centered strands below are therefore examined as the principal arena in which competing approaches to conceptualization collide.

Isolationism in U.S. scholarship

In U.S.-centered scholarship, isolationism has been debated across the interwar period, the Cold War, and contemporary politics, generating several valuable but competing interpretations. A persistent problem, however, is conceptual inconsistency, sometimes even within a single account. Doenecke's standard treatment illustrates this clearly. He defines “classic” isolationism as avoiding wars outside the Western Hemisphere, opposing binding military alliances, and preserving U.S. freedom of action. Yet he also describes a post-1945 “new isolationism” that opposed the UN, the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the Korean War while increasingly favoring militant unilateralism against the Soviet Union and China (Doenecke 2018: 2). Even within one influential interpretation, the term shifts across periods to include positions substantially more activist and coercive than the interwar archetype. This temporal slippage underscores the need for a more explicit operational definition.

In the literature touching on the conceptualization of the term, three strands stand out. The first denies the existence of U.S. isolationism, recoding the relevant policies as unilateralism, neutrality, unilateral internationalism,⁸ or national-

8 Although the term – denoting “a highly unstable zigzag course” of U.S. foreign policy

ism. Disagreements with proponents of the term's existence reflect divergent interpretations⁹ – especially an understanding of the concept in overly general a sense, and an overemphasis on economic factors. As Leffler (2017: 79) shows, focusing on separate aspects of interwar policy yielded incompatible readings of “political isolationism” versus “economic expansionism.” Similar conclusions appear on both sides (Dulles 1955: 145; Kaplan 1987: xi–xii; Johnstone 2011: 10; Leffler 2017: 75–116). Both camps identified key elements of U.S. diplomacy but failed to integrate them into a unified analysis (Leffler 2017: 79). Accordingly, some persistent problems remain, despite the debate's longevity and extensive literature (see footnotes 10–11).

The second strand affirms U.S. isolationism but defines it narrowly in security-political terms: a strategy to preserve freedom of action and avoid costly commitments that could compromise sovereignty, drain resources, or jeopardize security. Historically, it manifests chiefly as non-intervention and unilateralism – especially toward Europe, seen as the principal external threat – while U.S. behavior elsewhere (continental expansion, Pacific imperialism) is more assertive and unilateral.¹⁰ Incorporating critiques from other perspectives, this strand underpins

(Hoff 2008: 7–8) or “Lodge-type internationalism” (Restad 2015: 128–145) – captures ambiguities of U.S. post-WWI diplomacy, it can seem internally contradictory by simultaneously coupling unilateralism with multilateral cooperation. This contradiction dissolves once both orientations are treated as matters of degree rather than absolutes, allowing their relative levels to be assessed across issue-specific decisions, as outlined below.

- 9 Representatives of this stream of literature include various revisionist historians and authors such as William A. Williams (1954: *passim*; 1961: 183; 1972: 20–57, 110–111, 143–144), Richard W. Van Alstyne (1965: v–vi), Warren F. Kimball (1969: 1), Edward P. Crapol and Howard Schonberger (1972: 136–145), Robert F. Smith (1972: 254, 267–268), Henry W. Berger (1972: 294–297), Warren I. Cohen (1987: v), Walter LaFeber (LaFeber, Polenberg & Woloch 1988: 133–140; LaFeber 1994: 11–67), Walter A. McDougall (1997: 40–42), David A. Lake (1999: 16, 24), David G. Haglund (2003: 18–20), Robert Kagan (2006: *passim*), Hilde E. Restad (2010: 6, 13–33; 2015: 69–84), Andrew Johnstone (2011: 7–13, 16–17), Brooke L. Blower (2014: *passim*), Melvyn P. Leffler (2017: 5, 10–12), and Frida Stranne (2020: 101–103).
- 10 Elements of this interpretation can be found in the works of authors such as Charles A. Beard (1939: 64–71; 1946: 17), Samuel Flagg Bemis (1949: 356–362, 567–569), Dexter Perkins (1952: 3–4), Foster R. Dulles (1955: xviii–5), Alexander DeConde (1957: 3–6, 11, 15), Kenneth S. Thompson (1957: 159–183), Selig Adler (1957: 15–20, 28), Manfred Jonas (1966: 4–5, 7–15, 23; 2002: 337–351), Leroy N. Rieselbach (1966: 7–8, 10–12), Arthur Alphonse Ekirch (1966: 1–2), Wayne S. Cole (1974: 110, 187, 321–322), Inis L. Claude Jr. (1986: 4), Lawrence S. Kaplan (1987: xi–xvii, 8, 79–80), Eugene R. Wittkopf (1990: 25, 29), Ronald E. Powaski (1991: ix), John E. Wilz (Wilz & Doenecke 1991: 4), Doug Bandow (1994: 8–13), Eric A. Nordlinger (1995: 50, 121–122, 183–193), Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (1995: 2–5; 1996: 152–156), Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross (1997: 6, 9, 12–16; 2000: 3–51), Roger S. Whitcomb (1998: 63, 81–90), Justus D. Doenecke (1999: 341; 2018: 1–2), Patrick Buchanan (2002: xxiv), Edward A. Olsen (2002: 37, 42–43), Robert J. Art (2003: 172–197), Joan Hoff W. (2008: 24–33, 64), Stewart Patrick (2009: 8–9), Christopher McKnight Nichols (2011: 347–348), Lane Crothers (2011: 26, 28–29), and

the updated conceptualization. As shown below, however, all three approaches rest on core assumptions that entail important weaknesses. None, for example, provides a way to measure the level of isolationism or to capture how it varies in degree across foreign-policy episodes.

The final approach is that of Bear F. Braumoeller. Unlike the first group, he views the phenomenon only in a narrower, security-policy sense, not as a general isolation encompassing the economic and cultural levels (a major problem of the first stream).¹¹ In contrast with the second camp, he refuses to define isolationism through concrete policy measures such as alliance avoidance, unilateralism, or neutrality (Braumoeller 2010: 353). His reasoning is that these measures are not unique to isolationism: a unilateral action may reflect an isolationist stance, but it may equally serve an activist one. If isolationism is defined by the measures themselves, the definition cannot tell these possibilities apart, because the same observable behavior would count as isolationist regardless of the stance behind it.

However, the resulting definition remains problematic for two reasons. First, Braumoeller's (2010: 354) broad formulation – "the voluntary and general abstention . . . from security-related activity" – lacks specific criteria, making isolationism overly fluid and yet indistinct from other policies that share similar traits. Second, his claim that these policies cannot be meaningfully distinguished (2010: 353–354) is challenged in this study (see the unilateralism discussion below and the conditions specified in the conceptualization section). Nevertheless, this research is informed by his valuable insight that isolationism presupposes a state's capacity to act, thereby ruling out non-involvement driven by inability rather than intent (2010: 353). Situations preventing any involvement would render isolationism unprovable.

I concur with first-stream authors that the black-and-white binaries and a sharp shift from an "isolationist phase" to internationalism after 1898 or Pearl Harbor are simplistic (Restad 2012: 56–67; 2015: *passim*; Blower 2014: 349–355), given the evident continuity – a view also shared by contemporary second-stream scholars. In a careful reconstruction of isolationist thought from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, Nichols (2011: 1–2) warned against reductive formulations that misrepresent a considerably complex reality, while Kupchan (2020: 127–204) demonstrated that the forces culminating in 1898 had evolved over the preceding century. However, the counterclaim that U.S. isolationism never existed risks over-

Charles A. Kupchan (2020: 5, 373–374). The span of these works – stretching across both streams from the 1950s to the 2020s – is cited deliberately: it documents how long the definitional questions reviewed in this section have remained open without converging on a shared operational resolution.

