

13.1 Foreign Policy: Basics and International Actors



Image 13.1 Photos Left of President Biden with Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda and Right President Putin and President Trump

President Joe Biden and President Gitanas Nauseda of Lithuania (Credit: WhiteHouse.gov 2023)
President Donald Trump meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the G20 Summit, Friday, July 7, 2017, in Hamburg.
(Credit: AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

Learning Objectives

- Explain what foreign policy is and how it differs from domestic policy.
- Identify the objectives of U.S. foreign policy.
- Describe the different types of foreign policy.
- Identify the U.S. government's main challenges in the foreign policy realm.

Chart 13.1 Learning Objectives on Foreign Policy Objectives

The U.S. government interacts with many international actors, from other governments to private organizations, to fight global problems like terrorism and proliferation of nuclear weapons and to meet many other national foreign policy goals such as encouraging trade and protecting the safety and security of the American people. Sometimes these goals are conflicting. Perhaps because of these realities, the president is in many ways the leader of the foreign policy domain.

When the United States wishes to discuss important issues with other nations, the president (or a representative of the executive branch such as the secretary of state or defense) typically does the talking, as when President Joe Biden visited with Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda in 2023.

While the president is the country's foreign policy leader, Congress also has many foreign policy responsibilities, including approving treaties and agreements, allocating funding, making war, and confirming ambassadors. These and various other activities constitute the patchwork quilt that is U.S. foreign policy.

When we consider policy as our chapter focus, we are looking broadly at the actions the U.S. government carries out for purposes. In the case of foreign policy, that purpose is to manage its relationships with other nations of the world. Another distinction is that policy results from a course of action or a pattern of actions over time, rather than from a single action or decision. For example, U.S. foreign policy with Russia has been forged by several presidents, as well as by cabinet secretaries, House and Senate members, and foreign policy agency bureaucrats. Policy is also purposive, or intended to do something; that is, policymaking is not random. When the United States enters into an international agreement with other countries on aims such as free trade or nuclear disarmament, it does so for specific reasons. With that general definition of policy established, we shall now dig deeper into the specific domain of U.S. foreign policy.

Consider the Original

George Washington's Farewell Address

United States 19th September 1796

Friends, & Fellow-Citizens.

[page 25 of the address...] Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence, (I conjure you to believe me fellow citizens,) the jealousy of a free people ought to be *constantly* awake; since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of Republican Government. But that jealousy to be useful must be impartial; else it becomes the instrument of the very influence to be avoided, instead of a defence against it. Excessive partiality for one foreign nation and excessive dislike of another, cause those whom they actuate to see danger only on one side, and serve to veil and even second the arts of influence on the other. Real Patriots, who may resist the intrigues of the favourite, are liable to become suspected and odious; while its tools and dupes usurp the applause & confidence of the people, to surrender their interests.

The Great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign Nations is in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little *political* connection as possible.

Go: Washington

Originally published in David C. Claypoole's *American Daily Advertiser* on September 19, 1796, Washington devoted much of the address to domestic issues of the time, warning against the rise of political parties and sectionalism as a threat to national unity. In the area of foreign affairs, Washington called for America "to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world." at Library of Congress; <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mgw2&fileName=gwpage024.db&recNum=228> @

Chart 13.2 Excerpt for George Washington's Farewell Address 1796



Image 13.2 Davos Conference Photo of World Leaders

Domestic issues can sometimes become international ones when it comes to such topics as foreign trade. Here, President Donald Trump meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the World Economic Forum Conference Center on 25 January 2018 in Davos, Switzerland. (Credit: Official White House photo by Shealah Craighead from WhiteHouse.gov)

Foreign Policy Basics

What is **foreign policy**? We can think of it on several levels, as “the goals that a state’s officials seek to attain abroad, the values that give rise to those objectives, and the means or instruments used to pursue them.”^[1] This definition highlights some of the key topics in U.S. foreign policy, such as national goals abroad and the

manner in which the United States tries to achieve them. Note too that we distinguish foreign policy, which is externally focused, from domestic policy, which sets strategies internal to the United States, though the two types of policies can become quite intertwined. So, for example, one might talk about Latino politics as a domestic issue when considering educational policies designed to increase the number of Hispanic Americans who attend and graduate from a U.S. college or university.^[2]

However, as demonstrated in the primary debates leading up to the 2016 election, Latino politics can quickly become a foreign policy matter when considering topics such as immigration from and foreign trade with countries in Central America and South America.^[3] What are the objectives of U.S. foreign policy? While the goals of a nation’s foreign policy are always open to debate and revision, there are nonetheless four main goals to which we can attribute much of what the U.S. government does in the foreign policy realm: (1) the protection of the U.S. and its citizens, (2) the maintenance of access to key resources and markets, (3) the preservation of a balance of power in the world, and (4) the protection of human rights and democracy.

