

Trump-Era Visa Policies and the Transformation of US Education Diplomacy: Implications for Islamic Education and Global Geopolitics

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of President Donald Trump's visa policies on shifts in US education diplomacy within the context of global geopolitics, with particular attention to their implications for international students from Muslim-majority countries and Islamic education networks. Restrictive measures during his administration, including limitations on F-1 and J-1 visas and travel bans targeting several Muslim-majority states, led to a notable decline in international student mobility and weakened the United States' position as a leading global education destination. Using a descriptive qualitative approach and desk study method, this research is supported by individual-level foreign policy theory and education diplomacy theory. The analysis explores how Trump's perceptions and leadership style shaped policies affecting higher education, including Islamic education-oriented exchanges and collaborations. It also highlights responses from competing countries such as Canada, Australia, and China, which expanded inclusive education policies and strengthened engagement with Islamic and Global South students. The findings show that these visa policies reduced US soft power and created opportunities for other states to lead in global education diplomacy, underscoring the need for more inclusive policy reforms.

KEYWORDS

Education Diplomacy, Islamic education, Donald Trump, Visa Policy



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Introduction

Higher education has become one of the main instruments in international diplomacy in the era of globalization. Countries do not rely solely on military or economic power but also use the education sector as part of a soft power strategy to expand global influence (Saaida, 2023). The United States has led the way for decades, making universities like Harvard, MIT, Stanford, and Yale symbols of scientific progress, cultural openness, and freedom of thought (MacLeod & Urquiola, 2021). The United States has built a global elite network that contributes to strengthening the country's influence and image in the eyes of the world through scholarship programs such as Fulbright, EducationUSA initiatives, and international research partnerships. International students have become important actors in this diplomatic process, they do not only absorb knowledge, but also bring home experiences, values, and emotional affiliations with America (Harvey et al., 2024).

However, this order began to experience serious disruption during the administration of President Donald J. Trump. US foreign policy underwent a drastic change under Trump, shifting from a "America First" principle (previously based on openness and international cooperation) to one of unilateralism. Immigration and visa policies, especially student visas such as F-1 and J-1, were significantly tightened (Feeney et al., 2023). Several controversial policies, such as Proclamation 10043, which banned Chinese students from studying in technology and science fields, and a policy issued during the COVID-19 pandemic that required foreign students to return home if courses were conducted online, marked turning points in the history of the U.S. higher education system's international engagement (Executive Office of the President, 2020). In some cases, thousands of visas were unilaterally cancelled, and visa interviews for new students were postponed indefinitely. As a result, many international students lost their chance to study, even those who had been accepted to top US universities (Caroll Alvarado et al., 2025).

These policies have not only impacted the education sector, but have also shifted the direction and effectiveness of US Education Diplomacy. In international relations theory, Education Diplomacy is part of a soft power strategy that aims to spread values, build global elite networks, and enhance a country's image and influence. When access to US higher education began to be closed to foreign students, this soft power also declined. The sharp decline in the number of international students is concrete evidence of this. Data from the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) shows an 11.3% decline in the number of foreign students enrolled in

the US between March 2024 and March 2025. Major sending countries such as India, China, and Iran experienced drastic declines. In fact, according to a report by Inside Higher Ed, more than 1,800 international students faced visa cancellations in a short period of time, sparking a wave of criticism from universities and the global academic community (SEVP, 2024).

On the other hand, rival countries see an opportunity to expand their role in global education diplomacy. Canada, Australia, the UK, and China are strengthening their policies to attract foreign students with friendlier visa policies, full scholarships, and promising post-study immigration pathways (Isaac Garcia-Sitton, 2025). In comparison, Canada recorded a 29% increase in the number of foreign students by the end of 2023 with more than 1 million international students (Government of Canada, 2024), while Australia saw a 27% increase in the same period. China, through its Belt and Road Scholarship program, is using education as a conduit for soft power in Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe. In this context, the geopolitics of global education are also shifting: America, once the center of gravity of world education, is being replaced by regional powers offering equal access to education with a more inclusive diplomatic vision (Schulhof et al., 2025).

This phenomenon raises profound questions about how foreign policy shaped by Donald Trump's perceptions and decisions can affect a country's global position in areas long considered neutral and open, such as education. Within the framework of individual-level foreign policy theory, Trump's policies reflect threat perceptions, a nationalistic approach, and a transactional leadership style. These policies not only contradict the core values of the US higher education system but also clash with the long-term interests of American public diplomacy. Against this backdrop, it is important to examine more deeply how Trump-era visa policies affect the direction and effectiveness of US education diplomacy in the context of global competition (Dubinsky, 2023). This study seeks to fill a gap in the study of shifting foreign policy dynamics, the education sector, and interstate competition for strategic roles as leading education destinations. In an increasingly multipolar and interconnected world, education is no longer seen merely as a domestic sector but also as part of a grand global geopolitical strategy.