- 11 In fact, although Braumoeller (2010: 353) criticizes isolationism, he does not dispute its existence in U.S. (or British) foreign policy *per se* – indeed, he cites some notable examples – but rather questions its prevalence during a specific period of U.S. inter-war policy in the 20th century.

correcting: in discarding a misleading label and the grand narrative attached to it, this perspective also implicitly sheds the observable pattern of non-involvement that the label loosely covered – a pattern still in need of analytical treatment.

An overly general, literal interpretation¹² invites redescription: once “isolationism” is read as total separation, observable policies are more naturally subsumed under neighboring labels, or the concept is dismissed outright in light of rising trade. The result inverts, rather than escapes, the conventional narrative’s binary logic. Each of these redescriptions is examined in turn below, beginning with the most common. Isolationism in U.S. foreign policy extends beyond – and cannot be reduced to – unilateralism. For instance, the 1930s Neutrality Acts codified congressional non-interventionism, although Roosevelt’s 1937 cash-and-carry provision edged toward aiding the Allies. Yet despite his success in loosening neutrality by 1939, Congress did not authorize direct intervention into belligerent ports or “combat zones” until October 1941, after repeated U-boat clashes with U.S. Navy and merchant vessels (Office of the Historian 2018). In short, isolationism – unlike mere unilateralism – stands in principled opposition to *interventionism*.

Similarly, neutrality cannot stand in for isolationism. Blower (2014: 345–346, 349–354) offers one of the strongest critiques of the binary labels discussed above. Examining implemented interwar policies rather than an abstract tradition, she argues that the fierce debates of 1919–1941 are better understood as a struggle over how neutrality should be redefined in an age of total war – and she explicitly declines to simply relabel isolationists as “neutralists.” As a way of reinterpreting the period, this is a serious alternative. Yet neutrality cannot capture the policy configuration at issue here. Neutrality is a legal status under international law: a state abstains from hostilities between belligerents while retaining full rights to lawful – including multilateral – relations (Armstrong 2002: 559). Thus, pledging not to aid either side does not preclude political/diplomatic engagement or UN peacekeeping (Braumoeller 2010: 354). Likewise, neutralism/non-alignment (a peacetime orientation of detachment from great-power rivalries) is not isolationism; non-aligned states frequently engage in multilateral cooperation and act through international organizations (Ruddy 2002: 545; Geldenhuys 1990: 10). Unlike isolationism, these orientations do not reject *internationalism*. Like unilateralism, each of these orientations captures at most one facet of isolationism, not the configuration as a whole.

In his convincing evaluation, Andrew Johnstone (2011: 10) argues that focusing on two components of U.S. isolationism – *non-interventionism* and *unilateralism*, both sufficiently specific and traceable beyond WWII – provides analytical clarity. Yet his proposal to substitute the term with either component (2011: 12–13)

12 Read literally, “isolationism” invites the objection that *complete* isolation is impossible for the United States today – and has, indeed, never been the policy’s actual aim (Cole 1992: 38; Blower 2014: 351).

overlooks that U.S. isolationism is a distinct policy configuration: the intersection that rejects both interventionism and internationalism. Moreover, non-interventionism alone cannot capture the conditional unilateralist dimension of U.S. isolationism (see below).

The third approach, while seeking to eliminate the confusion between these policies, defines the term too broadly while still blurring conceptual lines. Both the first and third camps overlook that isolationism centers on disengagement and non-intervention, with unilateralism permissible only under specific conditions. As some of the second-stream authors note, isolationism reflects a minimal, defensive realism¹³ (Posen & Ross 1997: 6, 12), aiming *to avoid* involvement, and *to defend* unilaterally only when the narrowest definition of vital national interests (national defense and U.S. citizen protection) is at stake (Bandow 1994; Posen & Ross 1997: 5–6; Art 2003: 174). Unlike mere unilateralism, an isolationist stance does not employ unilateral action to expand the state's power position – to acquire territory, clients, bases, or spheres of influence – but only to protect the narrowest vital interests just defined.

Another contested claim rejects U.S. isolationism on the grounds of “economic expansionism.” This objection overlooks accounts that distinguish security-political non-involvement from commercial openness. For instance, Nordlinger (1995: 6) treats isolationism as “first and foremost a security strategy” and – despite frequent association with protectionism – argues that free-trade principles formed “a venerable part of the isolationist tradition”; Jonas (2002: 344) likewise emphasizes the compatibility of “traditional policy” associated with isolationism with international commerce since the republic's founding. Hayes (2004: *passim*) and Kertzer et al. (2014: 831, 835) further argue that libertarian political philosophy coheres with an isolationist foreign policy, as both resist government intervention and the expansion of state power, including abroad. A related distinction between commercial intercourse and security entanglement appears in foundational texts, such as Washington's “Great rule of conduct” (1796: 25) and Jefferson's call for “peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none” (1801: 150). Some prominent accounts understand U.S. isolationism primarily as an abstention from strategic security involvement – whether military, political, or diplomatic – as opposed to participation in trade or cultural exchange (Klingberg 1952: 239; Braumoeller 2010: 351–354).

While the United States embraced protectionism in the 1930s – like many states during the Great Depression – and this economic approach remains central to contemporary “America First,” protectionism should not be conflated with security-political isolationism (see the comparative usages section above). Nor

13 The concept is unrelated to the notion of “minimal realism” by Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik (1999: 6) denoting a theory preserving only two of the realistic assumptions – anarchy and rationality.

should nationalism be conflated with foreign policy isolationism. Nationalism/patriotism can motivate non-intervention, but so can pacifism, which often conflicts with nationalist sentiment. Moreover, these same ideologies have also supported international activism (Nichols 2011: 283–300, 323–327; Blower 2014: 352–353; Kupchan 2020: 360–361). Accordingly, such factors – including racial ideologies present in certain periods (Nichols 2011: 53–57; Boissoneault 2017; Kupchan 2020: 126–139) – do not provide a coherent or analytically useful basis for defining isolationism as a set of foreign policy measures.

Indeed, Braumoeller (2010: 351–353) argues that economic, market, and cultural exchange do not adequately capture U.S. isolationist policy. Claude (1986: 4) similarly notes that “serious students of U.S. foreign policy” do not read isolationism literally, but understand it mainly as abstention from security involvement. While the term’s misleading literal meaning leads some first-stream scholars to advocate for the complete rejection of the label (see McDougall 1997: 40–42; Restad 2010: 20), the distinct and recurrent policy pattern (see Kupchan 2020: 142–147, 161–162, 212–214) still requires conceptualization. Consequently, the introduction of a substitute label might appear to be a constructive alternative.¹⁴ Yet the discussion above shows that unilateralism, neutrality, protectionism, and nationalism are not viable substitutes. Older U.S. foreign-policy debates and contemporary discussions of U.S. grand strategy have also produced a cluster of near-synonymous terms. These include *continentalism* (Beard 1939: 64–65; Craig 2001: 255–263), *free hand* (Art 2003: 176–222; Hayes 2004: 510), *America First* (Dimitrova 2017: 34–39), *Fortress America* (Brands 2017: 77–82), *restraint* (Posen 2014: 69–71), and *strategic retrenchment* (MacDonald & Parent 2018: 23–25, 29–35). The next subsection therefore examines whether any of these alternative labels could plausibly replace “isolationism.”

