International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)
ISSN: 2319-7064
Impact Factor 2025: 7.089

U.S. Foreign Policy and Strategic Backfire in a Changing Global Order

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Abstract: ***The changing distribution of political, economic, technological, and strategic power is altering the environment in which U.S. foreign policy is formulated and implemented. This article examines when and why U.S. foreign-policy actions generate strategic backfire: unintended consequences that weaken the original policy objective while imposing identifiable strategic costs on the United States. Drawing on Foreign Policy Analysis and complementary international-relations perspectives, the article conceptualizes strategic backfire as an actor-mediated process linking international conditions, decision-maker perceptions, policy choices, external responses, unintended consequences, and strategic costs. A qualitative comparative analysis of three policy episodes- U.S. tariffs toward China, advanced-technology export controls on China, and sanctions against Russia- illustrates how external actors adapt rather than simply comply. The analysis identifies institutional inertia, cognitive bias, domestic political constraints, and ideological rigidity as mechanisms that can sustain counterproductive policies. The article argues that strategic effectiveness depends on anticipating external adaptation and revising policy when strategic costs accumulate.***

Keywords: U.S. foreign policy; strategic backfire; foreign policy decision-making; actor agency; strategic adaptation

1. Introduction

The international environment in which U.S. foreign policy is formulated has become more contested. The United States retains extensive military, economic, technological, diplomatic, and institutional capabilities, but these capabilities are increasingly exercised in an environment characterized by strategic competition, greater autonomy among emerging and middle powers, and expanding alternatives to U.S.-dominated economic and institutional arrangements. The transformation does not necessarily signify the disappearance or inevitable decline of American power. Rather, it changes the conditions under which that power can be translated into foreign-policy outcomes.

This distinction is important because foreign-policy effectiveness cannot be assessed solely by examining the resources available to the United States. The consequences of a policy also depend on how other actors interpret, resist, adapt to, or circumvent it. Contemporary U.S. foreign policy increasingly relies on instruments such as economic sanctions, tariffs, export controls, diplomatic pressure, alliance commitments, and other forms of coercive statecraft. These instruments can impose substantial costs on target states, but they can also encourage responses that alter the strategic environment in ways that reduce U.S. leverage or create new challenges. Research on sanctions, for example, demonstrates that coercive measures may produce unintended political and economic effects extending beyond their immediate targets (Drezner, 2022; Meissner & Mello, 2022).

This article develops the concept of **strategic backfire** to capture a particular form of counterproductive foreign-policy outcome. Strategic backfire occurs when an external response to a U.S. policy produces an unintended consequence that materially weakens the policy's original strategic objective and generates identifiable costs for the United States. The concept therefore differs from ordinary unintended consequences, policy failure, or backlash. A policy may fail without producing significant costs for the sender, and it may produce unintended effects without undermining its principal objective. Strategic backfire requires a meaningful connection between the policy, external adaptation, the resulting unintended consequence, and an identifiable strategic cost.

The article makes three contributions. First, it develops an actor-centered conceptualization of strategic backfire. Existing research has examined unintended consequences, economic coercion, strategic competition, and foreign-policy decision-making, but these literatures are often treated separately. This study integrates them through a causal sequence connecting international conditions and decision-maker perceptions to policy choices and external responses. Second, it develops a six-stage analytical framework—**U.S. Policy → Intended Objective → External Response → Unintended Consequence → Strategic Cost → Degree of Strategic Backfire**—and embeds this sequence within a broader Foreign Policy Analysis process. Third, it identifies four decision-making mechanisms—**institutional inertia, cognitive bias, domestic political constraints, and ideological rigidity**—that help explain why policymakers may continue policies even when evidence of counterproductive effects accumulates.

The article addresses three questions:

1) Under what conditions do U.S. foreign-policy actions generate strategic backfire?
2) How do decision-maker perceptions and decision-making mechanisms contribute to the emergence and persistence of backfire?
3) How does the changing distribution of international power affect the capacity of external actors to resist, adapt to, or circumvent U.S. policy?

The argument is not that U.S. foreign policy systematically fails or that American decline is inevitable. Instead, the central claim is that **strategic backfire becomes more likely when policymakers formulate policies on the basis of inaccurate or incomplete expectations about external actors' intentions, capabilities, and adaptive capacity**. International structural change creates the context, but decision makers interpret that context and translate their interpretations into policy. External actors then respond to those choices, potentially producing outcomes that diverge from U.S. expectations.

This actor-centered formulation strengthens the article's relevance to *Foreign Policy Analysis*. The journal explicitly identifies actor-specific decision-making and foreign-policy processes and outcomes as central to its intellectual identity. Oxford University Press Academic (OUP Academic) The article therefore treats changing global order as the **context**, foreign-policy decision-making as the **intervening mechanism**, and strategic backfire as the **outcome**.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Foreign Policy Decision-Making and Actor Agency

Foreign Policy Analysis distinguishes itself from approaches that treat the state as a unitary actor by examining the individuals, groups, organizations, and processes through which foreign-policy decisions are made. Hudson (2005) emphasizes the actor-specific foundations of FPA, while Mintz and DeRouen (2010) demonstrate how perceptions, decision environments, psychological factors, organizational processes, and political pressures influence foreign-policy choices.