Literature Review

Education Diplomacy

Education Diplomacy is one of the most strategic forms of diplomacy in modern international relations practice. Education Diplomacy refers to a country's efforts to build relationships and influence by providing access to education, facilitating academic exchanges, offering scholarships, and fostering cooperation between higher education institutions. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which focuses on formal negotiations between governments, Education Diplomacy operates more subtly but effectively through interactions among civil society, students, lecturers, and academic institutions. This practice has long been part of the foreign policy of many major countries, with the long-term goal of shaping positive perceptions, instilling values, and building a global elite network that has close ties to the country providing education (Knight, 2022).

The roots of Education Diplomacy can be traced back to the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union competed for ideological influence through educational aid and scholarships to Third World countries. The United States, through the Fulbright Scholarship program, which began in 1946, offered thousands of scholarships to students from around the world to study at top American universities. The program was not only academic in purpose but also politically motivated, introducing the values of liberal democracy, free markets, and American culture to young people from around the world. On the other hand, the Soviet Union developed a similar system through scholarships to institutions in Moscow and other cities, especially to friendly countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Hornsby, 2023). This competition shows that education is not just an instrument of human development, but a strategic field in the struggle for global influence.

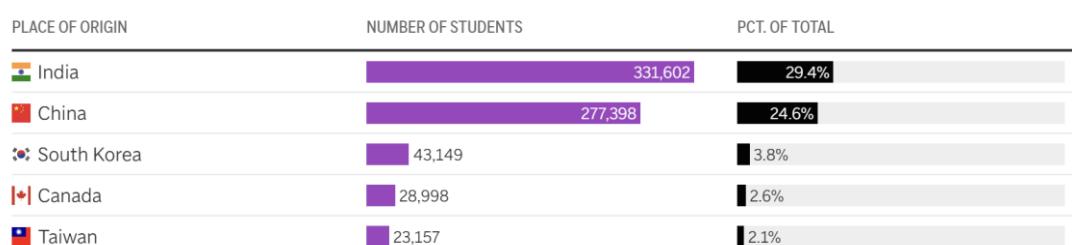


Figure 1. Most international students in US come from Asia (JOCELYN GECKER, 2025)

Education Diplomacy has undergone a transformation in the post-Cold War era. Globalization, technological advancement, and increasing human mobility have

prompted many countries to make higher education an integral part of their foreign policy (KelkiTli, 2020). Countries such as Australia, Canada, Japan, and France have developed national strategies to attract foreign students as part of their national image building, cultural diplomacy, and expansion of the education service economy. At the same time, rapid economic growth in East Asia is changing the power map in global education diplomacy, especially in China. China is actively promoting initiatives such as Confucius Institutes and scholarships under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to attract students from Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. This strategy is not only to challenge Western hegemony, but also as a means to build loyalty and expand networks of influence in BRI partner countries (Xu, 2022).

One concrete example of this transformation can be seen from the case study of the Belt and Road Scholarship program launched by the Chinese government. This scholarship targets students from developing countries participating in the BRI infrastructure project, offering free education at leading universities in China, accommodation, and living allowances. The aim is not only to provide access to education, but also to introduce the Chinese political system, culture, and work ethic. Many alumni of this program then return to their home countries with a positive perception of China, or even occupy important positions in government and strategic sectors. This shows how Education Diplomacy becomes an instrument for shaping long-term global power structures.

However, the trend of developing Education Diplomacy does not always run smoothly. On the other hand, countries that used to be global education centers, such as the United States, are facing serious challenges due to changes in domestic policies with international implications. For example, during the administration of President Donald Trump, the policy of restricting visas for foreign students and anti-immigrant rhetoric have weakened the image of US openness in the education sector. Policies such as the threat of deportation of foreign students taking online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic, the reduction of Fulbright funding for several countries, and tightening controls on Chinese students in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, reflect a shift from an open approach to a more exclusive national security approach. This has led to a significant decline in the number of foreign students enrolling in educational institutions in the US and moving to competing countries such as Canada, Australia, and Germany. In the study of international relations, this phenomenon can be explained through the theory of constructivism which emphasizes the importance of values, perceptions, and social interactions in shaping state behavior. A country that is able to shape its image as an

inclusive, ethical, and highly attractive center of knowledge will have a structural advantage in global diplomacy. On the other hand, the realism approach is also relevant to reading how countries like China utilize Education Diplomacy as part of a strategy to expand power, form influence in strategic regions, and create systemic dependency.