A further objection concerns consistency. Several authors doubt that isolationism ever existed because the same actors who supported isolationism-compatible policies at one point adopted activist measures at another (see, e.g., Blower 2014: 353–354; Restad 2015: 140). Senator William E. Borah opposed U.S. entry into the League of Nations and interventions in Latin America, yet backed U.S. leadership in Europe’s postwar recovery and interwar disarmament (Williams 1953: 391; 1972: 123–124; Blower 2014: 354; Restad 2015: 136–137, 140). Robert A. Taft, a longtime non-interventionist, later supported U.S. membership in the UN and binding international adjudication (Taft 1951: 11–19, 39–41; Patterson 1974: 672–679; Hayes

14 The “free hand” policy may be an alternative: non-involvement in others’ affairs coupled with a preference for independent (unilateral) action when involvement becomes necessary. Used by Senator Robert A. Taft (1951: 12), the term has roots in U.S. political discourse and is recognized in political science, but it resonates far less than “isolationism” with both professional and lay audiences. Another difficulty is that the term has already been treated as an umbrella concept that encompasses not only isolationism but also more confrontational offshore balancing (Art 2003: 121, 176).

2004: 510, 515–516). Whether such inconsistency disproves isolationism depends on how the term is conceptualized. If it names a tradition – an entrenched orientation that an actor is supposed to embody – the objection succeeds: when a politician who represents that tradition acts against it, such behavior undermines that characterization.¹⁵ If, however, isolationism conceptualizes a property of concrete policy responses – as this article defines it – the same evidence shows only that positions vary across issues, which is exactly what should be expected, since uniformity across disparate issues and security contexts is an unreasonable demand. The records of Borah and Taft then cease to be refutations and become ordinary within-actor variation, to be assessed response by response. Such variation has always been visible in the historical record; what has been missing is a conceptual apparatus able to register it instead of explaining it away. The episode-based conceptualization developed below provides exactly that: it classifies responses, not persons or traditions, and therefore treats mixed records as data rather than as counterevidence.

It may also seem that U.S. isolationism is unrealizable in post-WWII conditions. For example, Senator Taft (1951: 18–19) deemed the “free hand” policy obsolete as air power and nuclear weapons eroded U.S. geographical isolation, a view some share (Garfinkle 1996: 103). However, other scholars argue that nuclear deterrence makes conquests threatening U.S. security highly unlikely, allowing the United States to exploit its geography and intervene only in response to direct threats (Gholz, Press & Sapolsky 1997: 8–9, 45–47; Mearsheimer & Walt 2016: 72). They contend that nuclear weapons assure “great power sovereignty” (Gholz, Press & Sapolsky 1997: 6).

A related criticism holds that the term is Eurocentric: eras labeled “isolationist” coincided with continental territorial acquisition, imperial projects, expansionist ideologies, and settler colonialism, meaning that the label, as Restad (2010: 17–32; 2012: 54–65; 2015: 56–66) argues, survives only by ignoring the extensive external activism beyond Europe carefully documented by scholars of U.S. imperialism (see, e.g., Kagan 2006: *passim*). Against era-wide usage, the objection is well justified: calling a whole period isolationist while the state expanded elsewhere misdescribes the period. It does not, however, undermine claims about specific responses. As Braumoeller (2010: 353) argues, historical evidence suggests that isolationism is often geographically targeted: abstention toward one region can coexist with expansion in another. Assessed response by response, both sides of the record – non-involvement and activism – can be recognized simultaneously.

15 I thank Hilde E. Restad for comments on an earlier draft that prompted me to state explicitly the distinction between the episode-level classification of policy responses proposed here and tradition-level claims in the existing literature. The episode-based framework and its operational criteria were developed independently; I remain responsible for all interpretations and any errors.

The selective application of such policies – mostly toward Europe in one period and elsewhere in another¹⁶ – is then not a reason to dismiss the concept, but rather a pattern that an analytical framework should be able to register.

It is important to note, however, that many authors of the second stream tend to treat isolationism in an absolute, ill-specified extent: when isolationist measures appear in a given period, the entire era is often simplistically labeled as isolationist in a binary, all-or-nothing manner. If such policies are interpreted as mostly absent, and the international activism prevails, there is inclination to label the whole period as purely internationalist – the tendency that Restad also critiques. However, her alternative, outlined below, resolves only part of the problem.

As Restad (2015: 64–66, 79–84) correctly notes in her compelling critique, the United States actively interacted with nearby actors (European colonies, Indigenous polities) from its inception while preserving maximum foreign-policy autonomy – a continuous tradition she terms “unilateral internationalism.” However, since this tradition-level label was designed to describe a centuries-long pattern, it cannot capture the variation across individual – and often highly contrasting – episodes, presidencies, and eras. By necessarily treating this dynamic as a constant, such a macro-level design implies that both unilateral and internationalist elements are omnipresent across all issue areas and periods. Therefore, in the analysis of foreign policy actions, both dimensions are better understood as varying in degree and occasionally coexisting with alternative policy strands. Furthermore, unilateral internationalism leaves little room for the non-involvement dimension of U.S. foreign policy; in Restad’s account, groups advocating non-intervention consistently lose the policy argument and remain largely uninfluential (Restad 2015: 10–11, 82, 235). Crucially, as second-stream accounts suggest, even when Washington deemed a theater strategic and possessed the capacity to act, it sometimes still deliberately chose non-intervention and political disengagement. A more productive approach is therefore to assess, issue by issue, the relative levels of isolationism, interventionism, and internationalism in specific responses, treating the characterizations of actors, administrations, and periods as inferences drawn from those responses rather than as fixed starting points.

In sum, the conventional narrative and the outright dismissal of “U.S. isolationism” share more than they admit: both characterize whole eras and actors at once. Yet, the record they summarize is one of constant variation: non-involvement prevailing at times, in some regions, and in particular decisions, while activism dominates in others, with sentiment and policy not always aligned. As Crothers argues, U.S. foreign policy has been both *relatively* isolationist and *relatively* internationalist over time. The United States has never been *entirely* isolationist,

16 As Doenecke (1979: 9–11, 2018: 2) documents, advocates of isolationist policies persisted in U.S. governmental debates after WWII. Their influence waned but regained traction following U.S. setbacks in Vietnam during the 1970s.

even in eras so labeled. Consequently, the enduring coexistence of both tendencies – and their deep roots in U.S. political culture – counsels against treating isolationism as a historical relic (Crothers 2011: 32). Notably, these roots dictate no particular course, as exceptionalist ideas have historically framed engagement and abstention alike (Crothers 2011: 25–26). Even amid active global involvement, sizable publics have opposed it (Crothers 2011: 32), a sentiment that resurfaced prominently during the 2024 presidential election. It is this coexistence in actual policy – not only in sentiment – that summary labels obscure, and that the episode-based approach developed below is specifically designed to register.