The first goal is the protection of the United States and the lives of its citizens, both while they are in the United States and when they travel abroad. Related to this security goal is the aim of protecting the country’s allies, or countries with which the United States is friendly and mutually supportive. In the international sphere, threats and dangers can take several forms, including military threats from other nations or terrorist groups and economic threats from boycotts and high tariffs on trade.

In an economic boycott, the United States ceases trade with another country unless or until it changes a policy to which the United States objects. Ceasing trade means U.S. goods cannot be sold in that country and its goods cannot be sold in the United States. For example, in recent years the United States and other countries implemented an economic boycott of Iran as it escalated the development of its nuclear energy program. The recent Iran nuclear deal is a pact in which Iran agrees to halt nuclear development while the United States and six other countries lift economic sanctions to again allow trade with Iran. Barriers to trade also include tariffs, or fees charged for moving goods from one country to another. Protectionist trade policies raise tariffs so that it becomes difficult for imported goods, now more expensive, to compete on price with domestic goods. Free trade agreements seek to reduce these trade barriers.

The second main goal of U.S. foreign policy is to ensure the nation maintains access to key resources and markets across the world. Resources include natural resources, such as oil, and economic resources, including the infusion of foreign capital investment for U.S. domestic infrastructure projects like buildings, bridges, and weapons systems. Of course, access to the international marketplace also means access to goods that American consumers might want, such as Swiss chocolate and Australian wine. U.S. foreign policy also seeks to advance the interests of U.S. business, to both sell domestic products in the international marketplace and support general economic development around the globe (especially in developing countries).

A third main goal is the preservation of a balance of power in the world. An ideal **balance of power** means no one nation or region is much more powerful militarily than are the countries of the rest of the world.

The achievement of a perfect balance of power is probably not possible; but, general stability or predictability in the operation of governments, strong institutions, and the absence of violence within and between nations may be possible. For much of U.S. history, leaders viewed world stability through the lens of Europe. If the European continent was stable, the world was largely stable. During the Cold War era that followed World War II, stability was achieved by the existence of dual superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, and by the real fear of the nuclear annihilation of which both were capable. Until approximately 1989–1990, advanced industrial democracies aligned themselves behind one of these two superpowers.



Image 13.3 President Obama and French President Hollande at Terrorist Attack Memorial

President Barack Obama, along with French president François Hollande and Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo, place roses on the makeshift memorial in front of the Bataclan concert hall, one of the sites targeted in the Paris terrorist attacks of November 13, 2015. (Credit: The White House; OpenStax included image)

Today, in the post–Cold War era, many parts of Europe are politically freer than they were during the years of the Soviet bloc, and there is less fear of nuclear war than when the United States and the Soviet Union had missiles pointed at each other for four straight decades. However, despite the mostly stabilizing presence of the European Union (EU), which now has twenty-eight member countries, several wars have been fought in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Moreover, the EU itself faces some challenges, including a vote in the United Kingdom to leave

the EU, the ongoing controversy about how to resolve the national debt of Greece, and the crisis in Europe created by thousands of refugees from the Middle East.

Carefully planned acts of terrorism in the United States, Asia, and Europe have introduced a new type of enemy into the balance of power equation—non-state or nongovernmental organizations, such as al-

Qaeda and ISIS (or ISIL), consisting of various terrorist cells located in many different countries and across all continents.

The fourth main goal of U.S. foreign policy is the protection of human rights and democracy. The payoff of stability that comes from other U.S. foreign policy goals is peace and tranquility. While certainly looking out for its own strategic interests in considering foreign policy strategy, the United States nonetheless attempts to support international peace through many aspects of its foreign policy, such as foreign aid, and through its support of and participation in international organizations such as the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Organization of American States.

The **United Nations (UN)** is one of many international organizations in the world today. The main institutional bodies of the UN are the General Assembly and the Security Council. The General Assembly includes all member nations and admits new members and approves the UN budget by a two-thirds majority.

The Security Council includes fifteen countries, five of which are permanent members (including the United States) and ten that are non-permanent and rotate on a five-year-term basis. The entire membership is bound by decisions of the Security Council, which makes all decisions related to international peace and security.

Two other important units of the UN are the International Court of Justice in The Hague (Netherlands) and the UN Secretariat, which includes the Secretary-General of the UN and the UN staff directors and employees.

THE CREATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

One of the unique and challenging aspects of global affairs is the fact that no world-level authority exists to mandate when and how the world's nations interact. After the failed attempt by President Woodrow Wilson and others to formalize a "League of Nations" in the wake of World War I in the 1920s, and on the heels of a worldwide depression that began in 1929, came World War II, history's deadliest military conflict.

Now, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, it is common to think of the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001 as the big game-changer. Yet while 9/11 was hugely significant in the United States and abroad, World War II was even more so. The December 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (Hawaii) was a comparable surprise-style attack that plunged the United States into war.

