

America's Foreign Policy: A Brief History

(Constitutional Rights Foundation)

A central function of the U.S. government is to conduct relations with the almost 200 other nations in the world. A nation is a sovereign country, and as such, possesses the highest authority over its territories. All sovereign states are theoretically equal.

Foreign policy determines how America conducts relations with other countries. It is designed to further certain goals. It seeks to assure America's security and defense. It seeks the power to protect and project America's national interests around the world. National interest shapes foreign policy and covers a wide range of political, economic, military, ideological, and humanitarian concerns.

America's foreign policy has changed over time reflecting the change in its national interest. As a new nation after the Revolutionary War, America's prime national interest was to maintain its independence from more powerful European countries. Protected by the Atlantic Ocean, its major foreign policy, as typified by the Monroe Doctrine, was to limit European attempts of further colonization of the Western Hemisphere.

Through the 19th century, America concentrated on creating a nation that spanned the continent, and it avoided foreign entanglements. Once industrialized and more prosperous, it began looking for foreign markets and colonies.

By the turn of the 20th century, the United States had become a minor imperial power, fighting a war with Spain for Cuba and the Philippines and annexing Hawaii and several other territories. World War I engaged the United States in European affairs, but after the war, a wave of isolationist feeling swept the country. Refusing membership in the League of Nations, America turned inward once again. Absorbed by the prosperity of the 1920s and the Great Depression of the 1930s, America let its military strength erode. It was not prepared for war when the Japanese struck the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor in late 1941.

Emerging from World War II as the most powerful economic power on Earth, the United States changed its foreign policy dramatically. It took the lead in founding the United Nations. It invested billions of dollars through the Marshall Plan to help strengthen war-devastated European democracies. It created a system of alliances, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Central to America's foreign policy in the post-war period was the containment of the Soviet Union and communism. During the Cold War, the United States and its allies competed with the Soviet Union and its allies militarily, economically, and ideologically. Both sides created massive military forces and huge stockpiles of nuclear weapons. Although the two superpowers never went to war, the policy of containment led the United States into the bloody Korean and Vietnam wars.

The Cold War ended when the Soviet Union, economically exhausted from competing with the West, disintegrated. This left the United States the only remaining superpower in a world no longer ruled by the logic of containing the Soviet Union.

Through time, various constitutional principles and values have shaped American foreign policy. American foreign policy has favored the self-determination of nations for independence. Based on our commitment to constitutional government, we often favor and support nations that practice democracy. These principles, however, sometimes have conflicted with the goals of national security, economics, or the realities of international politics. In certain cases, America has supported dictatorial governments or intervened to curtail popular political movements.

Making and Carrying Out Foreign Policy

America's foreign policy today covers a wide range of functions and issues. It includes establishing and maintaining diplomatic relations with other countries and international organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States. It includes peacekeeping functions such as working with allies to assure regional and international security and arms-control efforts. It covers a range of international economic issues including trade, travel, and business. It involves foreign aid and disaster relief. As a superpower, the United States has also taken a leadership role in peacemaking around the globe by trying to negotiate treaties and agreements to end regional conflicts. Also, as a world leader, the United States has a longstanding role in trying to address international economic and environmental problems.

The making and carrying out of America's foreign policy involve all three branches of government and a complex array of governmental institutions and agencies.

The president and the executive branch have the most significant role in making foreign policy and are responsible for carrying it out. With the advice and consent of the Senate, the president makes treaties and appoints ambassadors. The president can hold summit meetings with world leaders. As commander in chief of the military, the president can, by executive order, rapidly project U.S. power around the globe.

In forming U.S. foreign policy, the president relies on advice from the National Security Council. This group is made up of the vice-president, secretary of state, secretary of defense, head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (the nation's highest military adviser).

The secretary of state heads the U.S. State Department and often represents the president abroad. The State Department carries out foreign policy decisions and helps develop foreign policy for every region of the world. Attached to the State Department is the U.S. Foreign Service, or diplomatic corps. It is made up of ambassadors (who represent America's political interests in every country), consuls (who represent America's business interests), and other officials who specialize in technical matters and issues of foreign aid.

Congress also plays a role in America's foreign policy through its power to set duties and tariffs on foreign exports and imports, regulate foreign commerce and immigration, and declare war. It sets quotas on immigration, chooses which countries will benefit for most-favored-nation status in trade agreements, votes on foreign aid, and sets the defense budget. But Congress is usually in the role of accepting, changing, or rejecting policies proposed by the president.

The Supreme Court plays a limited role in foreign policy. It has jurisdiction over cases involving treaties, admiralty and maritime law, and ambassadors and other public ministers. It also is charged with deciding disputes between states and foreign states and their citizens and subjects.

At different times, tensions have arisen between the branches in the conduct of foreign policy. Presidents sometimes favor treaties that the Senate does not want to approve. President Woodrow Wilson promoted treaties establishing the League of Nations after World War I, but the Senate opposed the League and refused to ratify the treaties. Other times, tensions have arisen between the Congress' power to declare war and the president's role as commander in chief. Presidents have committed American armed forces to major conflicts such as the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf wars without a declaration of war by Congress.

The public also plays a role in influencing foreign policy. Advocacy groups for foreign countries often try to influence Congress and the president about issues. Business associations lobby the government about international economic and trade issues. Groups and individuals with strong views on certain foreign policy issues, especially military intervention, often organize protests or other political actions to influence decisions.

Discussion Questions—Answer completely

1. What is foreign policy?

How would you characterize American foreign policy during most of the 19th century?

How would you characterize American foreign policy at the beginning of the 20th century?

How would you characterize American foreign policy following World War II?

How would you characterize American foreign policy today?

What do you think accounts for the differences in American foreign policy approach?

2. What role do the three branches of government have in creating American foreign policy?

What tensions sometimes arise between the branches over foreign policy?

Who else influences foreign policy?

3. What principles and values have helped shaped American foreign policy?