Setting aside the term's vague, often pejorative use in public and professional discourse, in much of the reviewed literature "U.S. isolationism" is typically: (i) rejected outright as non-existent; (ii) examined as a sentiment or a heterogeneous, often contradictory, set of ideas rather than a policy practice; (iii) insufficiently distinguished between its ideational/sentimental dimension and the policy manifestation; and (iv) even when distinguished, either conflated with neighboring terms, treated as an unchanging, all-or-nothing constant, or defined too broadly. These issues are not merely terminological disputes; they block measurement and comparison. The next subsection therefore evaluates the concept more systematically using Gerring's framework.

Conceptual evaluation: Gerring's framework

How does the concept's current state perform under neutral, transferable criteria that allow systematic evaluation and comparison of concept quality? To answer this question systematically, I use Gerring's concept-building framework because it offers an explicit set of criteria for assessing a concept's overall analytical performance in a given literature. This is essential for the paper's immediate task: to diagnose where "isolationism" performs poorly across scholarship and to specify which dimensions require repair before credible evaluation and comparison are possible. Alternative frameworks are valuable but address narrower problems. For example, Sartori (1970) or Collier and Mahon (1993) focus primarily on conceptual stretching and category adaptation as concepts travel across cases. Goertz (2006) emphasizes concept structure and the relationship between constitutive dimensions and indicators. Adcock and Collier (2001) concentrate on measurement validity once indicators are specified. By contrast, this study requires an integrated assessment that covers semantic clarity, empirical research utility, and measurement validity in one evaluative rubric. Gerring's criteria therefore provide the most direct fit for this step in the argument.

Gerring (2012: 116–131) outlines seven criteria for robust concepts; the assessment below applies these criteria to the concept as it operates across the literature as a whole, not to its most sophisticated individual accounts. The first – *resonance* – gauges a term's familiarity, intuitive fit, and alignment with

common/scholarly usage. “Isolationism” scores *high* on resonance: it is entrenched in scholarship, textbooks, public discourse, and political rhetoric. The historical familiarity makes it widely accessible. The problem is not recognition but imprecision and pejorative connotations.¹⁷

Despite the ambiguity of its literal meaning,¹⁸ replacing the term is ill-advised. Proposed substitutes discussed in the previous section are not conceptually equivalent, and the field is already crowded with near-synonyms that create further problems of analytical fit and differentiation. *Continentalism* and *free hand* are historical attempts to describe policies associated with isolationism without using the term itself. Yet Charles A. Beard, who coined *continentalism*, insisted that it was the antithesis of isolationism when critics labeled it “isolationist” (Philbin 2000: 96–98). Likewise, *free hand* has been used both as a synonym for isolationism (Hayes 2004: 509–511) and as a broader label encompassing the more activist strategy of offshore balancing (Art 2003: 172–177). *America First* and *Fortress America* function more as political slogans than analytical categories and are not identical to isolationist stances compatible with libertarianism, since both are closely tied to economic nationalism and protectionism (Brands 2017: 78; Dimitrova 2017: 34–37; Dufour & Ducasse 2020: 231, 233–236). *Restraint*, *offshore balancing*, and *strategic retrenchment*, by contrast, are modern grand-strategy alternatives whose proximity to isolationism creates a persistent differentiation problem. *Restraint* is sometimes treated as equivalent to isolationism in the military-security sphere, even though it remains compatible with defending allies and seeking new overseas alliances (Gholz, Press & Sapolsky 1997: 6, 46–47). *Retrenchment* refers to great-power decline and reduced grand-strategic ambition, with isolationism as only one possible endpoint (MacDonald & Parent 2018: 7–9), and even this label is used inconsistently across authors and accounts (Graefrath 2025: 333–335). Compounding this differentiation problem, isolationism is often defined only relationally, as the residual alternative to stances such as restraint, offshore balancing, or retrenchment, all of which criticize liberal hegemony while preserving some willingness to sustain external commitments or intervene (Gholz, Press & Sapolsky 1997: 46–48; Posen 2014: 6–7; Mearsheimer & Walt 2016: 72; MacDonald & Parent 2018: 7, 197). A new label might avoid the misleading implications of the existing term, but it would also weaken its resonance and further crowd the semantic field.

17 Born as an unflattering label for purported “isolation” from bygone times to be discarded, the term has been used in notoriously tendentious, pejorative ways – casting “isolationists” as foolish or unpatriotic (Campbell 1964: 35).

18 As Cole (1992: 38) argues, the label is misleading: no U.S. president has sought literal isolation. Coined in the 20th century as a misnomer to discredit long-standing U.S. policies – a caricature of actual measures – it has since been used to denounce positions even marginally less internationalist than the prevailing orthodoxy, a pattern that persists in the post–Cold War era (Dumbrell 1999: 24).

Addressing the other definitional challenges outlined above, rather than substituting the term, is therefore the better remedy. *Domain* – the clarity and logic of a concept’s boundaries in language community and application – is *moderate*: scholars broadly agree what isolationism evokes but disagree on scope (security-political disengagement vs. inclusion of trade/cultural/social withdrawal). Empirically, usage spans the whole arc of U.S. foreign relations – a vast literature applies the term to the early republic and the nineteenth century, while subsequent work extends it into the post-WWII and contemporary periods – but the interwar years (1919–1941) function as the prototypical referent, and the further application moves from that prototype, the more contested it becomes. *Consistency* – stability of meaning across different contexts – is *weak to moderate*: a meaning that shifts across studies undermines the validity of cross-study comparisons. While individual accounts can be internally stable, throughout the literature, both the object of classification and the properties deemed constitutive vary across historical eras.¹⁹ *Fecundity* – depth, coherence, and capacity to generate consistent theoretical/empirical insight across contexts – is *moderate*: rooted in sovereignty, non-intervention, and skepticism toward international commitments, it illuminates the original historical/rhetorical setting, but shared attributes diminish as referents diverge²⁰ (e.g., 1930s vs. 2010s). *Differentiation* – distinctness from related terms – is *weak to moderate*: some accounts draw the boundaries with adjacent terms carefully, but broader usage frequently conflates them, blurring boundaries and weakening explanatory clarity. *Causal utility* – value within explanatory frameworks (as independent, dependent, or intervening variable) – is *weak to moderate*: the concept appears in accounts of interwar behavior and debates on decline, but vagueness limits predictive leverage.²¹ *Operationalization* – reliable measurement/observation – is *weak to moderate*: particular studies rely on

19 Historically, isolationism has encompassed a broad array of U.S. foreign-relations stances without constituting a coherent set of principles (Whitcomb 1998: 83). Holmes (2013) likewise argues the term has become so elastic that it signifies little beyond disapproval. This elasticity invites comparison with what Wullweber (2015: 81–82) terms an “empty signifier” – a label lacking a fixed specific meaning – although, as argued below, the term retains a recurring security-oriented core. For a detailed discussion of the conceptual history of isolationism and its antonyms, see Wertheim (2024: *passim*).

20 Haglund (2003: 16) argues that many conceptual problems – including incoherent definitions – stem from conflating public isolationist sentiment with policy. Campbell (1964: 32) similarly notes that “isolationism” often denotes a vague national mood rather than concrete policies. The literature must therefore distinguish sentiment from policy – a distinction that remains largely implicit in much of the literature.

