

Research Article

NATO's Strategic Ambiguity under Trump: Fallibilism, Alliance Dynamics and Strategic Amnesia

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Submission: 12-02-2026 | Accepted: 29-04-2026

Abstract

This article examines how strategic ambiguity within NATO evolved during Donald Trump's presidency by analyzing the interaction between leadership, institutional political memory, and alliance dynamics. While ambiguity has long existed in alliance politics as a managed feature of deterrence and flexibility, existing scholarship insufficiently explains how alliance commitments themselves become uncertain without formal institutional rupture. To address this gap, the study introduces the concept of strategic amnesia, defined as a leadership-driven suspension of political memory that renders alliance commitments provisional while preserving their instrumental value. The research employs a qualitative interpretive case study grounded in neoclassical realism and informed by pragmatist fallibilism and political memory theory. Using an actor–space–interaction analytical framework, the study analyzes presidential speeches, policy statements, NATO communiqués, and summit interactions from 2016–2026. Interpretive tracing is applied to identify recurring patterns of conditionality and uncertainty in alliance commitments. The findings show that fallibilist leadership traits weakened NATO's stabilizing political memory by repeatedly reframing collective defense commitments as conditional and negotiable. This produced strategic amnesia, disrupting shared expectations without formal withdrawal from the alliance. The article contributes to debates on uncertainty, political memory, and alliance politics in international relations.

Keywords: Fallibilism, NATO, Neoclassical Realism, Political Memory, Strategic Ambiguity, Trump

INTRODUCTION

Political memory is widely acknowledged as a constitutive but understudied facet of international relations, influencing how governments interpret previous commitments, rationalize current strategies, and foresee future obligations. Political memory is more than just a passive repository of historical events; it is an active framework that allows international actors to recollect, reinterpret, or choose to bracket inherited meaning. In alliance politics, such memory is especially important because promises are preserved less by enforcement methods and more by shared expectations created through recurrent historical reaffirmation. However, mainstream international relations scholarship has tended to prioritize material power, institutional design, or strategic interaction over political memory, leaving

unanswered questions about how remembered obligations endure or unravel in the face of systemic uncertainty (Yost, 2010; Drent & Van, 2014).

NATO demonstrates this dynamic. Since its inception, the alliance's collective defence commitment under Article 5 has been based not merely on legal codification, but also on a dense accumulation of political memory connecting US power to European security. Studies on NATO's evolution highlight how shared narratives of Cold War solidarity and post-Cold War adaptability have kept the alliance together in the face of changing threat situations (Yost, 2010; Monov, 2019). At the same time, historians point out that the purposeful ambiguity of Article 5 has traditionally permitted political leaders to reinterpret duties without openly renouncing them (Drent & Van, 2014; Mazur, 2020). In this way, political memory has served as both a stabilizing force and a source of contention. The Trump presidency turned this underlying tension into an explicit issue (Ciot & Ghidui, 2020; Olsen, 2021; James, 2021).

This disruption can be observed in three broad strands. The first examines leadership psychology and personality. Political psychologists describe Trump as having high degrees of narcissism, charismatic dominance, and low integrative complexity, believing that these characteristics led to impulsive and unstable foreign policy behavior (Winter, 2018; Renshon, 2020; Siniver & Featherstone, 2020). According to research on charismatic and narcissistic leadership, Trump's rhetorical style enhanced crisis narratives and absolutist threat perceptions, impacting both domestic and foreign reactions (Marietta & Murphy, 2017; Williams et al., 2020; Barreto et al., 2023). Research suggest that Trump's belief system prioritizes unilateralism, skepticism towards limits, and conditional commitment (White, 2022; Özdamar, 2023; Turner & Kaarbo, 2022). While these works account for communicative style and decision-making tendencies, they primarily explain behavioral disruption and unpredictability, offering limited insight into how alliance commitments themselves become uncertain rather than abandoned.

A second strand places Trump within larger discussions about Trumpism, populism, and nationalism, casting NATO scepticism as an ideological rejection of liberal internationalism. According to Lachmann (2018), Waśko-Owsiejczuk (2018), and Pardasani (2022), "America First" is a populist uprising against elite-driven multilateralism, with alliances viewed as costly limitations on national sovereignty. Scholars studying Trumpism's domestic origins associate alliance scepticism with broader threats to liberal order and global governance (Humire, 2024; Adamkiewicz, 2018). However, these interpretations fail to explain why Trump did not demolish NATO, despite having both rhetorical purpose and political chance. Ideological arguments elucidate hostility to alliances, but they do not explain why commitments continue in the face of uncertainty.

A third strand focuses on alliance dynamics and structural forces. Studies on burden sharing and asymmetric alliances show that Trump's pressure on NATO partners exacerbated long-standing disagreements about costs and responsibilities rather than introducing wholly new dynamics (Blankenship, 2018; Mazur, 2020). Research on NATO under pressure reveals how ambiguity has always been built in

alliance politics, allowing for flexibility without collapse (Monov, 2019). However, this study often views ambiguity as a bargaining technique or institutional trait, with little emphasis on the cognitive and mnemonic processes by which leaders perceive alliance duties and especially how such uncertainties are formed.

Neoclassical realism (NCR) offers a significant corrective by positing leadership perception as an intervening variable between systemic forces and foreign policy outcomes (Rose, 1998; Ripsman, 2016; Smith, 2020). When applied to the Trump period, NCR-oriented studies demonstrate how power diffusion, resource limits, and alliance asymmetries filtered through executive views affected US policy while remaining true to realist ideals (Bonds, 2019; Friedman, 2022). Nonetheless, even within neoclassical realism, leadership perception is rarely investigated epistemologically; the reversibility of inherited commitments and the function of political memory are both neglected. When combined, existing scholars explain disruptive conduct and rhetoric, but it does not fully explain how alliance pledges become dubious in practice while institutional structures remain unchanged.