Thus, Education Diplomacy is no longer a sideline practice, but an essential part of a country's national power strategy. Today, countries compete to build the best universities, create competitive scholarship schemes, and promote their academic culture to the global level. The main challenge going forward is not only attracting foreign students but also building alumni networks, maintaining long-term relationships, and balancing openness with national interests. In this context, Education Diplomacy will remain one of the most important arenas in international relations in the 21st century.

Foreign Policy Analysis

Foreign policy is one of the most central objects of study in International Relations. Foreign policy refers to the strategies, actions, and decisions a country takes in its interactions with external actors, including other countries, international organizations, and non-state actors. Unlike grand theories such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism, which are often macro- and systemic in nature, foreign policy theory is more micro, explaining how and why a country designs its foreign policy, taking into account domestic actors, internal dynamics, and the perceptions of political elites. In this context, foreign policy theory becomes a bridge between international structures and concrete domestic decisions. (Herrera, 2023).

Foreign policy analysis as a discipline has developed since the 1950s, particularly with the emergence of behavioral approaches in political science that emphasize the importance of analyzing actors and decision-making processes. Scholars such as James Rosenau and Graham Allison were pioneers in developing analytical approaches to state behavior in the international system. Allison, for example, in his famous work on the Cuban missile crisis (*Essence of Decision*, 1971) (Graham Allison, 2008), shows that foreign policy is not only born from the rationality of a country, but also from bureaucratic dynamics, political compromise, and individual perceptions. This approach opens up space for a more contextual and multidimensional analysis of foreign policy. There are several theoretical approaches to foreign policy. The rational actor model assumes that the state is a single, rational entity that makes decisions

based on national interests and cost-benefit calculations. This model is widely used by classical realism and neorealism. However, this approach was later criticized for oversimplifying the decision-making process which in reality involves many actors and interests. In response, the bureaucratic politics model and the organizational model developed which see foreign policy as the result of bargaining between institutions, elites, and interest groups within the state. Meanwhile, the constructivist approach emphasizes that foreign policy is also shaped by national identity, social norms, and elites' subjective perceptions of the outside world.

Foreign policy theory has become increasingly important in the study of contemporary international relations, as it can explain why two states in the same structural position can adopt very different foreign policies. For example, two allies in the same international system can adopt different approaches to issues such as migration, climate change, or international education, depending on the ideology of the ruling government, domestic pressures, or perceptions of threat (Gries & Masui, 2022). Therefore, foreign policy theory offers great analytical flexibility to study foreign policy as a complex, dynamic, and often irrational phenomenon.

This context is particularly relevant to understanding the dynamics of President Donald Trump's administration in the United States. US foreign policy during this period represents a significant shift from the liberal-internationalist tradition that has long dominated US foreign policy since World War II. Trump's decisions to withdraw from various international agreements, implement strict visa policies for foreign students, and take a transactional approach to allies reflect how personal preferences, ideologies, and domestic political calculations can be determining factors in a major country's foreign policy. In foreign policy analysis, this cannot be explained simply by looking at international structures, but also requires an understanding of actor dynamics, elite perceptions, and domestic political pressures. Likewise, the foreign student visa policy during the Donald Trump administration can be analysed in depth through the lens of foreign policy theory, particularly within the bureaucratic politics model and the elite perception framework. This policy reflects the fact that foreign decisions are not only based on rational calculations of national interests but are also influenced by ideological preferences, domestic pressures, and dynamics among government institutions. Trump and officials from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) developed a narrative that foreign students, especially from countries such as China and Iran, have the potential to be a threat to US national security and technological sovereignty (Fu Ting et al., 2025).

From the perspective of foreign policy analysis (FPA), this policy is a combined result of threat perception, domestic populism, and strategies to respond to global changes, especially strategic competition with China. By restricting foreign student visas, Trump not only targets the education sector but also suppresses channels of knowledge exchange and people-to-people relations between the US and other countries. This shows that US foreign policy during the Trump era is highly personal, ideological, and often contradicts the principles of soft power that have been the hallmark of US Education Diplomacy. Thus, foreign policy theory helps us understand that the restriction of foreign student visas is not just a technocratic policy but a political decision that reflects the values, perceptions, and strategies of elites in shaping the direction of the country's international relations. Thus, foreign policy theory provides a very useful framework for International Relations researchers to explain shifts in a country's foreign policy, including in specific areas such as Education Diplomacy, immigration, multilateral cooperation, and the geopolitics of liberal values. This theory bridges between grand theory and policy reality, and places humans as the main actors (policy makers) who cannot be ignored.