The scope of the conflict, fought in Europe and the Pacific Ocean, and Hitler's nearly successful attempt to take over Europe entirely, struck fear in minds and hearts. The war brought about a sea of change in international relations and governance, from the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe, to NATO that created a cross-national military shield for Western Europe, to the creation of the UN in 1945, when the representatives of fifty countries met and signed the Charter of the United Nations in San Francisco, California.



Image 13.4 Speaker Pelosi at Anniversary Event for UN

On June 26, 2015, House minority leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) joined UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, California governor Jerry Brown, and other dignitaries to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the adoption of the UN Charter in San Francisco.
(Credit: modification of work by "Nancy Pelosi" /Flickr)

Today, the United Nations, headquartered in New York City, includes 193 of the 195 nations of the world. It is a voluntary association to which member nations pay dues based on the size of their economy. The UN's main purposes are to maintain peace and security, promote human rights and social progress, and develop friendly relationships among nations.

An ongoing question for the United States in waging the war against terrorism is to what degree it should work in concert with the UN to carry out anti-terrorism initiatives around the world in a multilateral manner, rather than pursuing a "go it alone" strategy of unilateralism. The fact that the U.S. government has such a choice suggests the voluntary nature of the United States (or another country) accepting world-level governance in foreign policy. If the United States truly felt bound by UN opinion regarding the way it carries out its war on terrorism, it would approach the UN Security Council for approval.

Another cross-national organization to which the United States is tied, and that exists to forcefully represent Western allies and in turn forge the peace, is the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)**. NATO was formed after World War II as the Cold War between East and West started to emerge. While more militaristic in approach than the United Nations, NATO has the goal of protecting the interests of Europe and the West and the assurance of support and defense from partner nations.

However, while it is a strong military coalition, it has not sought to expand and take over other countries. Rather, the peace and stability of Europe are its main goals. NATO initially included only Western European nations and the United States. However, since the end of the Cold War, additional countries

from Eastern Europe, have entered the NATO alliance. The recent conflict between Russia and the Ukraine has renewed the importance of NATO to its members.

Besides participating in the UN and NATO, the United States also distributes hundreds of billions of dollars each year in foreign aid to improve the quality of life of citizens in developing countries. The United States may also forgive the foreign debts of these countries. Developing countries are not modernized in terms of infrastructure and social services and thus suffer from instability. Helping them modernize and develop stable governments is intended as a benefit to them and a prop to the stability of the world. An alternative view of U.S. assistance is that there are more nefarious goals at work, that perhaps it is intended to buy influence in developing countries, secure a position in the region, obtain access to resources, or foster dependence on the United States.

The United States pursues its four main foreign policy goals through several different foreign policy types, or distinct substantive areas of foreign policy in which the United States is engaged. These types are trade, diplomacy, sanctions, military/defense, intelligence, foreign aid, and global environmental policy.

Trade policy is the way the United States interacts with other countries to ease the flow of commerce and goods and services between countries. A country is said to be engaging in **protectionism** when it does not permit other countries to sell goods and services within its borders, or when it charges them very high tariffs (or import taxes) to do so. At the other end of the spectrum is a **free trade** approach, in which a country allows the unfettered flow of goods and services between itself and other countries. At times the United States has been free trade-oriented, while at other times it has been protectionist. Perhaps its most free trade-oriented move was the 1991 implementation of the **North American Free Trade Agreement** (NAFTA). This pact removed trade barriers and other transaction costs levied on goods moving between the United States, Mexico, and Canada.

Critics see a free trade approach as problematic and instead advocate for protectionist policies that shield U.S. companies and their products against cheaper foreign products that might be imported here. One of the more prominent recent examples of protectionist policies occurred in the steel industry, as U.S. companies in the international steel marketplace struggled with competition from Chinese factories.

The **balance of trade** is the relationship between a country's inflow and outflow of goods. The United States sells many goods and services around the world, but overall it maintains a trade deficit, in which more goods and services are coming in from other countries than are going out to be sold overseas. The current U.S. trade deficit is \$37.4 billion, which means the value of what the United States imports from other countries is much larger than the value of what it exports to other countries.^[4] This trade deficit has led some to advocate for protectionist trade policies.

For many, foreign policy is synonymous with diplomacy. **Diplomacy** is the establishment and maintenance of a formal relationship between countries that governs their interactions on matters as diverse as tourism, the taxation of goods they trade, and the landing of planes on each other's runways. While diplomatic relations are not always rosy, when they are operating it does suggest that things are

going well between the countries. Diplomatic relations are formalized through the sharing of ambassadors.

Ambassadors are country representatives who live and maintain an office (known as an embassy) in the other country. Just as exchanging ambassadors formalizes the bilateral relationship between countries, calling them home signifies the end of the relationship. Diplomacy tends to be the U.S. government's first step when it tries to resolve a conflict with another country.