This actor-centered perspective is essential to understanding strategic backfire. Structural changes in the international system do not automatically produce particular foreign-policy decisions. Decision makers interpret threats, estimate relative power, evaluate alternatives, and form expectations about how other actors will respond. Consequently, similar international conditions can generate different policies under different administrations or decision-making environments.

Foreign-policy decisions are influenced by multiple mechanisms. Leaders differ in their perceptions of threats, tolerance for risk, beliefs about international order, and preferences regarding coercion and diplomacy. Bureaucratic organizations may favor established policy instruments or interpret information according to institutional interests. Domestic political pressures can constrain available alternatives, while cognitive biases can encourage policymakers to discount information that challenges existing assumptions (Gvosdev et al., 2019; Levy, 2023; Schafer & Smith, 2017).

These mechanisms are particularly relevant when policymakers assess the likely consequences of coercive policies. A government may believe that economic pressure will produce compliance because it overestimates the sender's leverage or underestimates the target's ability to adapt. Alternatively, policymakers may recognize potential resistance but judge that domestic or strategic considerations justify accepting the risks. In either situation, the relationship between perception and external reality becomes central to explaining policy outcomes.

The present study therefore places foreign-policy decision-making between structural conditions and strategic outcomes: International Environment → Actor Perceptions → Decision-Making Process → Policy Choice → Intended Objective → External Response → Unintended Consequence → Strategic Cost → Strategic Backfire

This sequence does not imply that decision makers control outcomes. Rather, it recognizes that actor agency mediates the relationship between international structure and foreign-policy behavior.

2.2 Strategic Backfire and Unintended Consequences

The idea that purposive action can generate unintended outcomes has a long history in social science (Merton, 1936). In foreign policy, however, unintended consequences vary considerably in their strategic significance. Some are minor and do not materially affect policy effectiveness. Others may undermine the original objective or create new strategic problems.

Existing scholarship on sanctions demonstrates this distinction. Meissner and Mello (2022) show that sanctions can produce unintended consequences depending on policy design and contextual conditions. Felbermayr et al. (2021) demonstrate the importance of third-country effects and international economic networks. Drezner (2022) argues that economic coercion does not automatically translate into political concessions, while Kustra (2023) examines how sanctions can alter incentives and generate effects beyond those initially intended.

OUP Academic. Previous FPA scholarship has also used the concept of backfire. Helfstein (2012), for example, examines how successful tactical surprise can generate strategically counterproductive outcomes through behavioral decision-making. More recently, Silva (2026) develops a theory of sanctions backfire based on leaders' causal beliefs about the risks and benefits of economic coercion.

These contributions demonstrate that backfire is not an entirely unexplored phenomenon. The contribution of this article is therefore more specific. It extends existing work by conceptualizing strategic backfire as a **broader actor-mediated process applicable across different U.S. foreign-policy instruments**, rather than as a phenomenon restricted to surprise attacks or sanctions.

The article **defines strategic backfire through three necessary conditions**. First, there must be a **causal connection** between the policy intervention and the unintended outcome, such that the outcome is meaningfully related to the policy action. **Second**, there must be strategic undermining, whereby the unintended outcome weakens or substantially reduces the achievement of the original strategic objective. **Third,** there must be an identifiable cost to the initiating state, reflected in a recognizable strategic disadvantage resulting from the policy's consequences.

Together, these conditions establish clear boundaries around the concept and prevent strategic backfire from becoming synonymous with every instance of policy failure or unintended consequence.

2.3 External Adaptation and Strategic Competition

The changing global order provides an important structural context for strategic backfire. The distribution of economic, technological, political, and military capabilities is increasingly diversified, giving states more strategic alternatives than during periods of greater U.S. predominance (Acharya, 2014; Wijaya & Jayasuriya, 2024).

Multipolarity does not necessarily mean that U.S. power has disappeared. Instead, it can increase the capacity of other actors to resist, circumvent, or adapt to U.S. policy. States with access to alternative markets, technologies, financial arrangements, diplomatic partners, and security relationships may be less dependent on U.S. preferences.

China illustrates this dynamic. U.S.–China strategic competition increasingly encompasses trade, technology, security, diplomacy, and international governance. Mokry (2024) shows that the two countries construct national interests through different strategic priorities, while Winkler (2023) demonstrates that strategic competition has become an organizing principle of contemporary U.S.–China relations. Zhang (2024) further shows that China's responses combine elements of cooperation, balancing, and competition rather than simple accommodation.

Middle and emerging powers similarly possess greater opportunities to diversify their external relationships. He and Feng (2023) show how Indo-Pacific states navigate U.S.–China competition through difficult strategic choices, while Munir and Safdar (2023) demonstrate the importance of hedging among middle powers. The analytical implication is straightforward: the more strategic alternatives external actors possess, the greater their capacity to transform U.S. policy into outcomes that diverge from U.S. expectations.

2.4 U.S. Power, Hegemony, and Strategic Adaptation

The changing global environment should not be reduced to a simple narrative of American decline. Stein (2022) cautions against simplistic interpretations of hegemonic decline, while Ikenberry (2018) emphasizes the continuing importance of the liberal international order and the changing conditions surrounding U.S. leadership.

The central question is therefore not whether the United States remains powerful. It does. The more analytically useful question is how effectively U.S. power can be translated into desired outcomes when other actors possess greater capacity for adaptation. With this analytical assumption, U.S. power is less effective when other actors can adapt, resist, or find alternatives to U.S. policies. Greater adaptive capacity can reduce U.S. influence and produce outcomes different from those intended. Therefore, U.S. policymakers must anticipate external adaptation and adjust strategies to achieve desired outcomes.

