

INTRODUCTION

The Context of US Foreign Policymaking

Chapter 1 introduces US foreign policymaking and the underlying analytical framework used to understand the complex politics through which it is shaped. Chapter 2 discusses the international context, considering the historical and global power contexts and major patterns in the US foreign policy response to them.

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UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICS OF US FOREIGN POLICY

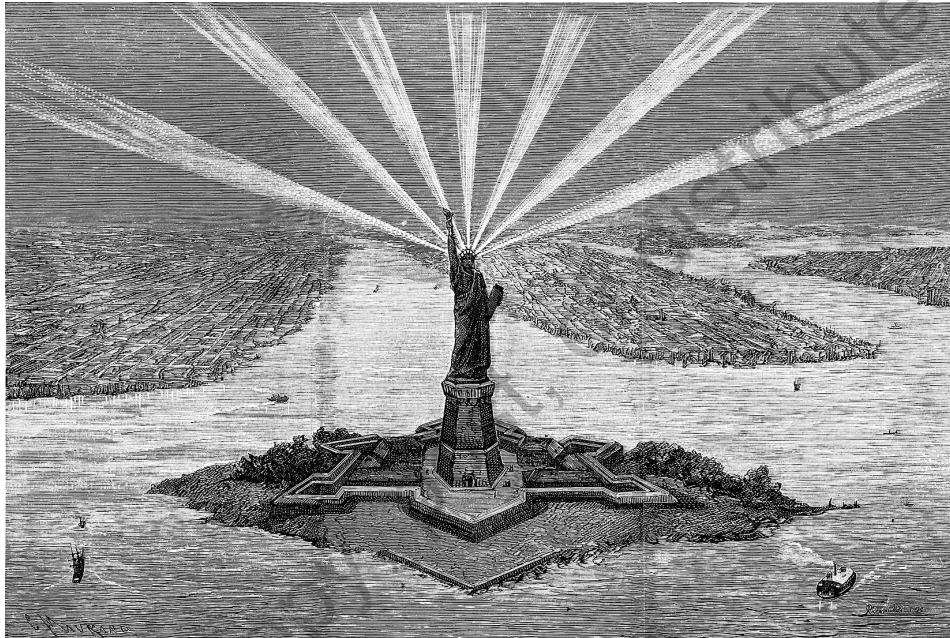


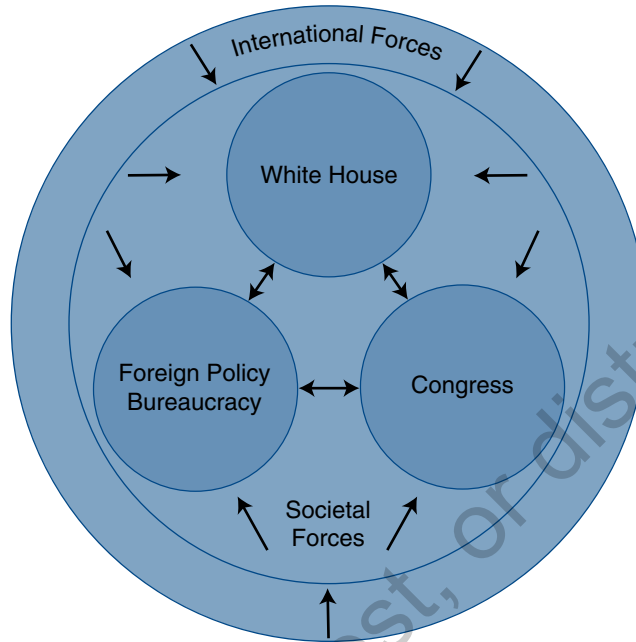
PHOTO 1.1 How does the United States decide what to do in foreign policy?

Source: Ilbusca/DigitalVision Vectors/Getty Images.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Know the meaning and significance of foreign policy.
2. Understand the foundations of the politics of foreign policymaking.
3. Identify a framework for understanding the politics of foreign policy.