This absence suggests a broader conceptual gap. Philosophical study on pragmatism and fallibilism emphasizes that views, institutions, and commitments are essentially provisional and can be revised considering experience and practical consequences. Contemporary pragmatism study extends this logic to political and organizational action, emphasizing adaptive inquiry in the face of uncertainty (Martela, 2015; Mohammed et al., 2025; Ryan, 2024). However, pragmatism has rarely been integrated into alliance studies or realism foreign policy research, leaving unexplored the possibility that leaders will interpret alliance memory as revisable. While constructivist scholarship has long emphasized identity, norms, and shared meanings in alliance behavior, these approaches typically focus on the formation and diffusion of norms rather than on leadership-driven revision of inherited commitments under conditions of systemic pressure. The present study, therefore, adopts neoclassical realism to capture how systemic constraints are filtered through leadership perception, while pragmatist fallibilism specifies the epistemological mechanism through which alliance memory becomes provisional.

Furthermore, complementary research in rhetoric, political memory, and performative leadership sheds light on this gap. Scholars demonstrate how leaders actively reinterpret security meanings through speech and symbolic action, modifying expectations without implementing formal policy changes (Costa & Khudoliy, 2019; Starr-Deelen, 2018; da Vinha, 2017). Trump's communicative practices, characterized by contingency, menace, and conditionality, served not just as expression but also as controlled intervention, breaking dependence on inherited narratives of alliance certainty (Michaels, 2017; Ciot & Ghidui, 2020). However, this literature has not been linked systematically to alliance theory or neoclassical realism.

Taken together, existing scholarship explains what Trump did, how he spoke, and why allies felt unsettled, but it does not fully account for how alliance commitments were systematically reinterpreted under conditions of continued institutional uncertainty. This study addresses this gap by synthesizing neoclassical

realism with pragmatist fallibilism to theorize strategic amnesia, understood as a leadership-driven suspension of political memory through which established alliance commitments are rendered conditional and revisable while their institutional utility is maintained. Within this concept, strategic amnesia is the mechanism by which leadership cognition reshapes inherited alliance expectations, resulting in strategic ambiguity as a structural effect of NATO interactions. By incorporating political memory into realist alliance analysis, this study hopes to advance international relations scholarship by reinterpreting strategic ambiguity as an emergent condition caused by the breakdown of stabilizing political memory under fallibilist leadership reasoning. As a result, the study asks: How does Trump's fallible leadership through strategic amnesia affect the ambiguity within US-NATO engagement under conditions of uncertainty?

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, case-based interpretive research approach to investigate how leadership perception shapes political memory and alliance commitments in US-NATO ties during Donald Trump's past and current term in office. The Trump-NATO relationship was chosen due to its theoretical relevance of how alliance commitments are being publicly disputed at the highest political level without resulting in formal institutional rupture. This enables a systematic analysis of how political memory and alliance expectations are destabilized while institutional continuity is maintained, making it an analytically suitable tool for investigating mechanisms of ambiguity construction under leadership styles. The empirical corpus includes qualitative textual data from (1) Donald Trump's presidential speeches and official remarks, (2) NATO summit communiqués and official alliance documents, and (3) publicly recorded alliance-related diplomatic and rhetorical encounters from 2016 to 2026.

The temporal frame spans from Trump's first presidential campaign to his post-presidency political influence phase, allowing for examination of both direct executive rhetoric and its ongoing interpretive consequences on alliance expectations. Documents were included if they featured a direct reference to NATO, Article 5, burden-sharing, collective defence duties, or alliance credibility. Routine administrative statements that made no substantial mention of alliance obligations were omitted. An initial coding frame was developed using the theoretical constructs of political memory, alliance commitment, and leadership cognition, which was then modified by repeated reading of the corpus. Statements were classified as fallibilist discourse if they contained one or more of the following characteristics: (i) explicit conditionality of previously assumed commitments, (ii) rejection of automaticity in alliance commitments, (iii) framing of alliance commitments as revisable or negotiable.

In contrast, a non-fallibilist language is acknowledged as fixed, binding commitment. To achieve analytical depth and temporal sensitivity, the study combines text analysis with interpretative process tracing (IPT) to recreate patterns of alliance commitments changing across key encounters throughout time. This

approach connects textual adjustments in leadership rhetoric to comparable changes in NATO-level responses and diplomatic engagements. Additionally, the study employs González-Ocantos' actor-space-interaction framework to structure the analysis (González-Ocantos, 2020). Donald Trump is regarded as the primary interpreter of meanings and political memory; NATO is the institutional and symbolic space in which collective defense expectations are upheld; and interaction refers to rhetorical, diplomatic, and summit-level engagements that reaffirm, conditionalize, or suspend commitments. This unified methodological approach assures that theory, data structure, and analytical procedure are all consistent. The data was gathered and distributed below as follows:

Table 1 (Actor-Based Data) presents the empirical material used to capture leadership cognition, belief revision, and decision-making patterns associated with Donald Trump. The table organizes primary data such as speeches, statements, and policy positions to identify fallibilist reasoning, personality traits, and leadership style shaped foreign policy commitments. This table is meant to capture the actor's dimension by linking observable discourse and decisions to cognitive uncertainty, provisional belief formation, and revision over time.

Table 1. Donald Trump (Actor)
Leadership perception and fallibilist signals in NATO policy discourse.

