U.S. Foreign Policy

Inquire: Foreign Policy Goals in the 21st Century

Overview

Foreign policy: 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.*

For much of world history, the goal of the most powerful countries was expansion. From the Assyrians and the Romans to the Mongols and the British Empire, it appears that everybody wanted to rule the world. In the 20th century, as America became the leading superpower, territorial expansion was not America’s goal — at least not overt physical dominion over other countries.

So, what are America’s goals in the 21st century? What values drive those goals? And, what instruments does the U.S. use to achieve those goals?

Big Question: How have the United States’ foreign policy goals changed in the last 50 years?


Watch: A Man Who Aims at Nothing Usually Hits It

If you do not know where you are going, you will probably never get there — or, even if you do, how would you know? This is true in domestic and foreign relations, and the United States has four primary foreign policy goals.

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 are 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. 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.

The second goal is to ensure the nation maintains access to key resources and markets across the world. Resources include: 1) natural resources such as oil, water, and minerals, and 2) economic resources, such as 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.
The third goal is the preservation of a balance of power in the world. A balance of power means no one nation or region is so powerful that it can dominate 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 may be.

The fourth goal of U.S. foreign policy is the protection of human rights and democracy. While certainly looking out for its own strategic interests in considering foreign policy strategy, the United States still feels a responsibility to the people of the world and will insert itself economically or in other ways to protect human rights and promote democracy.

The United States pursues these four main foreign policy goals through several distinct substantive areas of foreign policy: diplomacy, sanctions, military/defense, intelligence, foreign aid, and global environmental policy. Which of these will be most effective depends on the circumstances of various events.

With respect to foreign relations, the United States is an important player, and the decisions made impact people world-wide. It is vital to have some idea of where the United States is going. If the country aims at nothing, it will probably hit it!

Read: A Superpower in a New World

The United States is the most powerful country in the world and has been for almost 100 years. In this ever-changing world, foreign policy is a massive and complex enterprise. So, what are the specific challenges for U.S. foreign policy as the country balances what it can do with what it should do?

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 bargaining effort 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, the European Union (EU), 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 EU is the single supranational entity with some real and significant authority over its member nations. Adoption of a common currency, the euro, brings with it 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 country 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 in particular. When does it make sense to sign a multinational pact and when doesn’t it? Is a particular 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. The various schools of thought discussed later in the lesson will help us answer them.

Second, the widely differing views among countries about the role of government in people’s lives is a challenge for the United States. 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.

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, Iran’s narrow stance on personal liberty in recent decades led other countries to impose economic sanctions that crippled the country internally. Some of these sanctions eased in light of a nuclear deal with Iran signed in 2015. 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. This choice is often described as the “guns vs. butter” debate.

A third, and related, challenge for the United States is other countries’ varying ideas about the appropriate form of government. These forms range from democracies on one side to various authoritarian (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 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, people often prefer having stability within a nondemocratic system over a less predictable democratic form of government. Or, they may believe in a theocratic form of government. 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. 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, 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. Intelligence-gathering and focused military intervention are needed more than traditional diplomatic relations, and those relations can become complicated when the United States wants to pursue terrorists within other countries’ borders. Examples include the use of U.S. drone strikes on terrorist targets within the nation of Pakistan and the 2011 campaign that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden, the founder of al-Qaeda.

The fifth and final challenge for U.S. foreign policy is that countries in the world have varying political, economic, and environmental conditions. These conditions have an effect on what is possible in terms of foreign policy and diplomatic relations. Relations between the United States and a stable industrial democracy are generally easier than relations between the United States and an unstable, developing country run by a military junta. 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.
Reflect: Does Power Equal Responsibility?

Poll
Do you agree with Uncle Ben from the Spider-Man movie? Does great power equate to great responsibility? If we can do something, is it incumbent upon the U.S. to act?
- Yes, with great power comes great responsibility.
- No, just because we can help does not mean we have to help. We should only take care of the United States.

Expand: With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility

Overview
George Washington's Farewell Address in 1789 contained advice to the country regarding relations with other nations: "avoid entangling alliances." Those words shaped United States foreign policy for more than a century.

