

# *Issue Coalition: A Burgeoning Strategy in U.S. Foreign Policy*

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**Abstract:** As one of the most important phenomena in international relations, alliance has long been widely valued and widely studied. In fact, there are great differences in the form and degree of alliance. There are not only offensive or defensive alliances for military security, but also possible alliances for a specific issue to achieve their own strategic goals, which are defined as “Issue Coalition”. Throughout the development process of the international community, the phenomenon of “Issue Coalition” has both internal and external generation logic and existence reasons, especially after the end of the Cold War. This article tries to extract the definition and features of “Issue Coalition” and especially focuses on the US foreign behavior surrounding “Issue Coalition”. It can be found that the U.S is more inclined to form and lead issue coalitions than other countries.

**Keywords:** Issue Coalition, US Foreign Policy, International Relations, Trump Administration, Biden Administration

## 1. Introduction

Alliances between countries on specific issues are common. The issue coalition is capable to overcome Alliance Dilemma and Collective Action Problem which helps improve cooperation efficiency, transcend the traditional strategic relationship framework to expand cooperation space, and present the illusion of "multilateralism" to gain legitimacy. The United States is keener than other countries to form Issue Coalition. On the one hand, from the rational choice of its hegemonic power, the United States uses the Issue Coalition to break through the limitations of time, rules, relationship framework and task objectives, so as to maximize its interests in the specific issue. On the other side, the strategic thinking and culture of the United States are the underlying reasons. This paper is going to use the Document Analysis Method, Case Analysis Method and Comparative Analysis Method to study and analyze this topic. This kind of analysis will do favor to understand and even predict the foreign policies of the United States and tries to discover more feasible room for Issue Coalition in the international society.

## 2. Issue Alliance

Issue alliance, also hereinafter referred to as alliance (Coalition), also known on different occasions as ad hoc Coalition, Coalition of The Willing, or Like-Minded Coalition, refers to the international actor at a specific time, for specific issues, based on common interests, to unite like-minded people

to form a joint relationship network [1]. From the Greek Coalition formed by the Mycenaean group to the Non-Aligned Movement started by the Third World Countries to The Group of Ten formed as a result of the free trade negotiations, it is actually a common phenomenon for state actors to build coalitions or alliances on specific issues thus establishing formal linkages. In comparison to any other country, the US is high on organizing or participating in specific "Issue Coalitions", ranging from the "16-nation Coalition" in Korean War and the multinational coalition fighting against ISIS, to the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering (FATF) and the Proliferation Security Initiative as a proxy for the normalization action coalition, besides in the field of multilateral negotiations there are "Friends of Ambition", "Friends of Fish", "Joint Proposal in Intellectual Property", etc.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has initiated or formed Issue Coalitions in many areas, including three kinds of operation models: "top-down", "center-to-peripheral" alliance and "bottom-up". The function and feature of the Issue Coalition itself do acquire advantages in some aspects compared with the alliance mechanism and the multilateral mechanism, including overcoming the dilemma of alliance or collective action so as to improve the action efficiency, gaining the possibility to expand the space for cooperation beyond the traditional framework of strategic relations, grasping the legitimacy effects of the illusion of "multilateralism" cooperation.

Table 1: U.S. main "Issue Coalition" actions and initiatives after Cold War.

Period\Type	"Quick-response" type	"Normalization" type	"Bargaining & Game" type
Clinton Administration	a. Multinational coalition forces to intervene Somalia b. Multinational coalition forces to intervene Haiti c. "Operation Desert Fox " by the US-British coalition [12]		a. Friends of Fisheries (WTO negotiations) b. Block Group (The International Campaign to Ban Landmines, ICBL) c. Umbrella Group (Climate change negotiations) [12]
Bush Administration	a. Coalition in Afghanistan War b. Coalition in Iraq War [12]	a. Proliferation Security Initiative b. Regional Maritime Security Partnership Initiative c. New Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate d. Global Methane Commitment Initiative e. Major Economies Meeting f. Partnership for Climate Adaptation g. The Climate & Clean Air Coalition	a. Friends of Ambition b. Joint Proposal Group (WTO negotiations) [12]

Table 1: (continued).