Data	Year / Date	Context	Source Type	Description	Key Wording	URL
1	Mar 26, 2016	Campaign	Interview	Trump questions NATO's relevance and utility	"NATO is obsolete"	https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-nato.html
2	Jul-16	Campaign	Party Platform / Speech	Alliance framed through burden-sharing logic	"Countries are not paying what they should"	https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/republican-party-platform-2016
3	Jul-16	Campaign	Interview	Defence commitments framed as transactional	"If they don't pay, we're not protecting them"	https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/donald-trump-nato/492097/
4	May 25, 2017	Presidency	Speech	Ambiguous commitment at NATO HQ	Omission of explicit Article 5 reaffirmation	https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_144554.htm
5	May 25, 2017	Presidency	Speech	Symbolic invocation of Article 5 memory	"Our nations stood side by side..." (without commitment language)	https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-unveiling-article-5-and-berlin-wall-memorials/

6	Jul 6, 2017	Presidency	Speech	Discursive repair of alliance commitment	"I am committed to Article 5"	https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-people-poland/
7	Jul 11, 2018	Presidency	Press Conference	Re-testing alliance conditionality	"The U.S. is paying far more than its fair share"	https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-press-conference-nato-summit/
8	Jul-18	Presidency	Joint Remarks	Partial reassurance mixed with pressure	"NATO is stronger, but allies must step up"	https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-secretary-general-nato/
9	Dec 3, 2019	Presidency	Speech	Instrumental evaluation of alliance utility	"NATO helps us when it's run properly"	https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-nato-leaders-meeting-london/
10	2016–2020	Presidency	Social media	Informal testing of alliance norms	Repeated tweets linking defence to payment	https://www.thetrumparchive.com/
11	Jan 15, 2025	Post-Presidency	Statement	Reopening alliance scope via Greenland	"Greenland is vital to our national and NATO security"	https://www.politico.com/news/2025/01/15/trump-nato-greenland-comments-00198432
12	2025	Post-Presidency	Media Statement	Renewed conditionality toward allies	"If they don't pay, they can't expect protection"	https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-nato-defense-spending-comments-2025/
13	2025	Post-Presidency	Speech	Expansion of alliance meaning to Arctic security	"The Arctic is the future of NATO security"	https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-davos-greenland-nato-2025/

This table compiles Donald Trump's public statements on NATO from 2016–2026, including speeches, interviews, press conferences, and social media posts, treated as indicators of leadership perception within a neoclassical realist framework. The inclusion of key wording highlights moments where alliance commitments are framed as conditional, revisable, or strategically reopened, operationalizing fallibilist uncertainty through language. While this data allows for

interpretive analysis of belief articulation and revision, it does not establish direct causal links to policy outcomes and relies on researcher's judgment in identifying analytically salient phrases.

Table 2 (Space-Based Data) structures data related to the institutional and alliance environments within which leadership decisions were interpreted and constrained. It attempts to map NATO's institutional norms, political memory, legal frameworks, and alliance expectations to show how space functioned as a normatively dense arena. This would allow for analysis capturing institutional memory and alliance structures, be it mediated, amplified, or resisted by and from fallibilist leadership actions.

Table 2. NATO (Space)
Institutional memory, norm stabilization, and collective defence framing.

Data	Year / Date	Institutional Context	Source Type	Description	Key Institutional Wording	URL
1	1949 (foundation)	Founding Treaty	Legal Text	Establishes collective defence as core alliance norm	"An armed attack against one... shall be considered an attack against them all"	https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm
2	May 25, 2017	Brussels Summit	Summit Communiqué	Institutional continuity following Trump's Article 5 ambiguity	Reaffirmation of "ironclad commitment to collective defence"	https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/events_143770.htm
3	May–Jun 2017	Post-Summit Messaging	Institutional Statements	Rapid norm-repair after ambiguous leadership rhetoric	"Article 5 remains unconditional and unchanged"	https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions.htm
4	Jul 11, 2018	Brussels Summit	Summit Declaration	Reinforces alliance unity amid burden-sharing dispute	"We reaffirm our unwavering commitment to Article 5"	https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/events_145068.htm
5	Dec 4, 2019	London Leaders' Meeting	Summit Declaration	Reasserts alliance relevance and shared history	"NATO remains the foundation of our collective defence"	https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/events_66571.htm
6	2017–2019	Institutional Discourse	Policy Statements	Emphasis on NATO as values-based community	"Shared values, shared security, shared responsibility"	https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics.htm

7	2021–2024	Strategic Reflection	Policy / Concept Papers	NATO re-articulates purpose beyond Trump presidency	“NATO 2030: United for a New Era”	https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/
8	2025	Arctic / High North	Institutional Briefings	Frames Arctic security as alliance-wide concern	“The High North is of strategic importance to the Alliance”	https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm
9	2025	Greenland Context	Institutional Positioning	Avoids sovereignty dispute framing; emphasizes stability	“Respect for territorial integrity of Allies”	https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news.htm
10	2025–2026	Summit-Level Discourse	Summit Statements	Absorbs renewed U.S. pressure without norm change	“NATO's collective defence commitment remains steadfast”	https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news.htm

This table assembles NATO's institutional texts, including founding documents, summit communiqués, strategic concepts, and official statements, capturing the alliance as a normative and symbolic space that stabilizes collective defence commitments. Key institutional wording is used to trace how alliance memory and continuity are reaffirmed in response to leadership-level ambiguity. However, the consensus-driven and formal nature of these documents may obscure internal disagreement and informal negotiation, limiting insight into underlying contestation within the alliance.

Table 3 (Interaction-Based Data) compiles evidence of interaction, diplomatic exchanges, and relational dynamics between the United States and its allies in NATO. The table is organized this way to trace patterns of rhetorical escalation, reassurance, and contestation across interactions, enabling us to observe how uncertainty was produced and sustained through communication rather than policy change alone.

Table 3. Interaction
Alliance contestation, discursive repair, and negotiated meaning.