To illustrate how international relations play out when countries come into conflict, consider what has become known as the Hainan Island incident. In 2001, a U.S. spy plane collided with a Chinese jet fighter near Chinese airspace, where U.S. planes were not authorized to be. The Chinese jet fighter crashed, and the pilot died. The U.S. plane made an emergency landing on the island of Hainan. China retrieved the aircraft and captured the U.S. pilots. U.S. ambassadors then attempted to negotiate for their return. These negotiations were slow and ended up involving officials of the president's cabinet, but they ultimately worked. Had they not succeeded, an escalating set of options likely would have included diplomatic sanctions (removal of ambassadors), economic sanctions (such as an embargo on trade and the flow of money between the countries), minor military options (such as establishment of a no-fly zone just outside Chinese airspace), or more significant military options (such as a focused campaign to enter China and get the pilots back). Nonmilitary tools to influence another country, like economic sanctions, are referred to as **soft power**, while the use of military power is termed **hard power**.^[5]

At the more serious end of the foreign policy decision-making spectrum and usually as a last resort when diplomacy fails, the U.S. military and defense establishment exists to provide the United States the ability to wage war against other state and non-state actors.

Such war can be offensive, as were the Iraq War in 2003 and the 1989 removal of Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega. Or it can be defensive, to respond to aggression from others, such as the Persian Gulf War in 1991, also known as Operation Desert Storm. The potential for military engagement, and indeed the scattering about the globe of hundreds of U.S. military installations, can also be a potential source of foreign policy strength for the United States. On the other hand, in the world of diplomacy, such an approach can be seen as imperialistic by other world nations.

Intelligence policy is related to defense and includes the overt and covert gathering of information from foreign sources that might be of strategic interest to the United States. The intelligence world, perhaps more than any other area of foreign policy, captures the imagination of the general public. Many books, television shows, and movies entertain us (with varying degrees of accuracy) through stories about U.S. intelligence operations and people.

Foreign aid and global environmental policy are the final two foreign policy types. With both, as with the other types, the United States operates as a strategic actor with its own interests in mind, but here it also acts as an international steward trying to serve the common good. With foreign aid, the United States provides material and economic aid to other countries, especially developing countries, in order to improve their stability and their citizens' quality of life. This type of aid is sometimes called humanitarian

aid; in 2013 the U.S. contribution totaled \$32 billion. Military aid is classified under military/defense or national security policy (and totaled \$8 billion in 2013). At \$40 billion the total U.S. foreign aid budget for 2013 was sizeable, though it represented less than 1 percent of the entire federal budget.^[6]

Global environmental policy addresses world-level environmental matters such as climate change and global warming, the thinning of the ozone layer, rainforest depletion in areas along the Equator, and ocean pollution and species extinction. The United States' commitment to such issues has varied considerably over the years. For example, the United States was the largest country not to sign the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse gas emissions. However, few would argue that the U.S. government has not been a leader on global environmental matters.

Unique Challenges in Foreign Policy

U.S. foreign policy is a massive and complex enterprise. What are its unique challenges for the country?

First, there exists no true world-level authority dictating how the nations of the world should relate to one another. If one nation negotiates in bad faith or lies to another, there is no central world-level government authority to sanction that country. This makes diplomacy and international coordination an ongoing bargain as issues evolve and governmental leaders and nations change. Foreign relations are certainly made smoother by the existence of cross-national voluntary associations like the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the African Union. However, these associations do not have strict enforcement authority over specific nations, unless a group of member nations takes action in some manner (which is ultimately voluntary). The **European Union** is the single supranational entity (transnational government) with some real and significant authority over its member nations. Adoption of its common currency, the euro, brings with it sovereignty concessions from countries on a variety of matters, and the EU's economic and environmental regulations are the strictest in the world. Yet even the EU has enforcement issues, as evidenced by the battle within its ranks to force member Greece to reduce its national debt or the recurring problem of Spain overfishing in the North Atlantic Ocean.

International relations take place in a relatively open venue in which it is seldom clear how to achieve collective action among countries generally or between the United States and specific other nations.

When does it make sense to sign a multinational pact and when doesn't it? Is a bilateral economic agreement truly as beneficial to the United States as to the other party, or are we giving away too much in the deal? These are open and complicated questions. A second challenge for the United States is the widely differing views among countries about the role of government in people's lives. The government of hardline communist North Korea regulates everything in its people's lives every day. At the other end of the spectrum are countries with little government activity at all, such as parts of the island of New Guinea. In between is a vast array of diverse approaches to governance. Countries like Sweden provide cradle-to-grave human services programs like health care and education that in some parts of India are minimal at best. In Egypt, the nonprofit sector provides many services rather than the government. The United States relishes its tradition of freedom and the principle of limited government, but practice and reality can be somewhat different.