This distinction also relates to competing perspectives on U.S. grand strategy. Debates between deep engagement and restraint concern how American power should be used, the risks of overextension, and the costs associated with maintaining extensive international commitments (Jervis, 2021). These debates matter for strategic backfire because the choice of policy instrument reflects assumptions about the relationship between American capabilities and expected external behavior.

Power transition theory similarly highlights the importance of changes in relative capabilities (Organski & Kugler, 1980). Realist approaches emphasize that states respond to changes in security conditions through balancing, adaptation, and competition (Jervis, 1978; Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979).

These theories provide the structural background for the article, but they do not by themselves explain why policymakers select particular policies or why they sometimes persist with them despite counterproductive effects. That explanatory task requires an FPA perspective.

2.5 Research Gap and Contribution

The existing literature provides substantial knowledge about U.S. grand strategy, sanctions, strategic competition, multipolarity, external adaptation, and foreign-policy decision-making. Yet these dimensions are rarely integrated into one causal framework.

Three gaps are particularly important. First, existing research often evaluates policy effectiveness by asking whether the target complied or whether the stated objective was achieved, which can obscure indirect strategic costs that emerge through external adaptation. Second, structural accounts of international change can explain why U.S. influence becomes more contested but cannot fully explain why decision makers adopt policies that generate counterproductive responses. It means that structural changes explain why U.S. influence is challenged, but they do not explain the specific decisions made by U.S. policymakers. To understand counterproductive policies, it is also necessary to examine leaders' perceptions, assumptions, and decision-making processes, because these decisions can produce unintended consequences when policymakers misjudge how other actors will respond. Third, studies of foreign-policy decision-making explain perceptions and choices but often do not follow those decisions through the subsequent external responses that can produce strategic costs. This study connects these levels through an actor-mediated model of strategic backfire, showing how decision-making choices, external adaptation, unintended consequences, and strategic costs are linked.

3. Theoretical Argument

3.1 Structural Context and Actor Agency

The theoretical framework combines structural international-relations perspectives with Foreign Policy Analysis. Hegemonic stability theory helps explain the role of dominant powers in maintaining international order (Ikenberry, 2018). Power transition theory draws attention to changes in relative

capabilities among major states (Organski & Kugler, 1980). Realist approaches explain why states respond to perceived changes in power and security through balancing, adaptation, and competition (Jervis, 1978; Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). These perspectives establish the structural conditions under which U.S. foreign policy is formulated. They do not, however, determine policy choices.

The article therefore introduces Foreign Policy Decision-Making as the actor-level mechanism. The central proposition is: Changing international conditions influence decision makers' perceptions; those perceptions shape policy choices; policy choices generate external responses; and external responses can produce unintended consequences that impose strategic costs and generate strategic backfire.

3.2 Decision-Making Mechanisms.

Decision-making mechanisms explain why foreign-policy actors choose particular policies and how their perceptions, beliefs, and institutional environments shape those choices. This perspective moves beyond examining policy outcomes to identify the processes underlying strategic decisions. Key mechanisms include threat perceptions, beliefs about competitors, strategic assumptions, domestic political pressures, bureaucratic interests, leader preferences, organizational dynamics, information processing, and perceptions of relative power. Examining these mechanisms helps explain how initial policy choices are formed and why they may produce unintended responses and strategic backfire in a changing international order, (Hudson, 2014; Mintz & Redd, 2021). Therefore, the following four mechanisms receive particular attention.

1) **Institutional inertia -** Institutions develop routines, procedures, interests, and established interpretations of problems. These routines can make policy change difficult even when evidence indicates that the strategic environment has changed. Institutional inertia may therefore prolong policies whose assumptions have become less accurate.
2) **Cognitive bias-** Decision makers do not process information neutrally. They may overestimate their own capabilities, underestimate competitors, selectively interpret evidence, or discount information inconsistent with established beliefs. Such biases can produce gaps between expected and actual external responses (Levy, 2023).
3) **Domestic political constraints-** Foreign-policy decisions are also shaped by domestic political incentives. Leaders may find it politically costly to acknowledge failure, reverse a policy, or appear conciliatory toward an adversary. Consequently, policies can persist even when their strategic effectiveness becomes uncertain.
4) **Ideological rigidity -** Ideological commitments can narrow the range of strategies regarded as legitimate or effective. When policymakers interpret international developments through fixed assumptions about threats, leadership, or national power, they may be less willing to revise policies in response to changing conditions.

These mechanisms may interact. Institutional routines can reinforce established beliefs; cognitive biases can strengthen ideological assumptions; domestic political pressures can discourage policy reversal; and ideological commitments can justify continued reliance on familiar instruments.

The result can be a self-reinforcing cycle of strategic misalignment.

4. Research Design and Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative comparative research design. The purpose is not to estimate the statistical frequency of strategic backfire but to identify the causal mechanisms through which foreign-policy decisions generate external responses and strategic costs.

The analysis relies on publicly available secondary evidence, including peer-reviewed scholarship, official U.S. government documents, policy reports, institutional publications, and established research sources. Primary government statements are used where necessary to establish stated objectives and decision-maker expectations. The methodology distinguishes between documented evidence and analytical interpretation. A claim of strategic backfire is made only when the evidence supports a meaningful relationship between the policy, the intended objective, the external response, the unintended consequence, and the resulting strategic cost.