Donald Trump Policies: Controversy, Policies, and Tensions with Liberal Values

Donald J. Trump's presidency since 2017 has marked one of the most dramatic turning points in U.S. domestic and international politics. Elected in 2016 with strong support from conservatives, the white working class, and right-wing populists, Trump has led the country with an approach that openly challenged many of the principles that have been the foundation of American liberal politics. Trump's first term (2017–2021) was marked by a direct communication style via social media, especially Twitter, nationalist rhetoric, and a series of protectionist and unilateral policies that shocked allies and upended the global order (Şahin et al., 2021). His campaign slogan, "*Make America Great Again*," was not just a promise of economic and military recovery, but also a call to reject globalism, limit immigration, and "restore" America's conservative identity (James, 2021).

Since the beginning of his administration, Trump has prioritized economic policies based on protectionism and economic nationalism. He withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), renegotiated NAFTA into the USMCA, and imposed massive tariffs on Chinese imports, sparking a trade war between the world's two largest economies (Smith & King, 2021). Trump also took a controversial step on global climate change by withdrawing the United States from the Paris

Agreement (Alessi et al., 2024), a move widely criticized by scientists and world leaders as a major setback for environmental diplomacy. In foreign policy, Trump has embraced the principle of “*America First*,” fundamentally changing America’s multilateral approach to a more transactional one. He has withdrawn troops from several conflict zones, harshly criticized NATO, and openly praised several world authoritarian leaders, such as Vladimir Putin (Russia), Kim Jong-un (North Korea), and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil). This has raised concerns that the United States under Trump is moving away from its traditional role as a democratic and liberal world leader.

Trump's leadership has deepened political and identity polarization in public policy (Dimant, 2024). Issues of race, immigration, and social justice have come into open conflict under Trump's often inflammatory rhetoric. One of his most controversial domestic policies was the travel ban on citizens of several Muslim countries (Muslim Ban), which was described as a form of racial and religious discrimination. Trump has also dismantled the protections for immigrant youth (DACA), built a wall on the Mexican border, and consistently used the narrative of “*border security*” as a symbol of national security. These policies have been criticized as contradicting classical liberal principles of openness, individual rights, protection of minorities, and the rule of law. Trump has even accused U.S. higher education institutions of being “*hotbeds of leftist ideology*” and a threat to “*traditional American values*.” He has also stirred controversy over issues of academic freedom and higher education, which are deemed too liberal or “*anti-American*” (Golby, 2021).

One policy that demonstrates this tension is Trump's threat to cut off federal funding to universities that do not respect conservative free speech (Alex Kane, 2025), as well as open criticism of the curriculum based on critical race theory and the history of slavery which is considered to tarnish the nation's face. Trump even initiated the creation of the “*1776 Commission*,” a national education project to “*promote patriotic education*” (Fox News, 2020) in response to the 1619 Project initiative which focuses on the history of slavery and race in America (“What Trump Is Saying about 1619 Project, Teaching U.S. History,” 2020). Critics have called the project an attempt to whitewash history and steer education toward conservative nationalist doctrine. In the higher education sector, Trump has also made policies that limit the mobility of international students. One of the most controversial policies is the visa restriction policy for foreign students where immigration and student visas have been extremely politicized during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in 2020. Through ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), the Trump administration issued a regulation threatening to revoke visas for foreign students who only take online classes. This

policy not only disrupts the stability of higher education in the US which is heavily dependent on international students, but also reflects a rejection of the openness of the education system in a global context.

Trump has also consistently pushed vocational education over liberal academic education (Bill Scher, 2025). In his speeches, he repeatedly called universities too expensive and full of leftist ideology that is "*economically useless*." This approach shows Trump's vision of higher education as a market tool rather than an arena for forming critical citizens. Within the framework of liberalism in international relations, higher education should serve as a bridge between countries and cultures. However, in the Trump era, education has become a tool for nationalist selection, adopting an exclusive approach that weakens its role as a medium for diplomacy and global exchange.

Method

This study uses a descriptive, qualitative approach to analyze the impact of President Donald Trump's visa policy on the shift in US Education Diplomacy in the context of global geopolitics. This approach was chosen because it can describe in depth the complex, contextual, and ideologically laden dynamics of foreign policy. The method used is library research, by collecting secondary data from various sources such as official policy documents (executive orders, ICE and DHS statements), reports from international institutions (UNESCO, IIE), scientific articles, international relations journals, credible mass media, and reports from think tanks such as the Brookings Institution and the Council on Foreign Relations.

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis to identify discourse patterns, political narratives, and the implications of visa policies for the global role of US higher education. The main focus of the analysis is directed at the relationship between US domestic policies and the dynamics of educational geopolitics, as well as the responses of competing countries such as China, Canada, and Australia. The theoretical framework used is foreign policy theory, which combines the perspectives of soft power (Nye, 2008), realism, and constructivism, to explain how visa policies not only impact student mobility flows, but also America's strategic position in education-based global diplomacy. Through this method, this study is expected to provide a critical understanding of the changing role of the US in global educational geopolitics, driven by restrictive and exclusive domestic policies.