FIGURE 1.1 ■ The Context of US Foreign Policymaking in the Shifting Leadership and Politics Framework



INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF FOREIGN POLICY

What is foreign policy, and why should people care about it and the politics that shape it? Foreign policy, or foreign relations, refers to the scope of involvement abroad and the collection of goals, strategies, and instruments that are selected by governmental policymakers (see Rosenau 1976). While we are interested in the substance of policy, to understand the foreign policy of a country, one needs to recognize who decides and acts. To say “the United States intervened” is part of our everyday language. But what do people mean when they use this phrase? In reality, countries do not act; people act. What the phrase usually means is that certain governmental officials, representing the United States acted. A state is a legal concept that refers to the governmental institutions through which policymakers act in the name of the people of a given territory. The foreign policy process, or the politics of foreign policy, therefore, refers to how governmental decisions and policies get on the agenda, are formulated, and are implemented—which is the focus of this book.

Although it may not seem so to either Americans or people from other countries, US foreign policy engagement in the world profoundly affects their lives in many ways. Thus, studying how and why the United States chooses to do what it does in foreign policy—the politics of US foreign policy—is important for both Americans and the world.

For example, in 2022, the United States spent more than \$800 billion on defense (not counting military-related expenditures in departments other than the Department of Defense), close to

40 percent of the world's total military expenditures. About 200,000 American troops (roughly one sixth of the US armed forces) are stationed worldwide in around 800 US military bases, big and small. Since the 1930s, the United States has been engaged in numerous conflicts, including five major wars, which required millions of personnel to serve in the military and potentially place their lives at risk. World War II resulted in more than 400,000 US battle deaths, and the United States has sustained more than 400,000 military casualties since then. More than 35,000 Americans died during the Korean War, more than 58,000 died during the Vietnam War, and about 8500 Americans died in the Afghan and Iraqi wars as of 2022. In addition to those who died, many suffered physical and psychological injuries in each of these major wars as well.

The American standard of living is also heavily affected by the world economy, which is affected by US foreign economic policies involving trade in goods and services, investment in companies and capital, monetary policies and currency fluctuations, and access to raw materials and energy. In fact, as the global economy has expanded, the American economy has become increasingly more dependent on foreign markets and investment. Today, about one third of the US gross domestic product (GDP) comes from the import and export of goods and services. Although the United States now imports about a third of its oil, much of it from the Middle East, that figure was as high as 60 percent as recently as 2006.

Other important areas of foreign policy impact Americans beyond security and war or economics. Some areas that come to mind are transnational issues such as global climate change, immigration and population dynamics, the drug trade, the spread of AIDS, and travel and tourism. Additionally, times of war and national emergency are also times of greater presidential power and political tension at home when the demands of democracy often conflict with the demands of national security. This affects individual freedom, liberties, and civil rights guaranteed in the US Constitution.

Not only does US foreign policy have significance for Americans but it also impacts the lives of people throughout the world. Because the United States is much more powerful and wealthy than most other societies and peoples, US foreign policy can affect societies and lives all around the world—sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Certainly the September 11 terrorist attacks, the subsequent war on terrorism, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the economic crisis of 2008–2010, and the American-led effort involving NATO countries and many others to provide military and economic support to Ukraine to resist the 2022 Russian invasion clearly highlight the importance of America's connection to and policies toward the world. In sum, US foreign policy involves many activities and issues throughout the world that have implications—sometimes more immediate and direct, sometimes more indirect and underlying—for the everyday lives and futures of Americans.

Finally, our focus on the politics and processes of US foreign policy is motivated by several other foundational insights. Clearly, “what” the United States chooses to do in its foreign policy is quite consequential. But, policy—choices about the scope of involvement abroad and the collection of goals, strategies, and instruments to pursue it—is conditioned by “how,” the process by which those choices are made. And the process is, in turn, conditioned by who is deciding—the characteristics of the individuals, agencies, and institutions that interact to make foreign policy choices. Since those individuals, agencies, and institutions have different preferences and perspectives, their interactions in the process are highly political; policy, therefore, is ultimately politics (Figure 1.1).