Data	Year / Date	Interaction Context	Actors Involved	Source Type	Description	Key Interactional Wording	URL
1	May 25, 2017	Brussels NATO Summit	Trump – NATO Allies	Summit Interaction	First major contestation of Article 5 expectations under Trump	Absence of explicit Article 5 reaffirmation triggers alliance uncertainty	https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/events_143770.htm

2	May 26, 2017	Post-Summit Repair	Stoltenberg – Media – Allies	Statement / Press	Immediate institutional repair following ambiguity	“The United States’ commitment to Article 5 is firm”	https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_144556.htm
3	Jul 6, 2017	Warsaw Summit	Trump – NATO Allies	Speech Interaction	Discursive repair after earlier contestation	“I am committed to Article 5”	https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-people-poland/
4	Jul 11, 2018	Brussels NATO Summit	Trump – Stoltenberg	Press Conference	Re-testing of alliance commitment through burden-sharing pressure	“The U.S. is paying far more than anyone else”	https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-press-conference-nato-summit/
5	Jul-18	Summit Mediation	Stoltenberg – Trump	Joint Remarks	Institutional mediation to stabilize alliance meaning	“NATO is stronger because allies are doing more”	https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-secretary-general-nato/
6	Dec 3–4, 2019	London Leaders’ Meeting	Trump – NATO Leaders	Summit Interaction	Managed coexistence of tension and continuity	“NATO helps us when it’s run properly”	https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/events_66571.htm
7	May-17	Allied Pushback	Germany, France, EU Leaders	Media Interaction	Collective reassurance to counter alliance uncertainty	“Article 5 is not conditional”	https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-summit-idUSKBN18M0Q2
8	Dec-19	Informal Mediation	Mark Rutte – Trump	Diplomatic Interaction	Alliance leaders normalize tension without rupture	“We should focus on results, not rhetoric”	https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-summit-netherlands-

							idUSKBN 1Y81ID
9	Jan-25	Greenland Episode	Trump – Denmar k – NATO	Diplom atic Contes tation	Reopening alliance meaning via territorial- security linkage	“Greenland is vital to NATO security”	https://ww w.politico. com/news/ 2025/01/15 /trump- nato- greenland- comments- 00198432
10	Jan-25	Allied Response	Denmar k – EU – NATO Allies	Diplom atic Respon se	Sovereignty and alliance norms asserted against instrumenta l logic	“Greenland is not for sale”	https://ww w.reuters. com/world/ europe/eur opean- leaders- react- trump- nato- greenland- 2025-01- 16/
11	Feb-25	Institutional Mediation	Mark Rutte – NATO	Statem ent	Re- stabilization of alliance meaning amid renewed pressure	“Alliance unity and territorial integrity are non- negotiable”	https://ww w.nato.int/ cps/en/nat ohq/news_ 220145.ht m
12	2025– 2026	Arctic Security Discourse	NATO – Member States – U.S.	Summi t / Policy Interac tion	Expansion of alliance space without norm revision	“The High North is a shared strategic concern”	https://ww w.nato.int/ cps/en/nat ohq/news. htm

This table focuses on interactional episodes where leadership discourse and alliance norms intersect, such as summits, joint press conferences, diplomatic responses, and public reassurance efforts. These moments are used to trace processes of contestation, repair, and stabilization consistent with fallibilist belief testing in neoclassical realism. The data privileges publicly visible exchanges and may underrepresent private diplomacy or strategic ambiguity, while media amplification can occasionally exaggerate the significance of discursive conflict.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses an integrated analytical framework that combines neoclassical realism, pragmatist fallibilism, and the actor-space-interaction model to evaluate leadership speech, institutional responses, and commitments in US-NATO interactions. Rather than presenting these as opposing theoretical perspectives, the framework provides each a specific analytical function required to explain how commitments are destabilized without formal rupture. Neoclassical realism serves as the structural foundation for the approach, describing how systemic forces, particularly power asymmetries and alliance dependencies, are filtered through

unit-level perceptions to produce foreign policy outcomes (Rose, 1998; Ripsman, 2016; Smith, 2020). While NCR explains how leadership perception mediates external limitations, it fails to account for how inherited alliance commitments are cognitively reinterpreted or rendered unstable in the absence of institutional breakdown. This constraint deserves a new epistemological lens.

To overcome this gap, pragmatist fallibilism is proposed, which views beliefs, norms, and commitments as intrinsically revisable in the face of uncertainty and experience (Rescher, 1995; Brown, 2008; Hookway, 2007; Martela, 2015; Ryan, 2024). Complimenting this approach are other prominent IR concepts, such as Political Memory and Constructivism, that are applicable; it is necessary to acknowledge why Constructivism may not be in this case. Political memory methods view foreign policy action as rooted in generally stable leadership traits. As per this viewpoint, states operate consistently over time due to historical behaviour culture, or history, which establishes long-term trends (Olick, 1999).

The downside of this method is that it treats continuity as structurally given, making it quite impossible to account for episodic disruptions like those experienced under Trump. In contrast, the fallibilist viewpoint regards such continuity as contingent and subject to revision. However, it can be used to establish a dynamic feedback loop that protects the process from stagnation and repeating past mistakes. While fallibilism describes the intellectual viewpoint that is prone to errors, political memory gives the information needed to pinpoint exactly where those errors happened. These cost synergies are visible in the way memory serves as a corrective record of past errors, opposing ideological manipulation and sustaining a pluralistic discussion based on lived experience rather than abstract and possibly harmful dogma.