In the end, it falls somewhere in the middle of this continuum because of its focus on law and order, educational and training services, and old-age pensions and health care in the form of Social Security and Medicare. The challenge of pinpointing the appropriate role of government may sound more like a domestic than a foreign policy matter, and to some degree it is an internal choice about the way government interacts with the people. Yet the internal (or domestic) relationship between a government and its people can often become intertwined with foreign policy. For example, the narrow stance on personal liberty that Iran has taken in recent decades led other countries to impose economic sanctions that crippled the country internally. Some of these sanctions have eased considering the new nuclear deal with Iran. So the domestic and foreign policy realms are intertwined in terms of what we view as national priorities—whether they consist of nation building abroad or infrastructure building here at home, for example. This latter choice is often described as the “guns versus butter” debate.



Image 13.5 President Obama and Administration Officials Watch Raid on bin Laden Compound

President Barack Obama (second from left) with Vice President Joe Biden (far left), Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (second from right), Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (far right), and other national security advisers in the Situation Room of the White House, watching the successful raid on Osama bin Laden's compound on May 1, 2011. (Credit: The White House; OpenStax included image)

A third and related, unique challenge for the United States in the foreign policy realm is other countries' varying ideas about the appropriate form of government.

These forms range from democracies on one side to various authoritarian (or nondemocratic) forms of government on the other. Relations between the United States and democratic states tend to operate more smoothly, proceeding from the shared core

assumption that government's authority comes from the people. Monarchies and other nondemocratic forms of government do not share this assumption, which can complicate foreign policy discussions immensely. People in the United States often assume that people who live in a nondemocratic country would prefer to live in a democratic one. However, in some regions of the world, such as the Middle East, this does not seem to be the case—people often prefer having stability within a nondemocratic system over changing to a less predictable democratic form of government.

Or they may believe in a theocratic form of government. And the United States does have formal relations with some more totalitarian and monarchical governments, such as Saudi Arabia, when it is in U.S. interests to do so. A fourth challenge is that many new foreign policy issues transcend borders. That is, there are no longer simply friendly states and enemy states. Problems around the world that might affect the United States, such as terrorism, the international slave trade, and climate change, originate with groups and issues that are not country specific. They are transnational.

So, for example, while we can readily name the enemies of the Allied forces in World War II (Germany, Italy, and Japan), the U.S. war against terrorism has been aimed at terrorist groups that do not fit neatly within the borders of any one country with which the United States could quickly interact to solve the

problem. Intelligence-gathering and focused military intervention are needed more than traditional diplomatic relations, and relations can become complicated when the United States wants to pursue terrorists within other countries' borders. An ongoing example is the use of U.S. drone strikes on terrorist targets within the nation of Pakistan, in addition to the 2011 campaign that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden, the founder of al-Qaeda.

The fifth and final unique challenge is the varying conditions of the countries in the world and their effect on what is possible in terms of foreign policy and diplomatic relations. Relations between the United States and a stable industrial democracy are going to be easier than between the United States and an unstable developing country being run by a military junta (a group that has taken control of the government by force). Moreover, an unstable country will be more focused on establishing internal stability than on broader world concerns like environmental policy. In fact, developing countries are temporarily exempt from the requirements of certain treaties while they seek to develop stable industrial and governmental frameworks.



The [Council on Foreign Relations](#) is one of the nation's oldest organizations that exist to promote thoughtful discussion on U.S. foreign policy.

FOREIGN POLICY: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How are foreign and domestic policy-making different?

[Show Answer](#)

foreign involves the US relationship with other countries; domestic is internal policy

2. What is the main foreign policy goal of the United States?

[Show Answer](#)

safety and security of the American people

3. What tools may the president use for conducting foreign policy and achieving foreign policy objectives?

[Show Answer](#)

diplomacy, military, humanitarian aid, etc.

4. What is the general purpose of the UN?

[Show Answer](#)

international security and cooperation

TERMS TO REMEMBER

balance of power—a situation in which no one nation or region is much more powerful militarily than any other in the world

balance of trade–the relationship between a country’s inflow and outflow of goods

Cold War–the period from shortly after World War II until approximately 1989–1990 when advanced industrial democracies divided behind the two superpowers (East: Soviet Union, West: United States) and the fear of nuclear war abounded

diplomacy–the establishment and maintenance of a formal relationship between countries

foreign policy–a government’s goals in dealing with other countries or regions and the strategy used to achieve them

free trade–a policy in which a country allows the unfettered flow of goods and services between itself and other countries

hard power–the use or threat of military power to influence the behavior of another country

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)–a cross-national military organization with bases in Belgium and Germany formed to maintain stability in Europe

protectionism–a policy in which a country does not permit other countries to sell goods and services within its borders or charges them very high tariffs (import taxes) to do so

soft power–nonmilitary tools used to influence another country, such as economic sanctions

United Nations (UN)–an international organization of nation-states that seeks to promote peace, international relations, and economic and environmental programs

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13.2 Foreign Policy: Approaches



Image 13.6 U.S. Soldiers at Fort Bliss Training

Use of the United States military is only one of many methods of approaching and achieving various policy objectives. U.S. Soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), participate in a simulated force-on-force training exercise during the Network Integration Evaluation (NIE) 17.2 at Fort Bliss, Texas, July 15th, 2017. (Credit: U.S. Army photo at <https://www.army.mil/>)

Learning Objectives

- Explain classic schools of thought on U.S. foreign policy.
- Describe contemporary schools of thought on U.S. foreign policy.
- Delineate the U.S. foreign policy approach with Russia and China.