UNDERSTANDING US FOREIGN POLICY

How should we try to understand the politics of US foreign policy? Let us begin with two simple, but very important, points about the nature of the US foreign policy process:

- It is a very complex process.
- It is a very political process.

First, the US foreign policy process is complex and extremely messy. Many Americans hold a very simple view of the foreign policy process: that US foreign policy is made and defined by those at the top of the political hierarchy, especially by the president. According to Roger Hilsman (1964, 5), former assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs in the John Kennedy administration, “As Americans, we think it only reasonable that the procedures for making national decisions should be orderly, with clear lines of responsibility and authority.” We expect decisions to be made by “the proper, official, and authorized persons, and to know that the really big decisions will be made at the top ... with each of the participants having roles and powers so well and precisely defined that they can be held accountable for their actions by their superiors and eventually by the electorate.”

Clearly, the president is important, and presidential leadership is central to the politics of US foreign policy. The individual characteristics and beliefs of the individual elected to hold the office of the presidency play a crucial role in the making of US foreign policy. However, the president does not make US foreign policy alone, and presidential leadership in foreign policy is more a variable than a constant. President Lyndon Johnson colorfully put it this way:

Before you get to be president you think you can do anything. You think you're the most powerful leader since God. But when you get in that tall chair, as you're gonna find out, Mr. President, you can't count on people. You'll find your hands tied and people cussin' you. The office is kinda like the little country boy found the hoochie-koochie show at the carnival, once he'd paid his dime and got inside the tent: “It ain't exactly as it was advertised.”

(quoted in Cronin 1979, 381)

As President Johnson's description suggests, the reality is that many other individuals and institutions within the government and throughout society are involved in the foreign policy process. In the United States, these include presidential advisers, employees in the White House, the foreign policy bureaucracies, and other bureaucratic agencies in the executive branch; members of Congress and their staffs in the House of Representatives and the Senate; the courts; the public, political parties, and interest groups; the media; and even state and local governments at times. From outside the United States, foreign leaders, allies, and international organizations can also play a role. It is in this sense that the making of US foreign policy is a complex process. It is also a messy process, for the variety of individuals and institutions that affect US foreign policy do not stand still but constantly interact with and have an impact on one another. In other words, the policymaking process is not static but, as the word *process* implies, is dynamic.

Second, the foreign policy process in the United States is a very political process. What is politics? One common definition of politics is “who gets what, when, and how” (Lasswell 1938). Politics might also be defined as *the competition for power and shared meaning*. This simple but meaningful definition emphasizes the importance that ideas and symbolism play in the policy process. A final definition might describe politics as *competition between different individuals and groups for support of the public and influence throughout society in order to control the government and policymaking process for certain ends*. This is the broadest of the three definitions, emphasizing the role of different goal-oriented individuals and groups and the various arenas in which the political process takes place.

The three definitions are complementary and contribute to an understanding of what politics is all about. Together they illustrate that the politics of US foreign policy involves competition among differently motivated individuals and groups, that politics involves the flow of power and symbolism throughout government and society, and that it involves winners and losers. Such politics defines the national interest—a concept that is supposed to represent what is best for the country. However, policymakers will often invoke the idea of “the” national interest to justify and gain support for their preferred policies from other policymakers or society. Different people, groups, and institutions have competing conceptions of what is best for the country, and it is through politics that such competing interests are resolved into policy choices. Ultimately, US foreign policy tends to reflect the goals and priorities of those individuals and groups who are the most successful in influencing the political process within government and throughout society.

The Changing Politics of US Foreign Policy

The making of US foreign policy is a complex process inseparable from politics. This has been a dominant theme that most of the early theorists—including Gabriel Almond (1960), Richard Snyder (1958), Charles Lindblom (1959), Richard Neustadt (1960), Warner Schilling, Paul Hammond, and Glenn Snyder (1962), Roger Hilsman (1964), and Stanley Hoffmann (1968)—emphasized throughout their work on the US foreign policymaking process during the “high Cold War” period of the 1950s and 1960s, when the world seemed simpler, a time when presidential power and the Cold War consensus were at their apex.