4.2 Case Selection

Three policy episodes are selected purposively because they represent different instruments of U.S. statecraft and provide observable evidence of external adaptation: the Trump administration's Section 301 tariffs on China (2018–2019); the Biden administration's advanced semiconductor and computing export controls on China (2022–2024); and U.S. sanctions against Russia following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. These cases permit comparison across trade coercion, technological restrictions, and economic sanctions. These cases also provide variation in target behavior, policy objectives, external adaptation, and strategic consequences. The cases are not selected to demonstrate that every U.S. policy backfires. Rather, they provide analytically useful variation in the extent to which external responses diverge from U.S. expectations and generate strategic costs.

4.3 Analytical Framework

Each case is assessed through six dimensions:

#	Dimension	Analytical question
1	U.S. policy	What policy instrument was adopted?
2	Intended objective	What did U.S. decision makers seek to achieve?
3	External response	How did target states, allies, or third parties respond?
4	Unintended consequence	What outcomes emerged that were not part of the original objective?
5	Strategic cost	What identifiable costs resulted for U.S. interests?
6	Degree of backfire	How substantially did these consequences undermine the original objective?

The degree of strategic backfire is assessed qualitatively as limited, moderate, or substantial. This is not presented as a validated numerical index. A formal Strategic Backfire Index remains a task for future research requiring systematic coding across a larger number of cases. Limited backfire refers to unintended consequences with modest effects on the original objective; moderate backfire refers to material reductions in policy effectiveness accompanied by identifiable strategic costs; substantial backfire refers to significant undermining of the original objective with major and persistent strategic costs.

5. Empirical Analysis

Across this case, the FPA focus is on how U.S. decision makers interpreted Chinese behavior, assessed the leverage created by tariffs, and responded to retaliation. The evidence therefore treats the tariff episode not simply as an instrument of economic statecraft but as a decision-making process in which expectations about compliance shaped subsequent policy choices.

5.1 U.S. Section 301 Tariffs on China

U.S. policy and intended objective

U.S. policy involves specific actions taken by the United States to achieve defined foreign-policy objectives. The intended objective remains the strategic outcome that policymakers seek to achieve through those actions. These objectives may include changing another state's behavior, protecting national security, or strengthening U.S. economic and technological interests. The analysis examines whether the policy produces the intended outcome or instead generates unintended strategic consequences.

United States trade representative for instance, in 2018, the Trump administration initiated extensive tariffs against Chinese imports following a Section 301 investigation into Chinese practices involving technology development, intellectual property, and innovation. U.S. officials explicitly framed the tariffs as a means of changing Chinese behavior and improving reciprocity in the bilateral economic relationship. The administration initially targeted approximately $50 billion of Chinese imports and subsequently expanded the measures. (U.S. Trade Representative [USTR], 2018)

Trump White House Archives - To elaborate what is section 301 investigation into China, this means a formal probe by the United States government to check if another country uses unfair trade rules that harm American businesses. The policy therefore had several connected objectives: reducing perceived unfair trade practices, protecting U.S. intellectual property, encouraging Chinese policy change, and reducing the bilateral trade imbalance. The administration explicitly expected economic pressure to encourage behavioral change. (U.S. Trade Representative [USTR], 2018). Consequently, China and other affected states may respond to U.S. policies by changing their behavior, adapting their strategies, seeking alternatives, or using reciprocal retaliation. In the case of China, U.S. tariffs prompted reciprocal tariffs on U.S. goods and adjustments in trade relationships, which reduced the effectiveness of the U.S. policy and contributed to unintended economic and strategic costs for the United States.

Decision-maker expectations

Decision-maker expectations shape how policymakers anticipate the likely responses of other states to U.S. foreign-policy actions. When these expectations are inaccurate or incomplete, policies may produce outcomes that differ from those intended. The case illustrates the importance of expectations about target-state behavior. The Trump administration repeatedly presented tariffs as instruments capable of generating sufficient pressure to change Chinese practices. When China retaliated, the administration responded with additional tariffs, indicating that retaliation was treated not as evidence that the coercive strategy had failed but as a reason for further pressure. (U.S. Trade Representative [USTR], 2018). This pattern is consistent with an escalation mechanism in which policymakers interpret resistance as evidence that additional pressure is necessary rather than as evidence that the original assumptions may require revision.

Furthermore, the empirical analysis examines how U.S. policy decisions produce external responses, unintended consequences, and strategic costs, focusing on three policy cases to assess whether decision-maker expectations corresponded with the actual behavior of other states. Decision-maker expectations positively shape foreign-policy choices by helping policymakers anticipate other states' likely responses and select strategies that support U.S. objectives. When these expectations are accurate, they can improve policy effectiveness and reduce unintended consequences.

External response

China did not simply accommodate U.S. pressure. It responded with retaliatory tariffs, initially targeting substantial volumes of U.S. exports. By 2018, Chinese retaliation covered more than 70 percent of U.S. imports into China, while the United States had imposed tariffs on nearly half of its imports from China. (Bown, 2019).