Chart 13.3 Learning Objectives on Foreign Policy and Schools of Thought

Frameworks and theories help us make sense of the environment of governance in a complex area like foreign policy. A variety of schools of thought exist about how to approach foreign policy, each with different ideas about what “should” be done. These approaches also vary in terms of what they assume about human nature, how many other countries ought to be involved in U.S. foreign policy, and what the tenor of foreign policymaking ought to be. They help us situate the current U.S. approach to many foreign policy challenges around the world.

Classic Approaches

A variety of traditional concepts of foreign policy remain helpful today as we consider the proper role of the United States in, and its approach to, foreign affairs. These include isolationism, the idealism versus

realism debate, liberal internationalism, hard versus soft power, and the grand strategy of U.S. foreign policy.

Foreign Policy	Description of Policy Position
isolationism	country stays out of foreign entanglements; keeps to itself; non-involvement
containment	country tries to limit spread of opposing ideological viewpoint or military expansion
preemption	country uses threat of or actual use of force to promote policy goals
retaliatory	country counters measures taken by another country; economic, political, military
selective engagement	country maintains military presence; engagement through alliances & installations
intervention	country intervenes for humanitarian reasons; economic aid, health resources, etc.
interdependence	country ties itself to other countries through political, economic & defense policies

Chart 13.4 Chart on Foreign Policy Positions

From the end of the Revolutionary War in the late eighteenth century until the early twentieth century, **isolationism**—whereby a country stays out of foreign entanglements and keeps to itself—was a popular stance in U.S. foreign policy. Among the founders, Thomas Jefferson especially was an advocate of isolationism or non-involvement. He thought that by keeping to itself, the United States stood a better chance of becoming a truly free nation. This fact is full of irony, because Jefferson later served as ambassador to France and president of the United States, both roles that required at least some attention to foreign policy. Still, Jefferson’s ideas had broad support. After all, Europe was where volatile changes were occurring. The new nation was tired of war, and there was no reason for it to be entangled militarily with anyone. Indeed, in his farewell address, President George Washington famously warned against the creation of “entangling alliances.”¹¹

Despite this legacy, the United States was pulled squarely into world affairs with its entry into World War I. But between the Armistice in 1918 that ended that war and U.S. entry into World War II in 1941, isolationist sentiment returned, based on the idea that Europe should learn to govern its own affairs.

Then, after World War II, the United States engaged the world stage as one of two superpowers and the military leader of Europe and the Pacific. Isolationism never completely went away, but now it operated in the background. Again, Europe seemed to be the center of the problem, while political life in the United States seemed calmer somehow.

The end of the Cold War opened up old wounds as a variety of smaller European countries sought independence and old ethnic conflicts reappeared. Some in the United States felt the country should again be isolationist as the world settled into a new political arrangement, including a vocal senator, Jesse

Helms (R-NC), who was against the United States continuing to be the military “policeman” of the world. Helms was famous for opposing nearly all treaties brought to the Senate during his tenure. Congressman Ron Paul (R-TX) and his son Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) were both isolationist candidates for the presidency (in 2008 and 2016, respectively); both thought the United States should retreat from foreign entanglements, spend far less on military and foreign policy, and focus more on domestic issues.

At the other end of the spectrum is liberal internationalism. Liberal internationalism advocates a foreign policy approach in which the United States becomes proactively engaged in world affairs. Its adherents assume that liberal democracies must take the lead in creating a peaceful world by cooperating as a community of nations and creating effective world structures such as the United Nations. To fully understand liberal internationalism, it is helpful to understand the idealist versus realist debate in international relations. Idealists assume the best in others and see it as possible for countries to run the world together, with open diplomacy, freedom of the seas, free trade, and no military. Everyone will take care of each other. There is an element of idealism in liberal internationalism, because the United States assumes other countries will also put their best foot forward. A classic example of a liberal internationalist is President Woodrow Wilson, who sought a League of Nations to voluntarily save the world after World War I.