Results and Discussions

Education Diplomacy in the United States

Education Diplomacy is one of the most strategic instruments in shaping a country's international influence and image. In international relations theory, Education Diplomacy is categorized as part of soft power, namely the ability of a country to influence other countries without military or economic coercion, but through the appeal of culture, values, and institutions. For more than a century, the United States has made the higher education sector one of the main pillars of its public diplomacy. Through scholarship programs, academic exchanges, international research collaborations, and the branding of leading universities, America has succeeded in building a global reputation as a center of intellectual innovation, academic freedom, and technological advancement (Soler, 2021). However, in recent years, especially during the Donald Trump administration, this image has come under pressure due to domestic policies that tend to be exclusive, nationalistic, and restrictive of foreign students. This analysis will examine how the dynamics of higher education in the US interact with the principles of Education Diplomacy in the context of global geopolitics.

Historically, the United States higher education system has long been a model and a destination for students from around the world. Universities such as Harvard, MIT, Stanford, and Yale are not only academic institutions, but also symbols of modernity, freedom of thought, and social mobility (Kozlowski et al., 2024). Since the Cold War, the US government has recognized the strategic potential of education, and has developed programs such as the Fulbright Scholarship, EducationUSA, and student exchange programs aimed at spreading the values of liberal democracy, tolerance, and capitalism to partner countries. Within the framework of Education Diplomacy, these initiatives are intended to form a global "*elite network*" with experience and emotional affinity for America. For example, many Fulbright graduates have gone on to become leaders in their respective countries, from academics, diplomats, to heads of state, bringing with them positive perceptions of the US. However, this power began to weaken when domestic policies in the US began to restrict access for foreign students. During the Donald Trump administration, anti-immigrant rhetoric and restrictive visa policies had a direct impact on the number of international students and perceptions of America. One of the most controversial policies occurred in 2020, when the US government declared that foreign students who only took online classes because of the pandemic would lose their visa status. This policy sparked a wave of protests from universities, the international community, and even the high-tech private sector that

relies heavily on global talent. From an Education Diplomacy perspective, this policy is seen as a setback because it ignores the principles of openness, access, and collaboration that have been the foundation of the success of US Education Diplomacy.

Education Diplomacy theory emphasizes that providing access to education not only serves to build individual capacity, but also as a long-term investment in shaping transnational human relations (Lin, 2024). In the case of the US, every foreign student studying at an American university absorbs not only knowledge but also values, norms, and cultural experiences that are part of the American “brand.” Therefore, actions that hinder or complicate access to education are counterproductive to the country’s long-term goals. In contrast, competing countries such as China, Canada, Australia, and the UK are expanding scholarship schemes and policies that are friendly to foreign students, as a form of increasing competitiveness in education diplomacy. China, for example, through its Belt and Road Scholarship, attracts students from developing countries with the promise of free education and access to regional networks. This move directly challenges the US’s dominance in the global education market. In the framework of education diplomacy, success is measured not only by the number of foreign students studying in a country, but also by how the country builds alumni networks, facilitates cultural exchanges, and encourages international research collaborations. The United States has long excelled in all of these aspects, but is beginning to lose its relative advantage due to inconsistent policies. While the university sector continues to strive to maintain its global reputation, federal policies often do not support it. This creates a gap between education actors and national policymakers. Major universities such as Harvard, Berkeley, and Columbia have even openly opposed the federal government's visa policy because they are seen as undermining competitiveness and academic integrity.

Furthermore, Education Diplomacy theory also highlights the importance of values transmitted through education. The United States is known for its educational system that emphasizes academic freedom, pluralism, and critical thinking, which appeal to global students. However, in recent years, concerns have been raised that US campuses are experiencing ideological pressure from domestic political groups, including restrictions on the study of race, gender, and colonial history. When national policies interfere with curriculum and academic freedom, the appeal of higher education as an instrument of diplomacy is also eroded. This is where the big challenge arises: how can America maintain its global role in Education Diplomacy if the basic values it offers are in doubt. Thus, American Education Diplomacy shows that academic strength and global reputation cannot be separated from policy consistency,

inclusive values, and openness to the outside world. When visa policies, political rhetoric, and ideological orientations of governments contradict these principles, Education Diplomacy will lose its effectiveness as a soft power tool. Therefore, the sustainability of American leadership in global education depends greatly on its ability to restore the basic values of liberalism, openness, and international collaboration that have been the foundation of successful Education Diplomacy so far.

