U.S. Foreign and Defense Policies

Inquire: How is the Foreign Policy of the United States Developed?

Overview

Foreign policy comes in a variety of settings. There are broadly focused strategies, as well as sharply focused, short-term strategies that become a priority due to specific events. For example, Russia invades Belarus to support their friends in a contested election, and suddenly we have an incident. This incident requires a specific, sharply focused foreign policy. What are the goals of this policy, and what actions need to be taken?

While foreign policy is the president’s responsibility, Congress plays a part. It controls the purse strings. Only Congress can declare war and any treaties require the approval of the Senate.

So, how does this all work, and what tools can the president use to accomplish these goals?

Big Question: Who makes the defense policy of the United States?

Watch: The Pathway to Policy Decision Making

Foreign policy is about a country’s role within the larger international community. Domestic policy refers to the decisions made within a country’s own borders. Together, they are a large part of any president’s agenda. Whether it is a foreign policy or a domestic policy issue, all public policy is a goal-oriented course of action that the government follows in dealing with a problem or issue outside or inside the country.

This is a complicated process that goes through a predictable series of steps:

1. Recognizing the problem
   Many conditions disturb or distress people: unsafe workplaces, natural disasters (like tornadoes and earthquakes), crime, pollution, or the cost of medical care.

2. Agenda setting
   An agenda is a set of issues that government wants to address. Usually there are so many of them that issues must be prioritized, with some getting earlier and more attention than others. Agendas usually are reshaped when a new president takes office or when the majority party in Congress changes after an election.
3. Formulating the policy
At this stage, usually several conflicting plans from various political interests take shape. Various players — the president and White House aides, agency officials, specially appointed task forces, interest groups, private research organizations, and legislators — may take part in formulating new policy.

4. Adopting the policy
Once various plans are presented, one policy is accepted by the decision-makers. In many cases, a policy is adopted when Congress passes a law. Policy adoption may also take place when the president signs an executive order or when the Supreme Court rules on an important case.

5. Implementing the policy
Most public policies are carried out by administrative agencies in the executive branch, although sometimes the courts get involved in implementing decisions they make.

6. Evaluating the policy
Policy makers often try to determine what a policy is actually accomplishing or whether it is being carried out efficiently. Often, the evaluation process takes place over time with contributions from many of the interacting players. Most evaluations call for some degree of change and correction, and inevitably, at least some of the players will disagree. The whole process then begins again, starting with recognizing the problem again.

Decision-making, then, is a continuous process with numerous people participating. At any given time, government is at various stages of policy-making in a never-ending quest to provide solutions to countless problems.

Read: Foreign Policy - Broad and Sharply Focused

Broadly Focused Foreign Policy Outputs

Broadly focused foreign policy outputs not only span multiple topics and organizations, but they also typically require large-scale spending and take longer to implement than sharply focused outputs. In the realm of broadly focused outputs, we will consider public laws, executive agreements, and the appointment process for new executive officials and ambassadors.

Public Laws

When we talk about new laws enacted by Congress and the president, we are referring to public laws. Public laws, sometimes called statutes, affect more than a single individual. All policies enacted by Congress and the president are public laws, except for a few dozen each year. They differ from private laws, which require some sort of action or payment by a specific individual or individuals named in the law.

Many statutes affect what the government can do in the foreign policy realm, including the National Security Act, the Patriot Act, the Homeland Security Act, and the War Powers Resolution. The National Security Act governs the way the government shares and stores information, while the Patriot Act (passed immediately after 9/11) clarifies what the government may do in collecting information about people in the name of protecting the country. The Homeland Security Act of 2002 authorized the creation of a massive new federal agency, the Department of Homeland Security, consolidating powers that had been under the jurisdiction of several different agencies. Their earlier lack of coordination may have prevented the United States from recognizing warning signs of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.
The War Powers Resolution was passed in 1973 by a congressional override of President Richard Nixon’s veto. The bill was Congress’ attempt to reassert itself in war-making. The Constitution grants Congress the power to declare war, but it had not formally done so since Japan’s 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II. Yet the United States had entered several wars since that time, including Korea, Vietnam, and in focused military campaigns such as the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.

The main feature of the War Powers Resolution is the requirement that presidents get approval from Congress to continue any military campaign beyond 60 days. While many see the overall effect as actually strengthening the role of the president in war-making (clarified that presidents could act on their own for 60 days before getting authorization from Congress), there are others who doubt the constitutionality of the law, since it limits the president’s Constitutional power as commander in chief.