Obama administration	a. Multinational coalition for Libyan War b. Multinational Coalition against Islamic State [12]		High Ambition Coalition (Climate Change Negotiations) [12]
Trump Administration	a. Joint air strikes by the United States, Britain and France on Syria b. United 23 Western countries to expel Russian diplomats	a. Middle East Strategic Alliance Initiative b. Escort Union c. League of the United States, Japan and Europe promoting the reform of the World Trade Organization d. Blocking China's 5G Standard Alliance Initiative e. Free Navigation Scheme in South China Sea	
Biden Administration		a. AUKUS with Australia and U.K. b. New U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement c. Initiative of CHIP 4	

In the past, case studies on issue-specific coalitions or US-led issue coalitions are not uncommon [2-5]. However, due to the diverse fields of alliance cooperation, the lack of formal treaty documents, and the prominent characteristics of informality and non-institutional, the academic has not conducted a combined study on such alliance issues [6]. This paper believes that the Issue Coalition is a kind of network of joint relations formed by international actors uniting like-minded people at a specific time for a specific issue or topic, and most importantly, based on common interests and mutual concerns. There are mainly three kinds of Issue Coalition: “quick-response” type, “normalization” type and “bargaining & game” type.

### 3. "Issue Coalition" Behavior in U.S. Foreign Policy under Trump and Biden Administration

#### 3.1. Trump Administration

After Trump came to power, he launched a joint air strike in Syria with the United Kingdom and France on April 13, 2018. The US and Britain led a coalition of 23 western countries to expel Russian diplomats after the "poisoning" event of Russia's alleged double agent. This is in a non-war “quick-response” coalition.

Also, using the increase in the number of cases to carry out normalized issue coalition, including the initiative of Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), forming an "escort coalition" in the Middle East, pushing for US-Japan-EU coalition on the issue of World Trade Organization (WTO) reform, linking allies to build the “5G Clean Networks” to blockade China’s 5G standards, and more typically,

encouraging more allies to follow “the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea” so as to compress China's space in the South China Sea.

In the negotiation of multilateral mechanism, the US government has also formed issue coalitions to realize agenda preferences. However, the Trump Administration has an obvious unilateral attitude towards the issue coalition. On January 23, 2017, President Trump signed an executive order formally withdrawing the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), overthrowing his predecessor, Barack Obama, one of the greatest political legacies. It happened that there is a similar case for the world climate issue. President Trump also announced that the United States would withdraw from the Paris Agreement, in which the US entered in a high-profile way by the Obama Administration. Moreover, Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the Iran Nuclear Deal, a major multilateral agreement on the nuclear issue, and would impose the highest level of economic sanctions on Iran. UNESCO, Global Compact on Migration, and Universal Postal Union(UPU) all didn't escape from Trump's “Retreat”.

The present study examines how Trump's appointment as a president and his domestic and foreign policies have affected the position of American power in the global political economy. The research hypothesizes that the political economy of American domestic and foreign policy in the Trump era has led to the decline of its soft power in the world system. In the present article, the context of political economy is the decline of US soft power and the mechanism of influence of Trump policies on the position of soft power in the country, focusing on the use of hardware resources in the context of unilateralism, tariff warfare and political populism, anti-immigration policies and the tensions with the media and political institutions are described by the Trump administration. The result of these policies has been a decline in US soft power characteristics in terms of disregard for human rights and political institutions, media freedom, a positive image of the United States in world public opinion, multilateralism, public diplomacy, and international treaties and institutions. Eventually, the soft power of the country in the global political economy has declined [7].

He has abrogated or threatened to abrogate treaties and accords – notably the Iran Nuclear Agreement, the Paris Climate Accord, and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). He has also moved the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, made U.S. involvement in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance contingent on larger contributions from the allies, placed tariffs on imports from friends and enemies alike, indicated a preference for one-on-one negotiation with other nations (notably North Korea, South Korea, Iran, Russia, Mexico, and Canada), and has considered betraying the legal immunity granted to diplomats by allowing Russia to interrogate a recent U.S. ambassador. His unilateral assertion in international affairs is unprecedented in the annals of the U.S. presidency [8].