Trump's Student Visa Policy and Islamic Education

Foreign policy theory at the individual level places the actor (state leader) as the center of determining the direction and character of a country's foreign policy. This approach believes that a leader's personality, background, perception, ideological beliefs, and leadership style play an important role in the foreign policy decision-making process. In this context, President Donald J. Trump's visa policy, especially targeting foreign students and the international education sector, is very relevant to be analyzed through an individual perspective in foreign policy theory. This approach helps explain how policies that seem irrational or contrary to the traditions of American diplomacy actually make sense when viewed through Trump's own personality and perception of the world.

Donald Trump is not a career politician or a traditional party figure who rose through the bureaucratic ranks. He is a real estate mogul and media mogul who brings a transactional business approach to national leadership. In his speeches and books such as *The Art of the Deal*, Trump emphasizes the importance of control, winning, and tough negotiations (Tony Schwartz, 2009). This is reflected in his rhetoric as president, which often frames international relations as a zero-sum game, that is, if America wins, other countries must lose, and vice versa. This mindset carries over into foreign policy, including immigration and student visa policies. Trump sees immigration and the influx of foreign students not as a form of international cooperation or a long-term investment in soft power, but as a potential economic, cultural, and even national security threat.

From an individual perspective, Trump views globalization and multiculturalism as threats to the "*authentic*" and conservative American identity. On multiple occasions, he has accused elite US universities of being "bastions of radical left ideology" that threaten American values (Patrick Maguire, 2025). This perception played a major role in shaping restrictive visa policies toward foreign students, as Trump believed that foreign students not only took away from the local population

“quota” but also became a conduit for the infiltration of foreign values and interests, especially from rival countries such as China and Iran. The Individual-Level Foreign Policy Analysis approach as developed by figures such as Margaret Hermann and Alexander George emphasizes the importance of a leader’s psychological and cognitive profile in shaping foreign policy. Hermann, for example, developed a method for assessing the political personality of world leaders based on indicators such as belief in control of events, level of need for power, and orientation toward risk. In Trump’s case, the personality profile shown was high in dominance, low in openness to external input, and high in perceived threat to national status. This greatly influenced the way Trump formulated visa policy as part of national protectionism.

A concrete example of a policy that reflects the direct influence of Trump’s perceptions and leadership style is the policy announced in July 2020 by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which stated that foreign students who took courses entirely online during the COVID-19 pandemic would lose their visas and be required to leave the United States (WES & ICE, 2020). The policy sparked widespread protests from the academic community, the business sector, and the international community. Although ultimately reversed due to legal pressure from universities such as Harvard and MIT, the policy reflected Trump’s approach of viewing foreign students as a burden or threat, rather than as partners in global educational cooperation. Trump’s rhetoric toward Chinese students also reflects how personal perceptions can translate into policy. Trump has repeatedly expressed concerns that Chinese students are “stealing American technology” (Daphne Psaledakis, 2025), and even proposed visa restrictions for those majoring in strategic fields such as STEM. This view is based not only on intelligence data, but rather on Trump’s personal perception of China as the US’s main competitor in the global order. At the individual level, this subjective threat perception is important because it is this perception that influences foreign policy actions, not objective reality. Furthermore, Trump’s nationalist orientation and lack of empathy for international norms make him prone to making foreign policy decisions without considering the long-term diplomatic consequences. This explains why the foreign student visa policy was made without extensive consultation with the education sector or the state department, and without considering its impact on the United States’ international reputation. In the framework of foreign policy analysis, this is an example of how foreign policy can be the result of the internal processes of a powerful and centralized actor, rather than simply the result of structural or institutional pressures.

Additionally, visa policies during the Donald Trump administration significantly impacted international student enrollment in various study programs in the United States, including Islamic education programs. Since the enactment of the policy, widely known as the "Muslim Travel Ban," (Clapton, 2022) through Executive Order 13769 in 2017 (Organism For Poetic Research, 2025), students from several Muslim-majority countries, such as Iran, Yemen, Somalia, and Syria, face significant barriers to obtaining study permits in the US. These restrictions are not only administrative but also create a climate of uncertainty and fear for prospective Muslim students who previously viewed the United States as a center of modern Islamic learning and interfaith studies. Several US universities, previously top destinations for Muslim students, reported that enrollments from Muslim countries dropped by more than 20% in the first two years of the policy (Ranjbar, 2022), including Georgetown University with its Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding and Harvard Theological School. This is exacerbated by rising Islamophobia in American society, which also worsens the perception of safety and comfort for Muslim students (Abu Khalaf et al., 2023). Several surveys have shown an increase in cases of discrimination and hate speech targeting individuals with Muslim identities in public spaces and on campus during this period. This raises concerns for prospective students from Muslim countries, who ultimately choose alternative educational destinations such as Canada, Australia, and Western European countries that are more open to diversity (Nurdin & Baihaky, 2024). The significant decline in the number of Muslim students in the United States reflects not only the immediate impact of Trump-era visa policies, but also the long-term impact of the stigmatization of Islam and the exclusionary nature of American foreign policy toward the Muslim world. This situation has indirectly eroded the United States' reputation as an international educational destination, a long-held belief in freedom, pluralism, and openness to the global community.