Agreements
International agreements represent another of the broad-based foreign policy instruments. The United States finds it useful to enter into executive agreements with other countries for a variety of reasons and on a variety of subjects. These agreements run the gamut from bilateral agreements about tariffs to multinational agreements among dozens of countries about the treatment of prisoners of war. One recent multinational pact was the seven-country Iran Nuclear Agreement (INA) in 2015, intended to limit nuclear development in Iran in exchange for the lifting of long-standing economic sanctions on that country.

The INA is an excellent example of the strengths and weaknesses of the executive agreement. President Obama thought the terms of the INA were good and what America needed. The Republican Senate hated the term of the INA. Knowing he could not get a treaty ratified, Obama chose to enter into an executive agreement.

In 2016, Republican Presidential Candidate Donald Trump made cancelling the Iran Nuclear Agreement a campaign promise and, when he became President Trump, he rescinded the deal.

The last broad type of foreign policy output consists of the foreign policy appointments made when a new president takes office. Typically, when the party in the White House changes, more new appointments are made than when the party does not change. This is because the incoming president wants to put in place people who share his or her agenda.

Sharply Focused Foreign Policy Outputs
In addition to the broad-based foreign policy outputs above, which are president-led with some involvement from Congress, many other decisions need to be made. These sharply focused foreign policy outputs tend to be exclusively the province of the president, including the deployment of troops and/or intelligence agents in a crisis, executive summits between the president and other heads of state on targeted matters of foreign policy, presidential use of military force, and emergency funding measures to deal with foreign policy crises. Emergency spending does involve Congress through its power of the purse, but Congress tends to give presidents what they need to respond to emergencies.

Perhaps the most famous foreign policy emergency was the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. When the Soviet Union placed nuclear missiles in Cuba, just a few hundred miles from Florida, a Cold War standoff with the United States escalated. The Soviets at first denied the existence of the missiles. However, U.S. reconnaissance flights proved they were there, gathering photographic evidence that was presented at the United Nations. The Soviets stood firm, and U.S. foreign policy leaders debated their approach. Some
in the military were pushing for aggressive action to take out the missiles and the installation in Cuba, while State Department officials favored a diplomatic route. President John F. Kennedy ended up implementing a naval blockade of Cuba that subtly forced the Soviets’ hands. The Soviets agreed to remove their Cuban missiles and the United States in turn agreed six months later to remove its missiles from Turkey.

Another form of focused foreign policy output is the presidential summit. Often held at the presidential retreat at Camp David in Maryland, these meetings bring together the president and one or more other heads of state. Presidents use these types of summits when they and their visitors need to dive deeply into important issues that are not quickly solved. An example is the 1978 summit that led to the Camp David Accords between President Jimmy Carter, Egyptian president Anwar El Sadat, and Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin.

Another focused foreign policy output is the military use of force. Since the 1941 Pearl Harbor attacks and the immediate declaration of war by Congress that resulted, all such initial uses of force have been authorized by the president. Congress in many cases has subsequently supported additional military action, but the president has taken the lead. A recent example of the military use of force was the U.S. role in attacking Syrian gas manufacturing plants in April 2018.

Regardless, while the broad focus outputs involve the president, Congress, and others, the sharp-focus outputs are almost always actions the president takes unilaterally due to the situation.

**Reflect: Should He or Shouldn’t He?**

**Poll**

As discussed in the Read section above, President Obama entered into the Iran Nuclear Agreement in 2015 as an executive agreement and not as a treaty. He knew the Republicans controlled Senate, hated the deal, and would not ratify it as a treaty. Subsequently, President Trump rescinded the Iran Nuclear Agreement. What one president can make, another can rescind.

So, what do you think? Knowing the Senate opposed this deal, should President Obama have done this, trying to go around the Senate since they would not approve a treaty?

- Yes, President Obama did the right thing in entering into an executive agreement for the Iran Nuclear Agreement.
- No, President Obama did not do the right thing in entering into an executive agreement for the Iran Nuclear Agreement.

**Expand: The Best Offense is a Good Defense**

**Discover**

Until 1947, one of the president's cabinet-level positions was the secretary of war, who headed the War Department. President Harry Truman renamed it secretary of defense and the Department of Defense, a telltale sign of changing times.

The most destructive war of modern times — World War II — had ended only two years before, and nuclear weapons were used at its conclusion. The hope was that countries would "beat their swords into plowshares," as suggested by the famous biblical quotation that was to be engraved into a wall of the
United Nations building in New York City. Still, a United States defense policy is necessary as a second level of protection in case diplomacy fails to solve international problems. We want to build a military that offers protection — a fence to keep the enemy out.