### **3.2. Biden Administration**

In January 2021 Joe Biden was sworn in as the new president of the United States. His political program stands in stark contrast to that of his predecessor, Donald Trump, both domestically as well as internationally. The “America First” dogma, many said, had come to an end. The crisis of multilateralism – traditional backers withdrawing their support and a rising China challenging the rules-based international order – can be resolved by the US becoming its supporter again.

Indeed, the Biden administration has been busy extending its hand to European partners, recommitted to the World Health Organization, and re-entered the Paris Agreement. At the Munich Security Conference in February 2021, the new president stressed that the US is determined to re-engage, consult with Europe, and that the country wanted “to earn back our position of trusted leadership” [9]. Biden, along with Scott Morrison and Boris Johnson, soon announced a new trilateral security alliance, called AUKUS, under which Australia will gain access to nuclear submarine technology. In the field of regional trade, the U.S. -Mexico-Canada Agreement, which aims to update

and replace the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), went into effect quickly. Besides, on the issue of chip and other high-tech industries, President Biden signed the Chip and Science Act on August 9, 2022, and earlier put forward the idea of the CHIP 4.

Since taking office, the Biden administration has been adjusting its policy on Asia-Pacific alliances to minimize the impact of the Trump administration on the alliance. In terms of policy philosophy, it downplays "America First" and emphasizes shared values, which means that it tends to build a coalition of shared or similar values. In the aspect of alliance management, it tries to reduce power compulsion and pays attention to system constraint and interest coordination. In terms of the alliance objectives, greater emphasis on cooperation in global governance rather than only looking out for America's own benefits [10].

The alliance relationship is an important support for the hegemony strategy of the United States, but in different periods, the development of the alliance relationship of the United States fluctuates and nowadays, the stability of the alliance relationship seems to be dubious while the feasibility of establishing an alliance is even lower because of the diversity and variability of interests. One weakness of the US alliance system is that most of its regional allies don't like each other much[11].

Issue Coalition became a substitute, and another political tool of the United States by breaking certain constraints such as effectiveness, rules, relationship and tasks. Different from the alliance system and the multilateralism system, whose pursuit of long-term dominance of the global hegemonic order, the issue alliance is a way of cooperation used to address specific issues and solve specific tasks under specific situations. That means Issue Coalition is not only a "substitute" but also a supplement. And this decision, choosing Issue Coalition, was mainly motivated by its hegemony strategy. What's more, it is also deeply rooted in the American tradition. During the Trump administration, based on the policy orientation of "America First" and dominated by the unilateralism, the United States constantly shirked its responsibilities to its Allies and obviously fought for interests against its Allies, which alienated the alliance relationship to a certain extent though it still led to form some Issue Coalitions. With the arrival of President Biden in the White House, there has been a greater emphasis on multilateralism and cooperation in an effort to reinvigorate American leadership in the world. However, as for Biden, it still reflects the traditional American mindset like the kind of "generic thinking" that prefers to unite like-minded people and leads them to create the "wonderful world". Besides, it's easy to find multilateralism is not an end in itself but still a method of gaining other benefits [12].

#### 4. Conclusion

This article mainly explains the "Issue Coalition" behavior in the U.S. foreign policy and especially combs the "Issue Coalition" action under Trump and Biden administrations. It can be found that U.S is more inclined to form and lead issue coalitions than other countries. The United States may adopt Issue Coalition due to the outbreak of unexpected events, the violation of core interests, the administration of anti-establishment leaders, the early and late presidential administrations, the opposition of key Allies, and the opening of a new era in international relations. Building Issue Coalition seems to become a normalized trend in U.S foreign behaviors. However, the U.S. will not necessarily build more Issue Coalition instead of alliances, partnership frameworks or institutional rules. After all, the Issue coalition only focuses on the interests of specific issues rather than the overall strategic interests. If there is no strong leadership and stable alliance and partnership, the formation and mobilization of the issue coalition will lose strong support. Future studies can pay more attention to the interaction between alliance relationships and Issue Coalition, about how they reinforce and overthrow each other. This will help better understand the development of international relations.

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