21 Since as early as the 1940s, critics have dismissed the concept as an outdated slogan (Dennett 1944: 135); Watt (1963: 3–7) argued that applying it to numerous, often contradictory positions reduced it to a stereotyped label with limited analytical utility. These criticisms show that concerns about the term’s elasticity and pejorative use long predate the contemporary debate.

observable indicators – attitudes, votes, doctrines, or policy measures – but the concept often remains abstract, and no shared rules connect such indicators to a common classification.

Taken together, these ratings do not indicate an empty or unusable concept. They indicate a familiar and productive term with a recurring security-political core and several precise formulations, but without shared boundaries or rules for moving from sentiments and particular policy measures to episode-, actor-, or period-level conclusions. Despite its ubiquity, “isolationism” functions analytically as a rogue concept – widely recognized but operationally uncoordinated, and frequently subject to rhetorical deployment in political debates. It is this analytical looseness, rather than total conceptual failure, that requires careful redefinition for scholarly use. Moreover, both U.S. and other state-centered literatures show that “isolationism” is repeatedly stretched through various kinds of drift in domain, level-of-analysis, agency, and temporal scope. These shifts are analytically consequential because, without explicit scope conditions, they make isolationism observationally ambiguous. The next section therefore proposes the revised definition – a foreign policy issue-response framework that specifies the relevant domain (security-political dimension), fixes the unit of analysis (foreign-policy episodes across a presidential term), and states voluntariness and baseline-relative non-involvement conditions under which isolationism can be inferred.

Operationalized conceptualization of the problematic ‘i’ word

As the previous section shows, the literature often treats isolationist foreign policy as indistinguishable from public sentiment or conflates it with adjacent policies. However, the discussion above demonstrates that these terms are not adequate substitutes. Moreover, each of these concepts – be it isolationism or its antonyms – is frequently portrayed as fixed and unchanging across events, and political actors are cast in binary, all-or-nothing terms (e.g., entirely unilateral or completely isolationist). The temporal scope of isolationism is likewise unsettled – whether it is confined to traditionally “isolationist” eras or remains applicable today. These problems together motivate a conceptualization that directly addresses the foregoing ambiguities and limitations. I therefore present an operationalized conception of isolationism that eclectically synthesizes the defining features from competing strands of the literature (reviewed in the preceding section). The operationalization is designed to translate the previously mentioned conceptual ambiguities into explicit scope conditions and decision rules.

Isolationism is a specific configuration within the broader category of *non-involvement*. Accordingly, the principal forms of international activism – *interventionism* and *internationalism* – are antithetical to it.²² Moreover, the adoption

22 As Watt (1963: 6) observes, the commonly paired antonyms *internationalism* and *inter-*

of this policy option reflects diverse, ad hoc factors operating in combination; as Rieselbach (1960: 645–657; 1966: 9–27) notes, isolationism is complex and resists monocausal explanation. To reduce the term's domain ambiguity in the broader literature, this study treats isolationism as a security-political foreign-policy response, not as a residual label for inward-looking policy in general. The definition therefore excludes cultural or purely economic closure as such, and focuses instead on political/diplomatic engagement and on the use (or avoidance) of security-related instruments, including economic statecraft when deployed for security purposes.

Because administrations can be restraint-oriented in some regions or issue areas while simultaneously activist in others, I treat isolationism as context-specific rather than fixed and globally uniform. Accordingly, isolationism – and its opposing alternatives – is conceptualized as a response toward specific foreign-policy issues. Such a response may appear, to varying degrees, within any administration; few leaders are wholly isolationist. I therefore evaluate isolationism within and across policy episodes, rather than infer it wholesale from broad presidential rhetoric, popular sentiments, ideological orientations, or single-region snapshots. This episode-based design avoids binary “isolationist era” classifications by treating a presidency's overall posture as the distribution of its foreign-policy responses. In doing so, it challenges the common tendency to discuss isolationism as an administration-wide constant or as a property of discrete “eras.” This approach privileges observable policy behavior, preserves meaningful within-term variation, and enables systematic comparison across administrations and periods.

The episode-based design also clarifies what the concept does – and does not – claim. Although much of the academic debate on U.S. isolationism treats the term as a tradition – an identity-laden narrative intertwined with American exceptionalism (see McDougall 1997: 39–42; Restad 2012: 54–69; 2015: *passim*) – this conceptualization does not focus on tradition in an identity-based sense. Instead, it classifies observable foreign-policy acts – responses to specific episodes – that satisfy explicit behavioral conditions. Such an approach aims to derive broader characterizations of actors, administrations, or periods from the distribution of these policy responses, without taking a position on tradition-level claims, which would require further evidence of historical continuity and transmission. The existence of discrete acts in itself cannot prove a whole tradition, but rejecting a tradition cannot rule out that particular responses qualify as isolationist.

Although this paper centers on the United States, isolationism is not *sui generis*. The term has been applied to diverse polities across periods, including small and medium states as well as major powers. This warrants treating isolationism as a portable foreign-policy pattern rather than a uniquely American doctrine. Indeed,

ventionism exhibit paradoxes akin to those surrounding isolationism and are often at odds with one another, since the internationalist typically aims to create conditions under which intervention would be unnecessary.

even states with substantial capabilities have at times preferred non-involvement in others' security affairs: Braumoeller (2010: 353) cites the United Kingdom, and Schroeder (1994: 142–145) identifies episodes involving both Austria and Britain at stages of the nineteenth century. Nor is disengagement a comfortable default at the other end of the capability spectrum: small states are typically highly dependent on world markets and on external security and institutional “shelter,” which makes sustained political and economic disengagement a consequential and costly choice for them as well (Katzenstein 1985: 9, 24; Thorhallsson & Steinsson 2018: 1–3). Isolationism is therefore a deliberate and analytically consequential choice wherever it appears, not the natural posture of any class of states.

I define isolationism (see Table 1) as:

the response adopted by an *administration* toward a *relevant* foreign-policy issue (*crisis*), which favors voluntary *non-interventionism* and/or a baseline-relative *political/diplomatic disengagement* where the state is *able* to act, while permitting conditional (under imminent threat to the *narrowest vital interests*) and *reluctant unilateral intervention/engagement*.

The following paragraphs clarify the definition's key terms (in italics). The concept centers on *intervention*: a foreign policy action that (a) degrades a hostile actor's security (state or non-state) or (b) strengthens the security capacity of its opponents (e.g., U.S. strategic partners). Confrontational interventions include direct military action (overt/covert operations), indirect action (sabotage, cyberattacks), and economic sanctions.²³ Partner-support interventions comprise military-political assistance (arms transfers, training, personnel) and economic aid.²⁴ As a component of isolationism, non-intervention therefore includes declarations of neutrality coupled with the avoidance of multilateral interaction on the issue. A second element of isolationism is *political/diplomatic disengagement*: minimizing further costly foreign involvement (relative to the prevailing status quo at the time of implementation). It manifests itself as abstaining from diplomatic/political participation in matters that do not threaten national security (see

23 In the 1920s – within this study's timeframe – sanctions were seen as a powerful deterrent, the non-kinetic analogue of later nuclear weapons. WWI outcomes help explain this: air raids killed 1,400 British civilians (plus several hundred elsewhere), gas killed no civilians and 19,000 of 1.2 million exposed soldiers, whereas the economic blockade caused an estimated 800–900,000 civilian deaths from malnutrition and disease – in terms of civilian casualties, by far the deadliest instrument (Mulder 2022: 4–5).