Who Makes Defense Policy?

The president takes the lead in defense policy. This initiative is based on the constitutional powers as commander in chief of the armed forces. The Constitution grants Congress the power to declare war, a power with much less meaning in today's world. The last time that the United States officially declared war was December 8, 1941, the day after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Yet, America has fought full-scale wars in Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf without actually declaring war.

Today the president is able to order covert — or secret — operations to avoid full-scale military involvement. If that option fails, the president, sometimes with the vote of Congress, can try coercion, or tactics that force countries to "behave." Examples are economic boycotts, breaking diplomatic relations, and restricting tourist and business travel between countries. The United States applied all of these tactics to Cuba when Communist leader Fidel Castro took over in 1959. The president may also avoid congressional involvement in decision-making by endorsing limited military interventions without asking for a war declaration.

The Department of Defense (DOD) is the president's main source of advice on military policy. The DOD is headquartered in the Pentagon, which houses about 25,000 military and civilian personnel. True to the wishes of the founders, the secretary of defense — who heads the department — is always a civilian. However, all five military departments — the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and the Coast Guard — are under the general supervision of the secretary of defense.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff is a seven-member advisory body to the president, the National Security Council, and the secretary of defense. It consists of the Chairman, the Vice Chairman, the Chief of Staff of the Army, the Chief of Naval Operations, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and the Chief of the National Guard Bureau. The president, with the consent of the Senate, appoints all of the service chiefs, as well as the chair.

Threats to National Security

In a 1993 review of the mission and needs of the Defense Department, Secretary of Defense Les Aspin identified four major threats to U.S. national security:

1. The rapid growth of weapons of mass destruction, such as nuclear bombs;
2. Regional conflicts in the Middle East, Korea, and elsewhere;
3. The emergence of anti-democratic forces in Russia;
4. The erosion of American economic strength.

Even though the United States economy is considerably stronger than it was in 1993, all four threats remain important today. Since the Cold War ended in the early 1990s, Defense Department expenditures have come under closer scrutiny, with many people demanding that less be spent for defense programs. However, the Defense Department concluded that the United States needs sufficient military resources to conduct military operations against at least two "rogue nations" — such as Iran, Libya, and North Korea — at the same time. The Department also sees a number of other states, such as Russia, China, or India, as potential problem states.
Developing a coherent foreign policy is problematic in these post-Cold War days, as is the question of defending the country against possible danger from outside its borders. The avoidance of war, as indicated by the 1947 name change from department of war to department of defense, today holds the highest priority. The hope that the United States can play a role in limiting violent upheavals around the world is reflected in both its foreign and military policies.

Our goal, it seems, is to focus on the theory that, militarily, “the best offense is a good defense.”

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=PMhlQNK0_Y0

A Brief History of American Defense Policy
- A video providing a brief history of American Defense Policy
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfBq9uWSpug

Foreign Policy Explained, Ep. 11: Should We Privatize National Defense? - Learn Liberty
- A video discussing whether national defense is a “public good”
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrLMbwrW11c

Lesson Glossary

**foreign policy**: the ways a government advances its interests in world politics

**agenda**: a list of subjects or problems to which government officials as well as individuals outside the government are paying serious attention at any given time

Check Your Knowledge

1. A major threat to U.S. national security is the emergence of anti-democratic forces in Germany. -
   A. True
   B. False

2. The United States’ executive agreements run the gamut from bilateral agreements about tariffs to multinational agreements among dozens of countries about the treatment of prisoners of war.
   A. True
   B. False

3. Sharply focused foreign policy outputs tend to be exclusively the province of Congress.
   A. True
   B. False
Answer Key:

Citations

Lesson Content:
Authored and curated by Jay Reynolds, J.D. for The TEL Library. CC BY NC SA 4.0

Adapted Content:
Title: Defense Policy (2018): U.S. History Online Textbook, DOA. License: CC BY 4.0
http://www.ushistory.org/gov/11b.asp

Title: Policy Making: Political Interactions (2018): U.S. History Online Textbook, DOA. License: CC BY 4.0
http://www.ushistory.org/gov/11.asp

Title: American Government – 17.2 Foreign Policy Instruments (2018): Rice University, OpenStax CNX.
License: CC BY 4.0 http://cnx.org/contents/5bcc0e59-7345-421d-8507-a1e4608685e8@16.1