Constructivist methods, on the other hand, explain alliance behaviour through norm internalization and diffusion, in which principles such as collective defence become embedded as shared identities and appropriate patterns of behaviour (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). From this approach, strategic ambiguity would be interpreted as either a developing norm or a departure from established normative consensus. However, this theory has limitations in explaining short-term volatility since it promotes stabilized intersubjective meaning over situational adaptation. The fallibilist approach is fundamentally different in that it does not presume internalized norm stability; rather, it emphasizes experimental, transactional adjustment, in which actors continuously test, update, or suspend commitments based on perceived utility and feedback.

Furthermore, the actor-space interaction, while originally developed in the context of judicial politics, is valuable in this case due to its ability to systematically organize relational dynamics between agents, institutions, and interactional sequences (González-Ocantos, 2020). Despite other acceptable frameworks, such as Putnam's Two-Level Game and Fearon's Audience-Cost Model, the fundamental difference between these frameworks is their approach to agency and institutional stability. Putnam's Two-Level Game sees international cooperation as a strict bargaining process limited by preset domestic "win-sets" (Putnam, 1988). Fearon's

audience cost model, on the other hand, views political repercussions as a static signalling method for demonstrating resolve (Fearon 1994). In contrast, the actor-space-interaction model views NATO's institutional "space" as a flexible, socially produced environment rather than a set of rigid rules. While Putnam and Fearon look at how leaders handle existing limits, González-Ocantos examines how a fallible leader actively deconstructs the alliance's institutional memory.

By integrating these four components, the framework allows for a layered explanation of alliance transformation: neoclassical realism explains structural constraint, fallibilism and political memory explain the epistemic instability in commitments, and actor-space interaction provides a structured mechanism for tracing how instability unfolds empirically across discourse and institutional response.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Leadership Cognition, Political Memory, and Fallibilist Agency

The actor-level findings show that Trump's leadership cognition induced amnesia in NATO obligations through iterative reinterpretation rather than outright repudiation. This trend arises from the beginning of the dataset. In Table 1: Data 1, Trump stated that "NATO is obsolete," directly questioning the alliance's continued usefulness. Such a declaration reopens the epistemic position of alliance commitments, making them subject to evaluation. This evaluative posture is more evident in Table 1: Data 3, where Trump says, "If they do not pay, we are not protecting them." Collective defence is portrayed as a burden-sharing need, converting Article 5 from an automatic necessity to a consensual option. These utterances show a constant willingness to reassess inherited commitments, which supports neoclassical realist notions that leadership perception mediates systemic forces and alters foreign policy interpretation (Rose, 1998; Ripsman, 2016; Smith, 2020).

Trump's speech displays an openness to revisionism, placing the actor in a fallibilist mode of reasoning rather than a predetermined calculation (Rescher, 1995; Brown, 2008; Ryan, 2024). At the actor level, this revisability begins to shake the stabilizing role of alliance memory, generating an early type of strategic amnesia in which inherited commitments are selectively recalled but no longer considered binding to a certain extent, such as that of Articles 4 and 5.

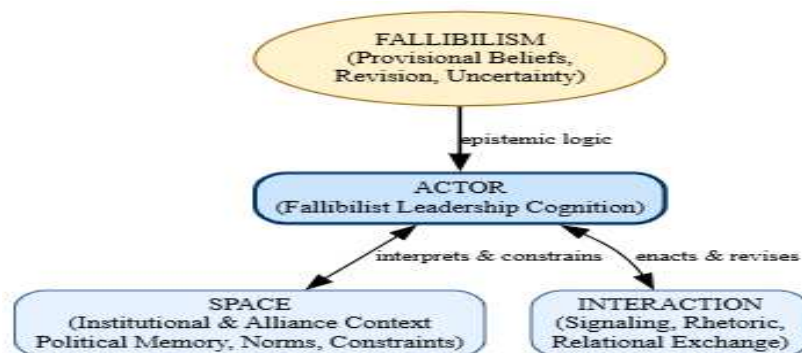
Furthermore, this fallibilist orientation became increasingly evident during Trump's early presidency. Table 1: Data 4 details Trump's statement at NATO Headquarters on May 25, 2017, in which he did not explicitly support Article 5. The omission occurred during a ceremonial context (which should traditionally be about alliance reassurance), rather than ambiguity. Table 1: Data 5 displays a symbolic invocation — "Our nations stood side by side..." — without a committal follow-up, blending historical continuity and current ambiguity. Such sequences show how political memory was addressed but not reaffirmed. A following discursive correction comes in Table 1: Data 6, where Trump states, "I am committed to Article 5." However, the change from omission to reaffirmation strengthens the transitory nature of agreements rather than restoring certainty.

Leadership psychology interprets such rhetorical reversals as a reflection of high self-confidence and low conceptual complexity, emphasizing intuition and personal judgment over institutionalized expertise (Immelman and Gietzen, 2020; Renshon, 2020; Siniver & Featherstone, 2020; Winter, 2018). From the perspective of this study, such characteristics allow fallibilism to function at the level of foreign policy engagement by normalizing uncertainty as a leadership position. Additionally, Trump's speech patterns incorporate aggressive language and reversible pledges, resulting in a mix of decisiveness and contingency (Marietta & Murphy, 2017; Costa & Khudoliy, 2019; Barreto et al., 2023). By a fallibilist lens, this shows an epistemic posture in which policy attitudes are adaptable in response to perceived opportunity or constraint. For example, In 2017, Trump used forceful language to convey an image of total decisiveness, notoriously threatening North Korea with "fire and fury" and ridiculing Kim Jong Un as "Little Rocket Man".