The structure of China's response was also strategic. Chinese retaliation targeted politically and economically sensitive U.S. exports, including agricultural products, while China simultaneously adjusted its trade relationships with other suppliers. Analysis by the Peterson Institute for International Economics shows that Chinese soybean imports shifted toward Brazil and Argentina after U.S. exports became less competitive. (Bown, 2019)

Unintended consequences

Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE). External response describes how other states react to U.S. foreign-policy actions. These responses may include cooperation, resistance, retaliation, adaptation, or seeking alternative partnerships. The U.S. policy therefore produced consequences beyond the intended pressure on China. Rather than generating unilateral Chinese adjustment, the policy produced reciprocal tariffs and encouraged trade diversification. U.S. agricultural exporters were exposed to retaliation, while U.S. firms using Chinese intermediate inputs faced higher costs. PIIE analysis also documented the

use of federal assistance to support farmers affected by retaliatory measures. (Bown, 2019). These outcomes do not establish that the tariffs were wholly ineffective. They demonstrate instead that coercive trade policy generated adaptive responses that imposed costs on the initiating state.

Strategic cost and degree of backfire

Strategic cost describes the identifiable disadvantages that U.S. foreign-policy actions create for U.S. interests or objectives. The degree of backfire indicates how strongly these unintended consequences weaken the original policy objective, ranging from limited to moderate or substantial backfire. The evidence supports a moderate degree of strategic backfire. The tariffs imposed significant economic pressure and contributed to negotiations, but they did not produce a straightforward transformation of Chinese economic practices. Instead, China retaliated, diversified some imports, and adjusted its strategic behavior.

The key FPA finding is therefore not that the Trump administration lacked information about Chinese retaliation. Rather, the case shows how expectations about the effectiveness of economic pressure interacted with domestic and political incentives to sustain escalation after external resistance emerged. The case provides strong evidence for the external-response component of the framework and moderate evidence for the role of decision-maker expectations.

From an FPA perspective, the central issue is how policymakers assessed the trade-off between immediate technological restriction and the longer-term possibility that China would accelerate substitution and technological self-reliance. The case therefore links strategic assumptions to policy adjustment and external adaptation.

5.2 Advanced Semiconductor Export Controls on China

U.S. policy and intended objective

The United States introduced advanced semiconductor export controls to limit China’s access to critical technologies and protect U.S. national security interests. The intended objective was to restrict China’s ability to develop advanced computing and semiconductor capabilities. The Biden administration introduced extensive export controls in October 2022 restricting China's access to advanced computing chips, supercomputing capabilities, and semiconductor-manufacturing technologies. The Bureau of Industry and Security explicitly stated that the controls were intended to restrict China's ability to obtain and manufacture advanced semiconductors relevant to military and advanced computing applications.

The controls were subsequently updated in 2023 and 2024 to address technological developments and potential circumvention. The measures included restrictions on advanced computing chips, semiconductor manufacturing equipment, software, and high-bandwidth memory.

The intended objective was therefore not merely commercial competition. It was to constrain China's access to technologies considered strategically important to advanced military and artificial-intelligence capabilities.

Decision-making and strategic assumptions

Decision-making and strategic assumptions shape how U.S. policymakers assess threats, competitors, and likely responses. When these assumptions are inaccurate or outdated, they can contribute to unintended consequences and strategic backfire. The policy reflects a different decision-making environment from the Trump tariff case. The Biden administration framed technology controls as a national-security measure and worked through regulatory and allied mechanisms. This indicates a more institutionalized approach to economic statecraft.

Nevertheless, the policy rested on an important strategic assumption: restricting China's access to critical external technologies would constrain the development of advanced capabilities faster than China could substitute domestic or alternative sources.

The assumption was not unreasonable. China's dependence on foreign semiconductor equipment and advanced chips created visible liabilities. However, the effectiveness of the policy also depended on the ability of the United States and its partners to sustain technological restrictions while preventing circumvention.

External response

China strongly opposed the restrictions and emphasized the need to develop technological self-reliance. Chinese responses included diplomatic criticism and intensified efforts to develop indigenous semiconductor capacity. Reuters reported that Beijing viewed the strengthened restrictions as barriers to trade and argued that they increased uncertainty and compliance burdens for businesses. (U.S. Bureau of Industry and Security [BIS], 2023)

The U.S. government itself subsequently expanded the controls partly to address risks of circumvention. The 2023 Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS), an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce, rules explicitly sought to prevent workarounds and extended certain controls to additional jurisdictions. This sequence is analytically important: the policy produced adaptation, and adaptation required the sender to modify its own policy.

Unintended consequences

The principal unintended consequence is the acceleration of technological diversification and indigenous capacity-building. Chinese efforts to develop domestic alternatives does mean that China give in to institutional inertia to overcome the technological constraints imposed by U.S. controls. Indeed, the restrictions have created substantial barriers to advanced semiconductor production.

However, from the perspective of strategic backfire, the relevant question is whether the policy generates effects that undermine longer-term U.S. objectives. If restrictions encourage China to reduce its dependence on U.S. technologies, they may gradually reduce the future effectiveness of technological leverage.

This possibility should not be overstated. The available assumption indicates that China continues to face important technological blockages. The more defensible conclusion is

therefore that the policy creates conditions for partial strategic backfire, rather than demonstrating completed backfire.

Strategic cost and degree of backfire
The case is best classified as limited-to-moderate backfire. The policy has clearly constrained Chinese access to advanced technologies, indicating that its core objective has been partially achieved rather than simply succeeding or failing. However, China's adaptation has also reduced the overall effectiveness of the policy and created new strategic challenges for the United States. At the same time, Chinese adaptation, domestic substitution efforts, and continuing U.S. efforts to close circumvention channels demonstrate that the policy has generated a dynamic process of adaptation.