24 The primary stated objective of U.S. development assistance is to safeguard national security. The military and economic dimensions of strategic-support interventions overlap, since U.S. foreign assistance includes military aid (Congressional Research Service 2022: 3).

Table 1). The baseline-relative element is included to prevent isolationism from being equated with simple inaction. The relevant question is whether decision-makers seek to avoid additional costly involvement compared to the inherited level of engagement at the moment the foreign-policy episode emerges, not whether the state is globally inactive in an abstract sense.

Two clarifications follow. First, a posture of non-involvement inherited from a previous presidency is not, by itself, an isolationist response; if no relevant episode arises during the administration, there is no decision to classify. Second, a relevant episode re-opens the choice: decision-makers face renewed pressure, or a renewed opportunity, to become involved. Maintaining the inherited policy then becomes an active, observable decision – for instance, declining proposals or requests for involvement – and qualifies as an isolationist response even though the overall level of engagement remains unchanged.

Importantly, policy outcomes cannot be attributed solely to the president, even though the president remains the pivotal decision-maker. Rather, an *administration* functions as a collective actor – a network of individuals where key decision-makers are those who most substantially shape the foreign policy response to a given issue. Although presidents, advisers, departments, agencies, and occasionally Congress may disagree, their interaction ultimately produces an authoritative or prevailing policy line. Isolationism is therefore evaluated across the presidential term, treating policy responses as negotiated compromises or consensual outputs among these principals. Alongside the president, these actors include internal administration staff (cabinet officials, departmental executive bodies, and offices within the Executive Office of the President) as well as external actors (members of Congress and personnel in independent federal agencies). Their composition varies dynamically from issue to issue.

A foreign-policy *response* refers to the course of action or deliberate non-action adopted by an administration, through its relevant decision-makers, toward a particular episode. Such a response is formed by observable measures; a stated position or rhetorical preference is not sufficient when contradicted by implemented policy. Much of foreign policy is routine – alliance management, scheduled negotiations, bureaucratic and budgetary processes. The framework targets what arises alongside this routine agenda: discrete issues that demand a positional response. The most urgent among them are *crises* – situations in which the primary decision makers of a given crisis actor perceive a threat to fundamental values, believe they have limited time to react, and anticipate an increased risk of involvement in military conflict (Brecher & Wilkenfeld 1997: 3). However, the same event does not necessarily constitute a salient problem for third parties observing it. Within an isolationist stance, involvement is legitimate only when the state's *narrowest vital interests* are imminently threatened and when these stakes plausibly outweigh the expected costs of counteraction. These core

security concerns primarily encompass the safety of citizens and the protection of critical territory and assets.

Crises vary substantially in salience for a given state, given different goals, geographic priorities, capabilities, and vulnerability to external shocks. Some episodes are so remote, small-scale, or strategically marginal that even strongly internationalist leaders – sometimes attentive to humanitarian concerns – may neither prioritize them nor devote sustained attention to them. Non-involvement in such low-salience crises therefore does not constitute evidence of isolationism, since abstention may reflect ordinary agenda constraints and prioritization rather than a deliberate stance of non-intervention or disengagement. Accordingly, *relevant* crises are those in which meaningful involvement is plausibly available and where abstention is not simply the default expectation for any administration because the episode is remote, trivial, or strategically marginal.

Unilateralism denotes a state's pursuit of foreign policy objectives individually, rather than in concert with others. By contrast, multilateralism seeks coordinated action with other states – through diplomacy, negotiation, conferences, treaties, and international organizations (Nollkaemper 2011). Because the literature frequently collapses isolationism into adjacent stances (especially unilateralism), the framework treats unilateral action as compatible with an isolationist stance only under restrictive “isolationist” conditions. To distinguish unilateralism as a component of isolationism from mere unilateralist policy, two conditions must hold:

1. *Motive*: political engagement / intervention is driven by protection of narrowly defined vital interests (above), not pursuit of broader gains;
2. *Reluctance*: the administration first pursues the available less-confrontational options.

Consistent with the second (reluctance) condition, when vital interests are at stake, unilateral political or diplomatic engagement need not negate isolationism. Instead, it signals a preference for less confrontational, lower-intensity measures. For military-political or economic assistance (intervention by supporting strategic partners), the reluctance condition holds only if the aid preempts an imminent confrontation threatening U.S. lives and property (i.e., strategic support designed to avert a more forceful intervention). If the United States is directly attacked, both conditions still apply. The first condition is satisfied by the threat to U.S. citizens. If a response necessary to end the ongoing threat leaves no scope for less-confrontational options, the reluctance condition is satisfied only when proceeding unilaterally (which minimizes external involvement). These conditions capture the logic that, even when isolationists act under specific circumstances, they do so narrowly and reluctantly – as a bounded exception – rather than treating unilateralism as a general substitute for international activism.

The final defining feature is *voluntariness*: the state possesses a meaningful *ability to intervene/engage* in a given arena yet chooses not to. This definitional characteristic follows Braumoeller's (2010: 353) point that isolationism reflects strategy rather than incapacity. It separates being isolated (an externally produced constraint) from being isolationist (a deliberate stance), avoiding false positives where abstention results from exclusion, coercion, or inability. Accordingly, where exclusion, coercion, incapacity, or another constraint removes meaningful choice, non-involvement cannot establish isolationism.

Table 1. Components of the isolationist stance

Antonyms of Isolationism		Isolationist Stance	
		Components	Manifestations in Foreign Policy
Interventionism	X	Non-interventionism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • endeavor to reduce the initiation of any intervention to the minimum necessary, until the narrowest vital interests are imminently threatened • declarations of neutrality coupled with the avoidance of multilateral interaction on the issue, until the narrowest vital interests are imminently threatened
Internationalism International Political/Diplomatic Engagement Multilateral Interventions in Terms of International Liberalism	X	Political/Diplomatic Disengagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • endeavor to minimize further costly political/diplomatic involvement, especially multilateral, relative to the inherited baseline, until the narrowest vital interests are imminently threatened
	X	Unilateral Interventions in Terms of Minimal (Defensive) Realism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • under imminent threat to the narrowest vital interests, reluctant unilateral confrontational intervention, only after the available less-confrontational options are exhausted • under imminent threat to the narrowest vital interests, reluctant unilateral partner-support intervention (military-political or economic aid) to preempt an imminent direct confrontation

Note: Narrowest vital interests = the safety of citizens and the protection of critical territory and assets.

Source: Author.

Demonstrating the analytical value of the updated concept

The value of a revised concept lies not only in definitional precision, but in whether it clarifies cases that earlier usage rendered ambiguous. The following section

addresses that question in two steps. It first offers a brief illustrative application to recent U.S. foreign-policy episodes in order to show how the updated conception distinguishes rhetoric from behavior and captures within-administration variation. It then reassesses the revised concept under Gerring's criteria to determine whether these gains translate into a more consistent, differentiated, and operationally useful analytical tool.

The clearest way to demonstrate the revised concept's analytical value is to apply it briefly to a case that has generated persistent conceptual confusion. The Trump administrations serve that purpose well, since their foreign policy has often been described in binary terms that blur the distinction between rhetoric, coercive activism, and selective disengagement. The aim of this illustration is to show that the concept recognizes variation that presidency-level labels cannot, rather than to establish new substantive findings about Trump based on a handful of foreign policy episodes. That Trump's record has combined elements of abstention with interventionist and coercive behavior is, by itself, familiar from the existing literature. The current debate, however, lacks a set of explicit criteria for classifying such mixed records: existing accounts can register that "both" tendencies were present, but not which specific episodes qualify as isolationist responses, under what conditions, and why. A full cross-presidential empirical application lies, however, beyond the scope of a conceptual article.