However, by 2018, Trump pulled a complete rhetorical reversal after meeting Kim Jong Un personally and declaring that they "fell in love." This discourse conveyed a strict, militaristic ultimatum to some degree. But the abrupt shift implies that his approach was never a permanent ideology, but rather a temporary attitude that could be abandoned whenever he saw a better deal or opportunity (Hookway, 2007; Martela, 2015). In this, sense as per the point of this study, strategic amnesia can be seen developing gradually as alliance memory is recalled rhetorically but suspended operationally. Additionally, political memory also influences actor-level cognition. Table 1: Data 7, records Trump saying, "The U.S. is paying far more than its fair share," while Data 8 blends comfort and pressure: "NATO is stronger, but allies must step up." These claims evoke long-standing burden-sharing grievances and redefine alliance agreements using transactional logic. Table 1: Data 9 continues this instrumental framing, with Trump saying, "NATO helps us when it is run properly," implying that the alliance is based on performance rather than a long-term commitment. Data 10 expands on this idea with numerous tweets tying defence to payment, suggesting that conditionality persisted in both official and informal communication.

Such selective narratives resonate with political memory scholarship identifying Trumpism as a memory-driven political project rather than a coherent ideological doctrine (Lachmann, 2018; Waśko-Owsiejczuk, 2018; Thorpe, 2020).

Figure 1: Illustrates how fallibilist leadership cognition subsumes institutional space and interaction in shaping foreign policy behavior



Source: authors

The empirical evidence also indicates resistance to institutional constraints. The repeated conditionality in Table 1: Data 3, Data 7 and Data 12 — "If they do not pay, they cannot expect protection" – illustrates the consistency in altercations. Meanwhile, Table 1: Data 11 and Data 13 broaden alliance definition to other areas by referring to Greenland as "vital to our national and NATO security" and asserting that "the Arctic is the future of NATO security." Such comments reinterpret NATO's geographical and strategic breadth, demonstrating the extent to which alliance cohesion can change and build mistrust. Furthermore, research on executive power and civil-military relations has consistently found conflict between presidential autonomy and bureaucracy under Trump's presidency (Starr-Deelen, 2018; James, 2021; Michaels, 2017). This lends support to the fallibilist idea that institutional knowledge does not have permanent advantage (Hollingsworth, 2022; Mohammed et al., 2025).

From a neoclassical realist perspective, systemic forces like alliance expectations were filtered through Trump's interpretive framework, resulting in responses that deviated from structural forecasts (Friedman, 2022; Bonds, 2019). Rather than adjusting means to established ends, Trump repeatedly questioned the validity of the ends themselves, particularly regarding alliance commitments. This aligns with recent arguments that U.S. grand strategy under Trump was cognitively reoriented rather than absent (Badawi, 2024; Adamkiewicz, 2018). The cumulative effect is the gradual erosion of shared alliance memory, laying the groundwork for ambiguity to emerge more prominently at institutional and interactional levels.

The persistence of conditional reassurance across Data 6, Data 8 and Data 9 suggests that rhetorical reversals did not necessarily undermine domestic legitimacy. Charismatic authority allowed shifts to be framed as planned actions rather than inconsistency (Bester, 2022; Williams et al., 2020; Obschonka & Fisch, 2018). Therefore, credibility was redefined as authentic rather than counterfeit, forming legitimacy in actions that were once deemed unusual. However, the data also indicated limitations towards actor-centric fallibilism. The ambiguity created by Data 4 to 8 caused friction within NATO, as allies faced uncertainty that further fuelled anxiety (Mazur, 2020; Ciot & Ghidui, 2020; Drent & Van, 2014). Through this process, strategic amnesia begins to take shape at the actor level (Figure 1 above), weakening inherited expectations and enabling strategic ambiguity to move from a latent condition towards a more explicit form (Kaarbo & Beasley, 2023; Turner & Kaarbo, 2022; Özdamar, 2023).

Institutional Alliances and Geopolitical Contexts

This spatial dimension of analysis investigates the context in which actor-level cognition and decision-making occurred. Consistent with neoclassical realism, systemic pressures pass through these lenses before reaching the actor, giving results that cannot be described only by state-centric variables (anarchy) (Rose, 1998; Ripsman, 2016; Smith, 2020). NATO as an institutional space is based on fundamental collective defense principles articulated in its treaty framework, particularly Articles 4 and 5. Table 2: Data 1 reflects the baseline that "an armed attack against one... shall be considered an attack against all" (Article 5). In Table 2: Data 2, the Brussels Summit reaffirms an "ironclad commitment to collective defense," followed by Data 3 stating that "Article 5 remains unconditional and

unchanged." These frequent affirmations suggest that NATO responds to uncertainty by increasing normative certainty rather than changing its core principles.

This pattern continued in Table 2: Data 4, where allies restate their "unwavering commitment to Article 5," and in Table 2: Data 5, where NATO is referred to as "the foundation of our collective defense." These entries demonstrate that institutional settings function as a memory-preserving environment, translating ambiguity into reaffirmation cycles (Yost, 2010; Drent & Van, 2014). Beyond NATO's basic declarations, the dataset demonstrates how institutional space actively rearticulates identity to sustain cohesion. Table 2: Data 6 focuses on "shared values, shared security, shared responsibility," indicating normative consolidation as a stabilizing reaction to interpretive strain. Similarly, the "NATO 2030" framework in Table 2: Data 7 indicates adaptation through continuity rather than rupture, preserving core commitments while upgrading strategic posture (Rose, 1998; Ripsman, 2016; Smith, 2020).

These dynamics also apply to rising and contested geopolitical regions. Table 2: Data 8 describes the High North as "of strategic importance to the Alliance," demonstrating spatial growth through the incorporation of new security concerns. NATO emphasizes "respect for territorial integrity of Allies" in Table 2: Data 9, showing the depoliticization of sensitive sovereignty issues to maintain alliance cohesiveness. Even in the face of renewed external pressure, such as Trump's threats to Greenland, Table 2: Data 10 reiterates that "collective defense commitment remains steadfast," as evidenced by the rapid deployment of a small number of foreign personnel (estimated to be 35-50 non-Danish troops), intended to act as a "diplomatic tripwire" to signal unity and complicate any potential US move to seize the territory.