Image 13.7 President Nixon's Historic Visit to China

President Nixon and First Lady Patricia Nixon visited the Great Wall on their 1972 trip to China. The Chinese showed them the sights and hosted a banquet for them in the Great Hall of the People. Nixon was the first U.S. president to visit China following the Communist victory in the civil war in 1949. (Credit: National Archives and Records Administration)

Realists assume that others will act in their own self-interest and hence cannot necessarily be trusted. They want a healthy military and contracts between countries in case others want to wiggle out of their commitments. Realism also has a place in liberal internationalism, because the United States approaches foreign relationships with open eyes and an emphasis on self-preservation.

Soft power, or diplomacy, with which the United States often begins a foreign policy relationship or entanglement, is in line with liberal internationalism and idealism, while hard power, which allows the potential for military force, is the stuff of realism. For example, at first the United States was rather isolationist in its approach to China, assuming it was a developing country of little impact that could safely be ignored. Then President Nixon opened China as an area for U.S. investment, and an era of open diplomatic relations began in the early 1970s.

As China modernized and began to dominate the trade relationship with the United States, many

came to see it through a realist lens and to consider whether China's behavior really warranted its beneficial most-favored-nation trading status.

The final classic idea of foreign policy is the so-called grand strategy—employing all available diplomatic, economic, and military resources to advance the national interest. The grand strategy invokes the possibility of hard power, because it relies on developing clear strategic directions for U.S. foreign policy and the methods to achieve those goals, often with military capability attached. The U.S. foreign policy plan in Europe and Asia after World War II reflects a grand strategy approach. In order to stabilize the world, the United States built military bases in Italy, Germany, Spain, England, Belgium, Japan, Guam, and Korea. It still operates nearly all these, though often under a multinational arrangement such as NATO. These bases help preserve stability on the one hand, and U.S. influence on the other.

More Recent Schools of Thoughts

Two events in foreign policy caused many to change their views about the proper approach to U.S. involvement in world affairs. First, the debacle of U.S. involvement in the civil war in Vietnam in the years leading up to 1973 caused many to rethink the country's traditional **containment** approach to the Cold War. Containment was the U.S. foreign policy goal of limiting the spread of communism. In Vietnam the United States supported one governing faction within the country (democratic South Vietnam), whereas the Soviet Union supported the opposing governing faction (communist North Vietnam). The U.S. military approach of battlefield engagement did not translate well to the jungles of Vietnam, where "guerrilla warfare" predominated.

Skeptics became particularly pessimistic about liberal internationalism given how poorly the conflict in Vietnam had played out. U.S. military forces withdrew from South Vietnam in 1973, and Saigon, its capital, fell to North Vietnam and the communists eighteen months later. Many of those pessimists then became neoconservatives on foreign policy.

Neoconservatives believe that rather than exercising restraint and always using international organizations as the path to international outcomes, the United States should aggressively use its might to promote its values and ideals around the world. The aggressive use (or threat) of hard power is the core value of neo-conservatism. Acting unilaterally is acceptable in this view, as is adopting a preemptive strategy in which the United States intervenes militarily before the enemy can make its move.

Preemption is a new idea; the United States has tended to be **retaliatory** in its use of military force, as in the case of Pearl Harbor at the start of World War II. Examples of neo-conservatism in action are the 1980s U.S. campaigns in Central American countries to turn back communism under President Ronald Reagan, the Iraq War of 2003 led by



Heading to a going-away party for departing defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld in December 2006, former president George

Image 13.8 President Bush and Administration Officials

twenty-first century foreign policy neoconservative. Rumsfeld is on the right. (Credit: OpenStax; modification of work by photographer D. Myles Cullen)

President George W. Bush and his vice president Dick Cheney, and the current use of drones as counter-terrorism weapons during the Obama administration.

Neo-isolationism, like earlier isolationism, advocates keeping free of foreign entanglements. Yet no advanced industrial democracy completely separates itself from the rest of the world. Foreign markets beckon, tourism helps spur economic development at home and abroad, and global environmental challenges require cross-national conversation. In the twenty-first century, neo-isolationism means distancing the United States from the United Nations and other international organizations that get in the way. The strategy of **selective engagement**—retaining a strong military presence and remaining engaged across the world through alliances and formal installations—is used to protect the national security interests of the United States. However, this strategy also seeks to avoid being the world’s policeman.

The second factor that changed minds about twenty-first century foreign policy is the rise of elusive new enemies who defy traditional designations. Rather than countries, these enemies are terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS (or ISIL) that spread across national boundaries. A hybrid approach to U.S. foreign policy that uses multiple schools of thought as circumstances warrant may thus be the wave of the future. President Obama has often taken a hybrid approach. In some respects, he has been a liberal internationalist seeking to put together broad coalitions to carry out world business. At the same time, his sending teams of troops and drones to take out terrorist targets in other legitimate nation-states without those states’ approval fits with a neoconservative approach. Finally, President Obama’s desire to not be the “world’s policeman” makes it appear as if he has followed selective engagement.



Several interest groups debate what should happen in U.S. foreign policy, many of which are included in this [list](#) compiled by the Council on Foreign Relations.