The most pronounced impact has been on Islamic education and Middle Eastern studies programs, which for decades have served as crucial platforms for interfaith dialogue and cultural diplomacy between the Islamic world and the West. The decline in Muslim student enrollment has not only diminished academic diversity but also narrowed the space for the exchange of ideas that has long been at the heart of America's soft power in education. Scholars have noted that these restrictive visa policies have altered the global perception of America as open and tolerant of religious pluralism. Meanwhile, countries such as Malaysia, Turkey, and Indonesia have begun strategically positioning themselves as alternative study destinations for international Muslim students. Thus, the Trump-era visa restrictions have not only led to a decline in

enrollment in Islamic education programs at American universities but also signaled a shift in the geopolitics of global education, with the focus of Islamic studies shifting from the West to the more inclusive and open-minded Global South.

Trump's visa policy toward foreign students cannot be understood simply as part of structural dynamics or interstate conflicts, but also as a product of the character, ideology, and perceptions of individual leaders. Individual-level foreign policy theory opens the possibility of understanding that, in certain situations, leaders with specific psychological profiles can shape a major power's foreign policy in significant ways, even at odds with their country's diplomatic traditions. In this context, Donald Trump is an important case study of how populist, protectionist, and transactional leadership styles can radically change the face of a superpower's Education Diplomacy and international policy.

The Impact of Trump-Era Visa Policies on Changes in US Education Diplomacy

The visa policies of the Donald Trump era have had a significant impact on the direction and face of US education diplomacy. Trump adopted a nationalistic, protectionist approach across various aspects of foreign policy during his presidency, including higher education and academic immigration. One of the most controversial policies was the restriction of foreign student visas, especially through regulations such as Proclamation 10043 which denied visas to Chinese students in STEM fields on the grounds of national security, as well as the policy during the COVID-19 pandemic which required international students to leave the US if their universities only offered online courses. These policies not only impacted the mobility of foreign students to the US, but also marked a fundamental shift in the approach of US education diplomacy from inclusive and open to exclusive and closed.

The impact of this policy is reflected in the drastic decline in the number of international students. According to SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System) data, there was a 11.3% decline in the number of foreign students in the US between March 2024 and March 2025. This decline was greatest in doctoral programs and major sending countries such as India, China, and Iran. In fact, a report from Inside Higher Ed noted that more than 1,800 students had their F-1 and J-1 visas revoked in just a few months, with many receiving no adequate official explanation. Meanwhile, data from the Cato Institute showed that throughout 2024, the visa denial rate for international students reached a record high of 41%, an unprecedented figure in the history of the modern US education system (Sanjay Sharma, 2025). This policy has had

a direct impact on America's soft power. For more than a century, American higher education has been an effective tool of public diplomacy. Universities like Harvard, MIT, and Stanford are known not only for their academic excellence but also for their examples of democratic values, free speech, and meritocracy. Through programs such as the Fulbright Scholarship, EducationUSA, and other exchange programs, the United States has built a global alumni network devoted to American values and leadership models. However, as the flow of foreign students to the United States has been restricted and the American educational experience has been marred by visa uncertainty and anti-immigrant rhetoric, the effectiveness of Education Diplomacy as a tool of global influence has begun to decline.

In contrast, competing countries such as Canada, Australia, and China have capitalized on this momentum to strengthen their positions as alternative global education destinations. Canada recorded a 29% increase in international student enrollments by the end of 2023, surpassing one million, driven by inclusive immigration policies and fast-track permanent residency schemes for graduates. Australia similarly experienced a 27% growth, reaching nearly 787,000 international students, supported by post-study work visas and a regionalized higher education strategy. Meanwhile, China has expanded its education diplomacy through the Belt and Road Scholarship program, offering full scholarships and establishing overseas university branches to enhance educational cooperation and soft power influence in developing countries (Erudera News, 2024).