Across these configurations, spatial environments do not passively transmit leadership signals but actively mediate their meaning. Highly institutionalized spaces, such as NATO convert ambiguity into normative reinforcement selectively, while less rigid geopolitical spaces allow more immediate translation of leadership cognition into strategic effect. This variation is consistent with findings that geopolitical spaces are socially constructed through historical memory and shared expectations (Lachmann, 2018; Waśko-Owsiejczuk, 2018; Williams et al., 2020; Barreto et al., 2023). Within such institutional response, strategic amnesia is again observed quite strongly here as NATO, tries to reinforce norms whilst trying to eliminate uncertainty, but instead absorbs it over time into its memory. Thereby strengthening how strategic ambiguity continues to develop as a structural condition rather than an isolated, selective effect.

Fallibilism Interaction and Relational Outcomes

According to this study, the interactional dimension describes how actor-level cognition and spatial limitations emerge through communicative exchanges. According to this theory, interaction is not a derivative outcome, but rather a site where meaning, uncertainty, and power are actively negotiated. Across the dataset, interactional instability is first visible at the 2017 Brussels Summit, where the

explicit absence of Article 5 reaffirmation sparked instant concern (Table 3: Data 1). This ambiguity was quickly followed by prompt discursive correction, with NATO officials reaffirming that "the United States' commitment to Article 5 is firm" (Table 3: Data 2). The interactional pattern here illustrates a cycle of breakdown and immediate reaffirmation by third parties other than the first party, being the United States president.

This dynamic persisted as Trump subsequently indicates alignment by stating "I am committed to Article 5" (Table 3: Data 3), but interactional volatility re-emerges through burden-sharing contestation, where the U.S keeps stating that "The U.S. is paying far more than anyone else" (Table 3: Data 4) demanding a five percent (5%) increase from two percent (2%) in defence spending from total Gross Domestic Production (GDP) by all NATO members – indicating transactional terms. This is despite NATO's assertion that "NATO is stronger because allies are doing more" (Table 3: Data 5). Such demonstrates that interaction does not resolve to a stable equilibrium but rather cycles through meaning.

The London Leaders' Meeting exemplifies this managed instability, with Trump claiming that NATO functions effectively when "run properly" (Table 3: Data 6), while allies repeat that "Article 5 is not conditional" (Table 3: Data 7). Informal mediation and diplomatic adjustment tend to support this logic. The emphasis on "results, not rhetoric" (Table 3: Data 8) indicates a desire to limit interpretive volatility while not eliminating it. This is further exacerbated by the Greenland issue, with the US framing that "Greenland is vital to NATO security" (Table 3: Data 9), which was immediately opposed by partner declarations that "Greenland is not for sale" (Table 3: Data 10). Subsequently, mitigation efforts reiterated that "Alliance unity and territorial integrity are non-negotiable" (Table 3: Data 11), as even in expanded domains such as the Arctic, the alliance maintains continuity by framing the High North as "a shared strategic concern" (Table 3: Data 12). Further confirming that interactional space stabilises meaning through reassertion rather than immediate resolution (Siniver & Featherstone, 2020; Winter, 2018).

Such actions raise the question of whether Trump's (or the United States) statements reflect bargaining tactics or policy intent. (Renshon, 2020; Immelman & Gietzen, 2020). To understand this, one must observe the personalization of diplomacy, where direct leader-to-leader exchanges displaced institutional channels, altering the locus of negotiation from bureaucratic procedures to performative encounter (Turner & Kaarbo, 2022; Özdamar, 2023). Trump's use of absolutist framing increased salience but reduced interpretive clarity (Bester, 2022; Barreto et al., 2023), producing widening perception gaps in multilateral settings rather than convergence, as effects were also asymmetrical: more autonomous allies adapted through interpretive heuristics, while more dependent actors experienced heightened sensitivity to U.S. posture (Blankenship, 2018; Mazur, 2020).

Evidently, Trump's policies are somewhat heavily leaned towards constant bargaining to ensure a "great deal at any cost". This is supported by his "America First" strategy, which viewed international relations as zero-sum (if others win, the U.S. loses) and valued personal deal-making over consistent ideological partnerships

(Yost, 2010; Drent & Van, 2014). In parallel, deterrence-related discourse introduced ambiguity into traditionally rigid domains such as nuclear posturing, where the United States hinted at the possibility of resuming the testing of nuclear weapons to be on par with its two global competitors, Russia and China. This can easily be heightened given that the the U.S., along with the other five permanent members (P5) of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), have not ratified the Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) (Michaels, 2017; Bothe, 2023).

However, what stands out regarding America's nuclear policy is Trump's refusal to extend the historic New START Treaty with Russia upon its February 5, 2026 expiration, favouring instead the creation of a new, broader trilateral agreement that includes China. Ultimately, these patterns suggest that unpredictability in interaction reflects a form of epistemic openness rather than deliberate policy (Humire, 2024; Mota, 2020). Within this space, fallibilism is most visibly as provisional commitments are repeatedly tested, revised, or abandoned in response to feedback, producing an interaction order defined by ongoing adjustment, again rather than equilibrium (Hollingsworth, 2022; Mohammed et al., 2025). Further fuelling strategic amnesia that in turn forcefully shifts the latent state of ambiguity to the centre of institutional conduct.