The central FPA lesson is that policymakers must evaluate not only whether a restriction imposes an immediate constraint but also whether it changes the target's incentives to develop alternatives that reduce the sender's future leverage.

From an FPA perspective, the case also requires attention to the expectations underlying coalition-based sanctions: policymakers sought to maximize coercive effects through coordinated action while assessing the extent to which Russia could redirect economic relationships. The resulting adaptation is therefore evaluated as a response to both the policy and the assumptions behind its expected effectiveness.

5.3 U.S. Sanctions Against Russia after 2022

U.S. policy and intended objective
U.S. Department of the Treasury - The United States imposed sanctions on Russia after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine to weaken Russia's economic and military capacity. The intended objective was to impose significant costs on Russia and constrain its ability to continue the war. The United States and its allies imposed extensive financial and economic sanctions. The U.S. Treasury Department described the measures as intended to impose severe and immediate costs on Russia and target the core of its financial system. (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022).

The sanctions were designed to constrain Russia's financial resources, reduce its ability to finance military activity, restrict access to international capital and technology, and increase the costs associated with continued aggression.

Decision-making and coalition strategy
Unlike the Trump tariff case, the Russia sanctions case involved extensive coordination with allies. This is important because coalition-building was itself part of the strategic calculation.

The United States sought to maximize the effect of sanctions by acting jointly with European and other partners. The strategy therefore recognized that economic coercion is more effective when major economies coordinate. Nevertheless, the sanctions also confronted a structural problem: Russia had incentives to redirect trade and financial relationships toward countries that did not participate fully in the sanctions regime.

External adaptation
Wiley Online Library - Russia adapted by redirecting trade, developing alternative economic relationships, and increasing dependence on non-Western markets. Research on the economic effects of sanctions demonstrates significant trade diversion toward countries such as China, India, Turkey, Indonesia, Brazil, and others. Flach et al. (2024), for example, find that deeper sanctions can substantially redirect Russian exports and imports toward third countries. (Wiley Online Library). This is the type of external adaptation identified by the strategic-backfire framework. The sanctions therefore imposed genuine costs on Russia but did not create complete economic isolation. Instead, they altered the geographical and institutional structure of Russian trade.

Unintended consequences
One unintended consequence is increased economic interdependence between Russia and non-Western partners. Russia's adaptation has created greater opportunities for alternative suppliers and markets, particularly China and India. This does not imply that Russia has escaped the costs of sanctions. Rather, it demonstrates that economic pressure can produce adaptation that changes the distribution of international economic relationships. The broader implication is important for U.S. strategy: sanctions may reduce the target's access to Western markets while simultaneously encouraging the development of alternative economic networks.

Strategic cost and degree of backfire
The case is best classified as moderate backfire, with important qualifications. The sanctions clearly generated economic and technological costs for Russia, so it would be analytically inappropriate to characterize them as a complete policy failure. At the same time, Russia's ability to redirect trade demonstrates that the effectiveness of coercion is constrained by the availability of alternatives. The evidence therefore supports a moderate assessment insofar as sanctions achieved important intended effects while also generating adaptive responses that may reduce future U.S. leverage.

The strategic cost to the United States is therefore indirect. The principal concern is not that sanctions failed to impose costs but that sustained reliance on them may encourage diversification away from Western economic networks and reduce the effectiveness of future sanctions. This distinction is central to the article's argument: tactical coercive effectiveness and long-term strategic effectiveness are not identical.

6. Cross-Case Findings

The three cases demonstrate that strategic backfire is neither automatic nor uniform.

#	Case	Main instrument	External response	Principal unintended consequence	Degree of backfire
1	China, 2018–19	Tariffs	Retaliation and trade diversification	Costs to U.S. exporters and continued strategic competition	Moderate
2	China, 2022–24	Technology controls	Indigenous technological adaptation and circumvention	Incentives for technological self-reliance	Limited–Moderate
	Russia, 2022–24	Sanctions	Trade and financial redirection	Expansion of alternative economic relationships	Moderate

Three broader findings emerge.

First, external agency is central - In all three cases, target states responded strategically rather than passively. China retaliated against U.S. tariffs, adapted to technology restrictions, and pursued greater technological autonomy. Russia redirected economic relationships in response to sanctions. This supports the central proposition that policy outcomes depend partly on the capacity of external actors to adapt.

Second, Policy Instruments Can Produce Both Success and Backfire

None of the cases should be interpreted as simple policy failures. U.S. tariffs-imposed costs on China, technology controls constrained Chinese access to advanced technologies, and sanctions imposed significant costs on Russia. However, these policies also generated external responses that created new strategic challenges for the United States. Strategic backfire can therefore coexist with partial tactical success; this is an important conceptual distinction.

Third, backfire is relational

Strategic backfire does not result solely from U.S. policy choices or from the behavior of target states. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between U.S. policy decisions, actor expectations, and the adaptive responses of other actors. The causal process can therefore be expressed as: policy choice + actor expectations + external adaptation → unintended consequence → strategic cost → degree of backfire. This relational perspective distinguishes strategic backfire from simple policy failure by emphasizing how interactions between actors' shape policy outcomes.