Illustrative application: Episode-level variation across the Trump presidencies

Some accounts have treated "America First" as a revival of isolationism or economic isolationism (Dimitrova 2017: 36–42; Clarke & Ricketts 2017: 370–373; Dufour & Ducasse 2020: 231, 236–239; White 2022: 5–6), whereas others have argued that Trump is anything but isolationist and is better understood as protectionist, nationalist, or transactionalist (Stranne 2020; Lindsay 2024). These competing interpretations capture different features of the same record, but both are too coarse for analytical purposes.

The first Trump presidency already reveals how several high-salience episodes sit uneasily with broad claims of Trumpian isolationism. In April 2017, Trump ordered cruise-missile strikes on Syria's Shayrat air base (Reuters 2017). In January 2019, the United States recognized Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's interim president and pledged support for facilitating the democratic transition in Venezuela, thereby engaging politically in a contested sovereignty crisis (Pompeo 2019). In January 2020, Trump authorized the strike that killed Qassem Soleimani. Although the administration publicly invoked an imminent threat to U.S. personnel, the strike was more clearly part of a broader response to past attacks and a deterrent signal in the Middle East than a response to a narrowly defined, imminent threat to U.S. security (Zengerle 2020). In the definition's terms, the motive condition therefore fails; and because

direct lethal force was chosen while less-confrontational options remained available, the reluctance condition fails as well. These episodes involved unilateral direct force and interventionist conduct that stood in clear opposition to security non-involvement and political disengagement. They therefore show that America First rhetoric alone is insufficient evidence of an isolationist foreign policy, in line with authors rejecting Trump's isolationism (Stranne 2020: *passim*; Lindsay 2024).

At the same time, the same first term also contains episodes that fit the revised concept's logic of relative isolationism. In all the episodes discussed here, the United States plainly possessed the ability to act, so the voluntariness condition holds throughout; what varies, and what the definition's remaining conditions sort, is the response. In June 2019, after Iran shot down a U.S. unmanned aircraft in international waters, Trump halted a retaliatory strike because of the likely casualties, while prioritizing a diplomatic solution and leaving broader coercive pressure in place through sanctions (Mason – Heavey 2019). This is analytically important not because it demonstrates *absolute* security non-involvement, but because it illustrates the role of reluctance in withholding a more confrontational response. This episode meets the definition's conditions in sequence (see Table 1): the downing of a U.S. asset triggered the narrow defensive motive; the more confrontational option was eventually withheld, thereby fulfilling the reluctance condition; and lower-intensity economic pressure was substituted for direct force. Likewise, the October 2019 troop withdrawal from northern Syria and the February 2020 U.S.–Taliban agreement are best understood as cases of baseline-relative disengagement. They brought inherited military commitments to an end, rather than merely reflecting non-response to foreign events in general (Ali – Perry 2019; U.S. Department of State 2020). These episodes qualify the opposite literature as well, showing that a presidency that was clearly activist in some cases could still generate identifiable isolationist-leaning responses in others.

The second Trump term reinforces the same conclusion. Early in the term, the administration restored coercive economic measures against Iran and justified them as tools for denying Tehran strategic capabilities and limiting its regional influence (White House 2025). This shows why economic measures cannot be coded apart from context. In this case, they functioned as instruments of intervention. In other contexts, however, especially when combined with a narrow defensive motive and reluctance, they may indicate a less confrontational, isolationist-leaning response, as the aborted Iran retaliation of June 2019 suggests.

A similar point applies to institutional withdrawal. In January 2026, Trump ordered U.S. withdrawal from dozens of international and U.N. organizations and treaties (White House 2026). Under earlier broad usages, such exits might be labeled “isolationist” almost automatically. Under the revised conception, however, that inference is not automatic. Such withdrawal may instead reflect unilateralism, that is, an effort to remove external constraints on independent

action rather than isolationism, especially if the administration also pursues confrontational unilateral steps in the same period. This is why it is analytically more useful to examine foreign-policy responses in specific episodes than to code anti-internationalist moves in the abstract.

These episodes show why economic nationalism, institutional withdrawal, or America First rhetoric cannot by themselves serve as reliable proxies for isolationism. The same month, after the U.S. capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, Trump said the United States would “run” Venezuela and left open the possibility of further interventions in Colombia and Mexico. The operation was described as the most direct U.S. intervention in Latin America since the 1989 invasion of Panama (Reuters 2026a, Reuters 2026b). Conceptually, this is important because it shows that language associated with withdrawal can coexist with extraordinary external activism, including the removal of a sitting foreign leader and claims over the subsequent political order.

The following weeks sharpen the point and show why the revised conception must remain context-sensitive. In February 2026, U.S. forces withdrew from key military bases and strategic positions in Syria and handed them over to Syrian control (Dalatey & Qereman 2026). This was a case of disengagement relative to the previous status quo: the relevant benchmark is not abstract passivity, but the reduction of an inherited military commitment. Yet within days, coordinated U.S.-Israeli strikes killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and several other key Iranian decision-makers in Tehran. During the continuing campaign, which destabilized the Middle East and disrupted global oil shipments, Iran’s security chief Ali Larijani and other senior officials were killed in March 2026 (Huang & Arranz 2026). These were far-reaching interventions, but their significance here lies not simply in their severity. Rather, the same administration combined baseline-relative disengagement in one theater with coercive economic pressure, regime-directed force, and the killing of senior foreign decision-makers in another. Even such confrontational measures, however, might still be acceptable under isolationism if they were undertaken reluctantly and for narrow defensive reasons; yet the evidence presented here provides no basis for classifying them as such. Earlier conceptions tended to flatten precisely this kind of variation. The gain of the revised conception, therefore, is not simply that it captures both sides, but that it distinguishes among intervention, disengagement, unilateralism, and isolationism according to context and conditions rather than slogans or presidency-level stereotypes.

These episodes indicate that the revised conception does more than redescribe familiar debates in new language. They show that the updated conceptualization identifies boundary cases that earlier usage tended to absorb too quickly into “isolationism,” especially where economic statecraft, institutional withdrawal, and unilateral action appear in changing combinations. The analytical gain, then, is

not merely greater nuance in case interpretation, but a clearer set of distinctions for sorting outward behavior that presidency-level labels leave blurred. Most importantly for temporal scope, this section demonstrates that isolationist responses are not confined to stereotyped “isolationist eras,” nor excluded from presidencies often described as interventionist. Such responses can appear, in qualified and episode-specific form, within administrations whose overall record is far more activist than the fixed presidency-wide label would imply. The question, then, is whether these gains amount only to greater interpretive nuance, or whether they also improve the concept’s overall quality. The next subsection addresses that issue directly by reassessing the revised conception against Gerring’s criteria.