Today, some Americans think that Washington's words are still wise and that the United States should withdraw from world affairs whenever possible. However, World Wars I and II proved isolation was impossible.

New Challenges, New Enemies?
If isolationism has become outdated, what kind of foreign policy does the United States follow? The policy of containment was key during the Cold War. It kept communism from spreading, but with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, containment no longer made sense.

New enemies and dangers have arisen since 1991 — most of them coming from mercurial, difficult to locate terrorists, forcing the United States again to redefine its foreign policy.

In this age of ever-shrinking distances and falling barriers, what are the United States’ responsibilities, if any, to the rest of the world? Is America “the policeman of the world?” The answers are not easy.

Foreign Policy Goals
The U.S. State Department’s job is to define and direct foreign policy. Foreign policy goals include the following:

(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;
(4) the protection of human rights and democracy.

Examining these goals closely reveals that they are based on cooperation with other nations, although "preserving the national security of the United States" implies possible competition and conflict.
Who Makes Foreign Policy?

As with all policy making, many people and organizations have a hand in setting United States foreign policy. The main objective of foreign policy is to use diplomacy — or talking, meeting, and making agreements — to solve international problems. Diplomats try to keep problems from developing into conflicts that require military settlements.

President and Executive Offices

The president almost always has the primary responsibility of shaping foreign policy. Presidents, or their representatives, meet with leaders of other nations to try to resolve international problems peacefully. According to the Constitution, presidents sign treaties with other nations with the "advice and consent" of the Senate. So, the Senate, and to a lesser extent, the House of Representatives, also participate in shaping foreign policy.

The secretary of state and many other officials of the State Department play major roles in setting foreign policy. He or she is usually the president's principal foreign policy adviser and the chief coordinator of all governmental actions that affect relations with other countries.

The Foreign Service consists of ambassadors and other official representatives to more than 160 countries. Ambassadors and their staffs set up embassies in countries recognized by the United States and serve as an American presence abroad. Embassies are part of the State Department, and they protect Americans overseas and are in part responsible for harmonious relationships with other countries.

The National Security Council, as part of the Executive Office of the President, helps the president deal with foreign, military, and economic policies that affect national security. It consists of the president, the vice president, the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, and others that the president designates. The national security advisor — who coordinates the Council — sometimes has as much influence as the secretary of state, depending on his or her relationship with the president.

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is an independent agency responsible for providing national security intelligence to senior U.S. policymakers. Although the CIA is best known for clandestine services and covert actions, much of its work is public and routine. The CIA director is appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate.

Conclusion

United States foreign policy has changed dramatically from George Washington's day. Although Americans mostly adhere to the advice of their revered founder, America is now the country that can make a difference and help — more than any other country in history.

Based on America’s ability to help and intervene, should it? Do you believe that “with great power comes great responsibility?”
Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Foreign Policy: Crash Course Government and Politics #50
  ● A video discussing the least and most important aspect of government: foreign policy
  ● https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMhlQNKoO_Y0

U.S. Foreign Policy
  ● A video introducing students to U.S. foreign policy
  ● https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ix9Y9FV4gTk

Trump’s Foreign Policy: A Look Back At Year One
  ● A video discussing President Donald Trump’s foreign policy in his first year in office
  ● https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WN4QKfVfUaM

Lesson Glossary

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

**theocratic**: a form of government in which a deity is the source from which all authority derives

**junta**: a form of government wherein a military force exerts complete or substantial control over political authority

**isolationism**: a category of foreign policies institutionalized by leaders who assert that their nations' best interests are best served by keeping the affairs of other countries at a distance

**containment**: a geopolitical strategy to stop the expansion of an enemy

Check Your Knowledge

1. One of the main goals for U.S. foreign policy is to be able to establish alliances in case of future terrorism or wars.
   A. True
   B. False

2. There is not a true world-level authority dictating how the nations of the world should relate to one another.
   A. True
   B. False

3. In general, the United States will have an easier time creating relations with stable industrial democracy countries than unstable developing countries being ran by military junta.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:
Citations

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