7. Why Does Strategic Backfire Persist?

A central contribution of the article is to explain why policymakers may continue policies even after counterproductive effects become visible. Strategic backfire persists when policymakers continue to rely on assumptions that do not fully account for changing international conditions and the adaptive responses of other actors. Misperceptions, institutional routines, domestic pressures, and expectations of compliance can reinforce policies even when unintended costs become visible. In a changing global order, repeated external adaptation may therefore sustain a cycle in which policies designed to advance strategic objectives generate consequences that undermine them.

7.1 Institutional Inertia

Foreign-policy organizations develop established procedures, interests, and policy routines. Once an instrument becomes institutionalized, reversing it can require significant bureaucratic and political effort. Institutional inertia can therefore create continuity even when external conditions change.

7.2 Cognitive bias

Policymakers may interpret evidence through existing expectations. If a target resists, decision makers may interpret the resistance as temporary rather than as evidence that the underlying policy assumptions are incorrect. This mechanism is especially important when leaders overestimate U.S. leverage or underestimate the adaptive capacity of competitors.

7.3 Domestic political constraints

Policy reversal can be politically costly. Leaders may fear accusations of weakness, domestic criticism, congressional opposition, or reputational damage.

Consequently, policymakers may continue a strategy because abandoning it is politically more difficult than accepting its strategic costs.

7.4 Ideological rigidity

Ideological assumptions about American leadership, adversary intentions, or the legitimacy of coercive statecraft can restrict the range of policies considered acceptable. Ideological rigidity therefore limits policy learning by making contradictory evidence easier to dismiss.

7.5 Interaction among mechanisms

These mechanisms should not be treated as independent.

A leader may hold a strong belief about U.S. power; bureaucratic institutions may reinforce that belief; domestic political pressures may make policy reversal costly; and ideological commitments may justify continued escalation.

The resulting process can be represented as: Cognitive assumptions → institutional reinforcement → political constraints → policy persistence → external adaptation → accumulating strategic costs. Strategic backfire can therefore become a cumulative process rather than a single policy mistake.

8. Discussion

This section interprets the findings in relation to the study's theoretical framework and existing literature. It examines how U.S. foreign-policy decisions interact with external responses to produce unintended consequences and strategic costs. The discussion also considers the implications of these findings for understanding strategic backfire in a changing and increasingly multipolar global order. The findings have three implications for Foreign Policy Analysis.

8.1 Strategic backfire as an actor-mediated outcome.

The first implication is theoretical. Strategic backfire should not be understood simply as a structural consequence of multipolarity. Structural conditions affect the options available to states, but policymakers interpret those conditions. The same international environment can therefore generate different policy outcomes depending on how decision makers perceive threats, evaluate relative power, interpret intelligence, and anticipate external behavior. This formulation places strategic backfire directly within the actor-specific tradition of FPA. The journal explicitly emphasizes individuals and groups making decisions that produce foreign-policy actions and outcomes (Hudson, 2005).

8.2 Perception–reality gaps

The second implication concerns the gap between policymakers' expectations and the actual responses of external actors. Strategic backfire becomes more likely when policymakers overestimate U.S. leverage, underestimate competitors' capabilities and strategic alternatives, assume compliance where resistance is more likely, interpret external adaptation as temporary resistance, or fail to incorporate contradictory evidence into policy evaluation (Jervis, 1976; Mintz & Redd, 2021). These misjudgments can reinforce policy choices even when external actors are actively adjusting their strategies to reduce the effectiveness of U.S. pressure. This mechanism is particularly relevant under multipolarity, where the growing availability of alternative economic, diplomatic, technological, and strategic partnerships provides external actors with greater opportunities to resist, adapt, or circumvent U.S. policy pressure (Walt, 2022; Drezner, 2022).

8.3 Tactical success versus strategic effectiveness

The third implication concerns how foreign-policy effectiveness should be evaluated. A policy may accomplish an immediate objective and still generate longer-term strategic costs. For example, a sanction may reduce access to Western finance while simultaneously encouraging the target to establish alternative financial channels. An export restriction may limit immediate access to technology while encouraging domestic technological development. A tariff may pressure a trading partner while also generating retaliation against domestic exporters. Consequently, foreign-policy evaluation should include both first-order effects and second-order strategic consequences.

9. Implications for U.S. Foreign-Policy Strategy.

The findings identify six strategic priorities for strengthening U.S. foreign-policy effectiveness and reducing unintended strategic costs in a changing global order. These priorities highlight key implications for adapting U.S. foreign policy to evolving international conditions and managing the strategic responses of other actors.

1) **Anticipate external responses -** Before implementing major coercive measures, policymakers should assess likely resistance, circumvention, balancing, and alternative partnerships.
2) **Incorporate actor perceptions into policy analysis -** Decision-making processes should explicitly evaluate how leaders and organizations interpret relative power, threats, and target-state intentions.
3) **Distinguish tactical success from strategic success -** A policy should not be considered successful solely because it imposes immediate costs on a target. Evaluation should examine whether the target adapts in ways that reduce future U.S. leverage.
4) **Strengthen policy-learning mechanisms -** Foreign-policy institutions should establish mechanisms capable of challenging established assumptions and incorporating contradictory evidence.
5) **Use coercive instruments selectively -** Sanctions, tariffs, export controls, and other coercive instruments should be assessed against their likely second-order consequences, including incentives for strategic diversification.
6) **Recognize strategic pluralism -** The United States remains a major global power, but other states increasingly possess independent strategic options. Sustainable influence therefore requires policies that recognize the autonomy and adaptive capacity of major, middle, and emerging powers.

10. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings and identifying directions for future research. First, it relies on qualitative secondary evidence and therefore cannot estimate the statistical probability of strategic backfire across all U.S. foreign-policy actions (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018). **Second,** decision-maker perceptions are not always directly observable. Public statements and official documents provide evidence of stated expectations, but they may not fully reveal private beliefs or internal disagreements (Jervis, 1976; Mintz & Redd, 2021). **Third,** the three cases are purposively selected and therefore should not be treated as representative of all U.S. foreign policy (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). **Fourth,** the qualitative classification of backfire as limited, moderate, or substantial is an analytical judgment rather than a statistically validated index**.** These limitations provide opportunities for future research. Comparative studies could examine additional administrations and policy instruments. Process-tracing could reconstruct decision-making more closely through presidential archives, National Security Council documents, congressional records, and elite interviews (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). Quantitative research could operationalize the six dimensions of strategic backfire and develop a formal Strategic Backfire Index. Future research should also compare cases in which external adaptation did and did not produce strategic costs. Such comparison would help identify the conditions under which external resistance becomes genuine backfire.

11. Conclusion

This study has argued that U.S. foreign-policy effectiveness cannot be understood through American capabilities alone. The consequences of U.S. policy depend substantially on how decision makers interpret their strategic environment and how external actors respond to the policies they choose.

The article conceptualizes strategic backfire as an actor-mediated outcome occurring when an external response to a U.S. policy generates an unintended consequence that weakens the original strategic objective and imposes an identifiable strategic cost.

The framework is organized around six stages:
U.S. Policy → Intended Objective → External Response → Unintended Consequence → Strategic Cost → Degree of Strategic Backfire. Embedded within the broader FPA sequence, the model becomes: International Environment → Actor Perceptions → Decision-Making → Policy Choice → Intended Objective → External Response → Unintended Consequence → Strategic Cost → Strategic Backfire

The three cases demonstrate that coercive policies can produce both immediate gains and longer-term complications. U.S. tariffs-imposed pressure on China but generated retaliation and trade diversification. Technology controls constrained China's access to advanced technologies but also strengthened incentives for technological self-reliance. Sanctions imposed significant costs on Russia but encouraged trade diversion and deeper economic relationships with non-Western partners.

These findings do not demonstrate inevitable U.S. decline. They instead demonstrate that U.S. strategic effectiveness has become increasingly conditional. American power remains substantial, but its effectiveness depends on how it is exercised within an international environment in which other actors possess greater capacity to resist, adapt, and diversify.

The article's central theoretical contribution is therefore to reposition strategic backfire as an actor-centered foreign-policy outcome. Structural change creates opportunities and constraints, but decision makers interpret those conditions and translate their interpretations into policy. When their expectations diverge from the actual behavior of external actors, the resulting gap can generate unintended consequences and strategic costs.

The persistence of backfire can further be explained through institutional inertia, cognitive bias, domestic political constraints, and ideological rigidity. These mechanisms can interact to produce policy persistence even when evidence of counterproductive effects accumulates.

The broader implication is that sustainable U.S. influence depends not simply on preserving material capabilities but on improving the decision-making processes through which those capabilities are converted into foreign-policy action. Strategic effectiveness requires anticipation of external responses, willingness to revise assumptions, selective use of coercion, diplomatic flexibility, and systematic evaluation of long-term consequences.

The central lesson is therefore not that American power is disappearing. It is that the strategic value of American power increasingly depends on the ability of U.S. decision makers to understand how other actors will respond to its use.

Declaration of Originality and Exclusive Submission
I, Dr. Omar Abdi Mohamed (Kasaye), hereby declare that the manuscript is my original work and has not been previously published elsewhere. I further confirm that the manuscript is not currently under review by, nor has it been simultaneously submitted to, another journal.

Competing Interests
The author declares that there are no financial, professional, personal, otherwise other competing interests that could have influenced the research, analysis, interpretation, before presentation of this article.

Data Availability
No original dataset was generated or collected for this study. The article is based on the analysis and synthesis of publicly available academic literature, policy documents, institutional reports, and other publicly accessible sources. All sources used in the development of the manuscript are appropriately cited and can be accessed through their respective publishers, repositories, or institutional platforms.

Ethics Declaration
This study did not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, personal otherwise identifiable information, animals, biological materials, or experimental interventions. The research was based entirely on publicly available documentary and scholarly sources. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

Author's Contributions
Dr. Omar Abdi, conceived and designed the study, developed the conceptual framework, conducted the literature review and analysis, interpreted the findings, and drafted and critically revised the manuscript. The author also developed the strategic backfire framework and integrated the empirical cases with the foreign policy decision-making analysis. The author approved the final version of the manuscript and accepts responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

Funding
The author declares that this research received no specific financial support, grant, institutional funding, or other external financial assistance for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

AI Use Statement
The author declares that artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely to support the preparation of this manuscript, including language editing, grammar correction, clarity, and improvement of academic expression. AI tools were not used to generate or fabricate research data, findings, citations, or references. The author retains full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, interpretation, arguments, and final content of the manuscript. All AI-assisted text was reviewed, verified, and, where necessary, revised by the author before submission.

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