A comparison of international student mobility trends can be seen in the following table:

Table 1. A comparison of international student mobility trends

Country	Year	Number of International Students	Year-on-Year Growth	Main Policy
United States of America	2024–2025	-11,3%	Negatif	Visa denials up to 41%, F-1/J-1 revocation, Proclamation 10043 policy
Canada	2023	±1.04 juta	+29%	Post-study community relations pathway, EduCanada, immigrant-friendly visa
Australia	2023	±787.000	+27%	Post-study work visa, regional scholarships, ASEAN cooperation
China	2023–2024	±500.000+ (BRI target)	+18%	Belt and Road Scholarship, international campus, credit transfer

This has created a geopolitical shift in the global education sector. The United States, which has been the focal point of international education for decades, is now facing a loss of dominance. As other countries open up to international students and adopt inclusive, collaborative policies, the US has chosen the opposite path. The result is not only the economic downturn of the higher education sector (worth over \$44 billion annually), but also the potential loss of long-term cultural and diplomatic ties built through global alumni networks. Many media outlets have warned that Trump's visa policies have resulted in thousands of student visa interview delays at US embassies, worsening queues and increasing uncertainty (Abigail Williams & Deon J. Hampton, 2025).

Conceptually, Trump's policy directly contradicts the principles of education diplomacy, which, in soft power theory, aim to build closeness and influence through the exchange of educational values and experiences. Education diplomacy is not just the export of educational systems, but also an ideological and strategic investment in shaping future leaders from various partner countries. When the US restricts such access, what is at stake is not only economic income but also the loss of opportunities to build cultural and political ties with young generations in developing countries. In the long term, the biggest challenge for the US is not just the decline in the number of foreign students, but also the decline in global trust in America's openness and leadership in education. Countries such as Canada, Australia, and China are not only replacing the US quantitatively but also normatively, by building narratives that portray them as more inclusive, adaptive, and respectful of global diversity. This will further strengthen the multipolar shift in education diplomacy, where academic influence and prestige are no longer monopolized by a single superpower but are spread across regional networks competing to offer value, access, and opportunity.

Thus, the Trump-era visa policy has been a turning point in U.S. education diplomacy. Rather than strengthening global competitiveness and influence, it has accelerated the shift of educational power to other countries that are more open and responsive to the needs of international students. In the context of international relations, this is an important lesson that exclusionary domestic policies can have long-term consequences for a country's strategic position in an increasingly interconnected and competitive global order.

Conclusion

President Donald Trump's visa policies represent a critical shift in the trajectory of United States education diplomacy, with profound implications for its strategic standing within the geopolitics of global education. Grounded in individual-level foreign policy theory, Trump's protectionist orientation, shaped by threat perceptions and economic nationalist rhetoric, translated into restrictive visa regimes that significantly constrained international student mobility, particularly from Muslim-majority countries and Islamic education networks, as well as from strategic states such as China and Iran. These policies not only contributed to a marked decline in international student enrollment but also weakened the United States' education-based soft power, which has long relied on openness, academic exchange, and cross-cultural engagement to project democratic values and global leadership. From an education diplomacy perspective, the erosion of inclusivity and predictability in visa governance undermined the credibility of the US as a welcoming hub for global and Islamic education. Consequently, competing countries such as Canada, Australia, and China capitalized on this shift by advancing more inclusive visa frameworks and strategic scholarship initiatives, redirecting global student flows away from the United States. This study concludes that domestically driven visa policies can significantly reshape education diplomacy and global power dynamics, underscoring the need for US policy reforms that reaffirm inclusivity, international collaboration, and education as a long-term instrument of strategic diplomacy.

Limitation and Future Research

This study has several limitations that need to be considered. First, the approach used is qualitative descriptive and relies on secondary data, so the results of the analysis are greatly influenced by the availability and validity of information from public sources. Second, the scope of the study is limited to the Trump-era visa policy, without examining in depth the comparative policies between presidents (before and after Trump), even though the transition of government has the potential to affect the continuity of US education diplomacy. Third, although the analysis has covered the responses of competing countries such as Canada, Australia, and China, this study has not covered other regional dynamics such as Europe and Southeast Asia which also play important roles in the global education market. In addition, there has been no quantitative measurement of how much impact the policy has on international students' perceptions of the United States, which should provide a stronger empirical picture. Therefore, further researchers are advised to take a comparative approach across countries and government periods to gain a more comprehensive longitudinal understanding. Research can also be directed to explore international students'

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perceptions directly through survey methods or in-depth interviews, to capture the subjective dimensions of the impact of visa policies. Other relevant issues that will be developed in the future include post-pandemic digital education diplomacy strategies, the impact of technological competition on global scholarship, and the role of non-state actors such as universities and diasporas in shaping the direction of a country's education diplomacy.

Author Contribution Statement

Author contributions to this article: Arofah Minasari contributed as concept developer, drafters of the article and data analyst; Dewi Wardah Mazidatur Rohmah contributed as data collector and interpreter; Afrizal Fajri contributed as critically revising the article. All authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of this work.

Disclosure Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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