Reassessing the revised concept under Gerring’s criteria

Using Gerring’s concept-quality criteria, I now assess the extent to which the updated, operationalized framework addresses the issues identified in the previous sections. Two remarks frame this comparison. First, the left column of Table 2 (see below) summarizes the range of existing usage reviewed above – not a claim that every individual account is equally imprecise – while the subsequent column presents the revised conception as specified in this article. Second, the ratings are deliberately conservative: they rest on what this article itself demonstrates – explicit components, decision rules, and the illustrative application above. The conception’s implementability is further corroborated by companion research that applies it to the full record of U.S. crisis responses from 1921 to 2021. Since those results are reported separately, they are invoked here only as evidence of feasibility, not as grounds for substantive claims.

As the previous evaluation demonstrated, the term resonates strongly among both specialist and lay audiences. The revised concept retains this *high* scholarly and public *resonance*. Because the main substitutes proposed in the literature are either too broad, too narrow, or only partially overlapping, it is preferable to retain the term and improve it on the remaining criteria rather than replace it altogether.

Domain: high; rather than drifting across various meanings, it is clearly delineated as a security-political foreign-policy stance, with explicit boundaries that permit comparison across U.S. administrations and, potentially, other actors adopting non-involvement in others’ security affairs. *Consistency: moderate to high*; explicit scope conditions are designed to secure temporal stability and substantially reduce the cross-period shifts in meaning characteristic of much prior usage. *Fecundity: moderate to high*; the revised concept enables clearer classification and comparison across periods, thereby increasing its analytical value for both theoretical and empirical inquiry. *Differentiation*: the concept delineates its boundaries and relations to unilateralism, neutrality/neutralism, protectionism, and nationalism, although near-synonyms (continentalism, free hand, America First, Fortress America, restraint, strategic retrenchment) keep contrast only

moderate. Causal utility: moderate; clearer classification provides a better-defined variable for explanations of engagement and withdrawal, although this explanatory leverage remains to be demonstrated. *Operationalization: moderate to high*; despite being defined by absence, the concept is now observable through explicit components, indicators, and decision rules, making empirical measurement feasible and moving beyond rhetoric-based treatments.

Applying Gerring's criteria shows that the updated formulation addresses most of the major deficiencies of prior usage. The principal difficulty that remains is the persistence of partially overlapping labels that are related but not synonymous.

Table 2. Applying Gerring's Criteria to Existing Usage and the Revised Conception of U.S. Isolationism

Gerring's Criteria	Existing Usage in the Reviewed Literature	Revised Episode-Based Conception of U.S. Isolationism
Resonance	Strong historical usage; familiar but increasingly imprecise in modern usage. (High)	Retains strong scholarly and public resonance while reducing analytic looseness. (High)
Domain	Covers a broad empirical terrain, often too vague; overlaps with other doctrines. (Moderate)	Clearly delineated boundaries as a security-political foreign-policy stance. (High)
Consistency	Individual accounts can be stable, but the classified object and decisive properties shift across eras. (Weak to Moderate)	Temporal stability of the meaning through explicit scope conditions. (Moderate to High)
Fecundity	Useful in historical and rhetorical analyses, less so analytically. (Moderate)	Allows for more robust analytical insight, clearer classification and comparison across periods (Moderate to High)
Differentiation	Some accounts draw boundaries with adjacent terms carefully; broader usage overlaps with them. (Weak to Moderate)	Delineated boundaries and affinity in relation to adjacent concepts; still weaker contrast with near-synonyms. (Moderate)
Causal Utility	Vagueness makes it hard to link directly to outcomes, though useful in historical analyses. (Weak to Moderate)	Provides a clearer variable for explaining engagement and withdrawal; explanatory leverage remains to be demonstrated. (Moderate)
Operationalization	Particular studies use observable indicators, but no shared rules connect them to a common classification. (Weak to Moderate)	Observable through explicit components and decision rules; measurability is feasible. (Moderate to High)

Note: The ratings are ordinal judgments, deliberately conservative and grounded in the properties demonstrated in this article (see the remarks preceding the table); the first column summarizes the range of usage reviewed above, the second assesses the revised conception as specified here.

Source: Author.

As noted above, replacing or merging these labels with “U.S. isolationism” risks a loss of resonance and greater conceptual confusion. Yet this residual problem is not an argument for discarding the term. Since isolationism retains strong resonance in both scholarly and public discourse, the more productive strategy is conceptual repair: preserving the familiar label while imposing the distinctions necessary for analytical clarity. The revised conception therefore does not eliminate every ambiguity in the broader language community, but it improves the concept’s usefulness for research.

Conclusion

This article has argued that isolationism remains too resonant a term to abandon, yet too unstable a concept to use without repair. Across the literatures reviewed here, the term has been applied to heterogeneous phenomena ranging from security non-involvement to economic autarky, protectionism, diplomatic sanctions, and broader forms of closure. That breadth has produced recurring weaknesses: cross-domain conceptual drift, excessive reliance on rhetoric as an indicator, weak differentiation from adjacent terms, and the tendency to label presidencies or eras in binary terms. The revised conception addresses these problems by redefining isolationism as an episode-level, security-political foreign-policy stance characterized by voluntary non-interventionism and/or baseline-relative political/diplomatic disengagement, while permitting only narrow and reluctant unilateral action under imminent threat to vital interests.

In Gerring’s terms, the revised concept performs better than prior usage on the criteria most important for analytical research. Its domain is more clearly bounded, its consistency is supported by explicit scope conditions, its differentiation from adjacent labels is sharper, and its operationalizability is improved by clearly defined components and decision rules. The illustrative Trump episodes show the practical value of these improvements: they demonstrate that rhetoric can point in one direction while observable foreign-policy behavior points in another, that economic coercion can function as intervention in one context and the sign of isolationist stance in another, and that the same administration may contain both relative isolationism and its antonyms across different episodes. The chief remaining difficulty is the persistence of a few overlapping near-synonyms, but this is an argument for conceptual discipline, not for abandoning the term. The ratings on consistency, causal utility, and operationalization are deliberately conservative, resting on the evidence a conceptual article can contain.

The broader implication is that isolationism as a foreign-policy practice should no longer be viewed as a presidency-wide constant, a relic of a single historical era, or a synonym for inward-looking rhetoric. Once reformulated as an episode-based, behavior-centered, and domain-explicit concept, it becomes suitable for systematic comparison across administrations, periods, and beyond the U.S.

case. Comparison under this conception operates through aggregation: because a presidency's overall posture is the distribution of its responses to relevant episodes, administrations can be compared by the share, form, and conditions of their isolationist-leaning responses rather than by summary labels. Diachronically, this permits a disciplined test of how far the conventional "isolationist era" narrative survives episode-level scrutiny across the interwar, post-1945, and post-Cold War periods. For the contemporary debate, it offers a way to adjudicate competing characterizations of the Trump presidencies – and any successor – by asking what share of relevant episodes actually meets the isolationist conditions. Furthermore, this conceptualization extends – without conceptual stretching (Sartori 1970: 1041–1042) – to the non-U.S. cases of capable abstention noted above. Their fuller demonstration is the task of the aforementioned companion research, which translates this conception into a full measurement framework and applies it across a century of U.S. crisis responses to test how far it clarifies patterns of engagement, disengagement, and bounded unilateral action in U.S. foreign policy. In this sense, the present article is not the endpoint of the analysis, but its conceptual foundation.



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MICHAL BULA is a PhD student in international relations at Charles University, Prague. His research focuses on the current foreign policy of the United States and isolationism. His area of professional interest also includes the security-development nexus and the fight against terrorism in the Horn of Africa during the mandate of George W. Bush and Barack H. Obama.

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