U.S. Foreign Policy in the Cold War and with China

The foreign policy environment from the end of World War II until the end of the Cold War in 1990 was dominated by a duel of superpowers between the United States and its Western allies on the one hand and the Soviet Union and the communist bloc of countries in the East on the other. Both superpowers developed thousands of weapons of mass destruction and readied for a potential world war to be fought with nuclear weapons. That period was certainly challenging and ominous at times, but it was simpler than the present era. Nations knew what team they were on, and there was generally an incentive to not go to war because it would lead to the unthinkable—the end of the Earth as we know it, or mutually assured destruction. The result of this logic, essentially a standoff between the two powers, is sometime referred to as nuclear deterrence. When the Soviet Union imploded and the Cold War ended, it was in many ways a victory for the West and for democracy. However, once the bilateral nature of the Cold War was gone, dozens of countries sought independence and old ethnic conflicts emerged in several regions of the world, including Eastern Europe. This new era holds great promise, but it is in many ways more complex than the Cold War. The rise of cross-national terrorist organizations further complicates the equation because the enemy hides within the borders of potentially dozens of countries around the globe. In summary, the United States pursues a variety of topics and goals in different areas of the world in the

twenty-first century. The Soviet Union dissolved into many component parts after the Cold War, including Russia, various former Soviet republics like Georgia and Ukraine, and smaller nation-states in Eastern Europe, such as the Czech Republic. The general approach of the United States has been to encourage the adoption of democracy and economic reforms in these former Eastern bloc countries. Many of them now align with the EU and even with the West's cross-national military organization, NATO. With freedoms can come conflict, and there has been much of that in these fledgling countries as opposition coalitions debate how the future course should be charted, and by whom. Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia is again trying to strengthen its power on the country's western border, testing expansionism while invoking Russian nationalism. The United States is adopting a defensive position and trying to prevent the spread of Russian influence. The EU and NATO factor in here from the standpoint of an internationalist approach.

In many ways the more visible future threat to the United States is China, the potential rival superpower of the future. A communist state that has also encouraged much economic development, China has been growing and modernizing for more than thirty years. Its nearly 1.4 billion citizens are stepping onto the world economic stage with other advanced industrial nations. In addition to fueling an explosion of industrial domestic development, public and private Chinese investors have spread their resources to every continent and most countries of the world. Indeed, Chinese investors lend money to the United States government on a regular basis, as U.S. domestic borrowing capacity is pushed to the limit in most years.

Many in the United States are worried by the lack of freedom and human rights in China. During the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing on June 4, 1989, thousands of pro-democracy protesters were arrested, and many were killed as Chinese authorities fired into the crowd and tanks crushed people who attempted to wall them out. Over one thousand more dissidents were arrested in the following weeks as the Chinese government investigated the planning of the protests in the square. The United States instituted minor sanctions for a time, but President George H. W. Bush chose not to remove the most-favored-nation trading status of this long-time economic partner. Most in the U.S. government, including leaders in both political parties, wish to engage China as an economic partner while they keep a watchful eye on its increasing influence around the world, especially in developing countries. Elsewhere in Asia, the United States has good relationships with most other countries, especially South Korea and Japan, which have both followed paths the United States favored after World War II. Both countries embraced democracy, market-oriented economies, and the hosting of U.S. military bases to stabilize the region. North Korea, however, is another matter. A closed, communist, totalitarian regime, North Korea has been testing nuclear bombs in recent decades, to the concern of the rest of the world. Like China many decades earlier, India is a developing country with a large population that is expanding and modernizing. Unlike China, India has embraced democracy, especially at the local level.



You can plot U.S. government attention to different types of policy matters (including international affairs and foreign aid and its several dozen more focused subtopics) by using the online [trend analysis tool](#) at the Comparative Agendas Project.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In your view, what are the best ways to get the community of nations working together?

[Show Answer](#)

personal opinion

2. What are the three most important foreign policy issues facing the United States today? Why?

[Show Answer](#)

open for debate

3. If you were president and wanted to gather support for a new foreign policy initiative, which three U.S. foreign policy actors would you approach and why?

[Show Answer](#)

personal opinion

TERMS TO REMEMBER

containment—the effort by the United States and Western European allies, begun during the Cold War, to prevent the spread of communism

isolationism—a foreign policy approach that advocates a nation's staying out of foreign entanglements and keeping to itself

internationalism—a foreign policy approach of becoming proactively engaged in world affairs by cooperating in a community of nations

neo-isolationism—a policy of distancing the United States from the United Nations and other international organizations, while still participating in the world economy

selective engagement—a policy of retaining a strong military presence and remaining engaged across the world

1. "George Washington's Farewell Address." 1796. New Haven, CT: School Avalon Project, Yale Law Library. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp (May 12, 2016). [↗](#)

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