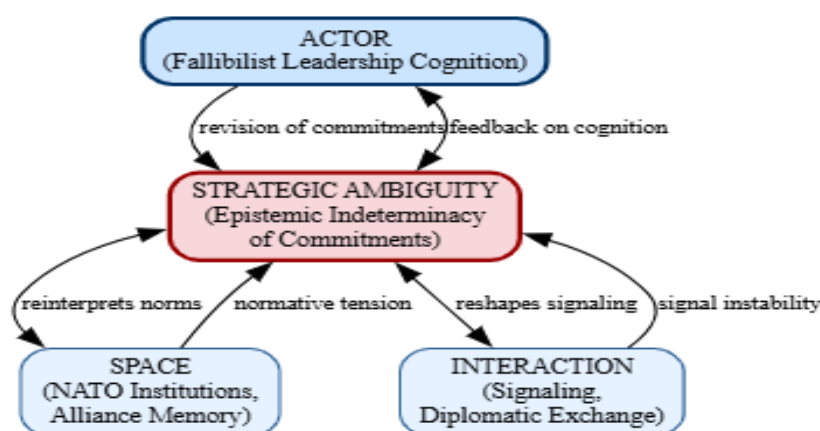
Strategic Ambiguity from Latent Uncertainty

Strategic ambiguity historically arose inside NATO through burden-sharing, escalation thresholds, and the precise scope of collective defence obligations, which was sustained and further amplified by the fallibilist leadership of the dominant power (Yost, 2010; Drent & Van, 2014). At the heart of this transition is strategic amnesia – acting as a driving mechanism for Trump's fallibilist leadership style, influencing US-NATO relations. As a result, ambiguity again became no longer rooted in a stable memory baseline as it was historical within NATO, but a permanent condition in the alliance dynamics. This mechanism explains why ambiguity in the Trump era moved beyond conditional uncertainty (Figure 2 below). The data showed that uncertainty extended not only to how commitments would be implemented, but increasingly to whether foundational assumptions—such as alliance solidarity, U.S. reliability, or even the stability of strategic intent—could still be treated as consistent reference points (Mazur, 2020; Ciot & Ghidui, 2020; Friedman, 2022). Within this configuration, it can also be agreed that fallibilism provides the epistemic foundation for the development of strategic amnesia (Rescher, 1995; Brown, 2008; Ryan, 2024).

NATO traditionally mitigates uncertainty by stabilising its posture through precedent (Yost, 2010; Volovoj & Batorshina, 2017). However, under conditions of strategic amnesia, precedent loses authority because it cannot guarantee credibility in decision-making frames (Monov, 2019; Blankenship, 2018). This is the key mechanism through which latent ambiguity becomes presently active. The cost distribution of this transformation further reinforces the structural nature of the shift. While allies experience heightened uncertainty, the United States also internalises constraints as its own command credibility tends to erode (Bonds, 2019;

Adamkiewicz, 2018). This became evident on February 28th, 2026, when European NATO powers (France, United Kingdom (UK) and Germany) refused to join the U.S. in its illegal bombing campaign, dubbed “*Operation Epic Fury*” of the Islamic Republic of Iran, following calls by Trump to reopen the Strait of Hormuz (Anadolu Agency, 2026). In this case, we can also observe that strategic amnesia therefore does not simply destabilise interpretation externally but also reduces the effectiveness and puts into question the credibility of the dominant power due to the constant decoupling of present statements from historically grounded narratives (Siniver & Featherstone, 2020; Winter, 2018; Renshon, 2020).

Figure 2: The figure shows strategic ambiguity as an emergent, recursive outcome produced by and feeding back into actor, space, and interaction.



Source: authors

Within an alliance already affected by strategic amnesia, the embracement of military-hedging gets reinforced amongst European NATO allies as they try to reduce dependency on American security guarantees (Bester, 2022; Williams et al., 2020; Barreto et al., 2023). Such can be seen via French's President; Emmanuel Macron's official proposal to extend France's nuclear umbrella to eight European allies through a new "Advanced Deterrence" doctrine to enhance continental security – a move considered to be the most significant change in French strategic thinking since 1960 (Schofield, 2026) Ultimately, what distinguishes the Trump era is not the presence of ambiguity, but its mechanism of persistence. Strategic amnesia ensures that ambiguity is not merely encountered but continually regenerated till peak condition through weakened temporal anchoring of institutional memory. This is what shifts ambiguity from latent structural background into an immediate condition of alliance dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that strategic ambiguity within NATO during the Trump presidency was not merely an inherited condition of alliance dynamics, but an emergent outcome produced by the convergence of fallibilist leadership cognition, institutional political memory, and unstable interactions. Rather than functioning

as a background feature of alliance politics, ambiguity became an explicit and recurrent condition shaping how commitments were interpreted, contested, and revised. Crucially, this shift was driven by strategic amnesia, which operates as the mediating mechanism of fallibilist leadership by progressively weakening the stabilizing unified memory of the alliance.

The findings yield two main implications. First, strategic ambiguity under fallibilist leadership should be understood as an epistemic condition rather than a deliberate instrument, since strategic amnesia erodes the reliability of historical precedent as a stabilizing reference for alliance expectations. This shifts ambiguity from a managed standpoint into a structural feature of decision-making within NATO. Second, the normalization of ambiguity redistributes the costs of uncertainty across alliance members and constrains the credibility of the dominant power itself, as witnessed during the U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict. For NATO member states, this implies that reliance on historical continuity and leader reassurance is insufficient for strategic planning under such unstable conditions, thereby strengthening the potential of military-hedging.

Future research may extend this analysis through comparative examination of different leadership styles, alliance systems, or periods of institutional stress to assess whether similar transformations of strategic ambiguity emerge under varying political conditions. Further work could also investigate how political memory is reconstructed following episodes of epistemic disruption and whether alliances can re-stabilize expectations without reverting to rigid or overly deterministic strategic commitments.

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