Since the Vietnam War, the policy process has become increasingly complex, political, and visible. One consequence is that it has become very difficult for a president to govern successfully and lead the country in foreign policy. In the words of I. M. Destler, Leslie H. Gelb, and Anthony Lake (1984, 20), “The making of American foreign policy [has] entered a new and far more ideological and political phase.” Or as Hedrick Smith (1988, xvi) likewise observed, “Presidents now have much greater difficulty marshalling governing coalitions” for “it is a much looser power game now, more wide open, harder to manage and manipulate than it was a quarter of a century ago when I came to town.”

The complex politics of US foreign policy, if anything, has been heightened with the collapse of the Cold War, the war on terrorism, the challenges of globalization, and the rising political polarization with which Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joseph Biden have had to contend. Indeed, with its roots in the domestic reaction to the

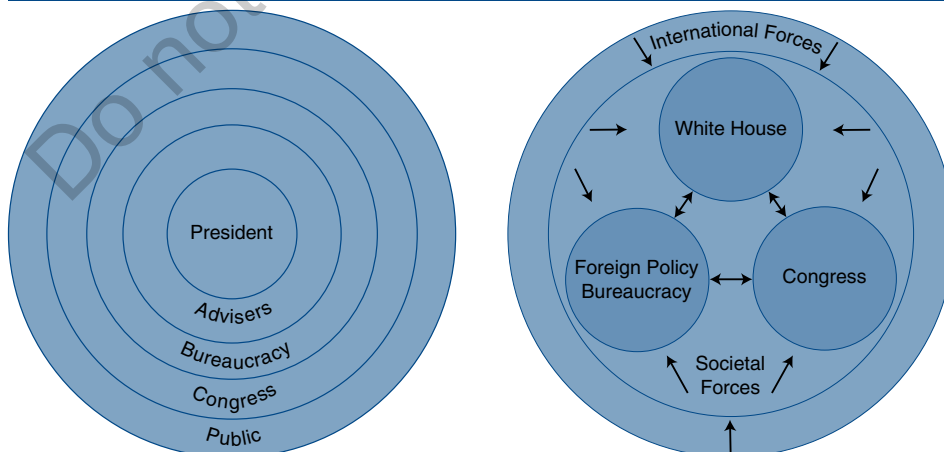
Vietnam War, polarization in foreign policymaking has increased steadily. With the end of the Cold War, the glue of anticommunism largely disappeared and polarization in foreign policymaking increased further, while ideological and partisan differences amplified the complexity and consequences of foreign policy politics.

A Framework for Understanding US Foreign Policymaking

How will we make sense of the complex politics of US foreign policy? We use a general analytical framework that provides the basic structure or frame of reference for organizing and thinking about (i.e., analyzing, conceptualizing, and synthesizing) the information and knowledge available to understand the politics of US foreign policy. As we noted, it is common practice to refer to the preeminence of presidents over American foreign policy. In fact, a common framework of US foreign policymaking is the **Presidential Preeminence** framework, illustrated on the left side of Figure 1.2. This framework is depicted as a series of concentric circles beginning with the president and expanding outward to include advisers, bureaucracies, Congress, and the public. According to this framework, the influence and relevance of actors decrease with the distance from the center of the circles, suggesting that the president dominates policymaking. Instead of this approach, because we understand that presidential leadership is more a variable than a constant in the politics of US foreign policy, we adopt the analytical framework shown on the right side of Figure 1.2, which we call **Shifting Leadership and Politics**.

Unlike the Presidential Preeminence framework, the Shifting Leadership and Politics framework recognizes the complex and messy politics of the US foreign policy process and the varying roles and leadership of the president, presidential advisers, the agencies of the foreign policy bureaucracy, Congress and its members, societal forces and actors such as public opinion, interest groups and the media, and international factors as well. Our framework indicates that the White House *may* dominate, but it does not necessarily *always* dominate. Thus, while

FIGURE 1.2 ■ Two Frameworks for Understanding US Foreign Policymaking: Presidential Preeminence (Left) and Shifting Leadership and Politics (Right)



presidential leadership is a key aspect of US foreign policymaking, our analytical framework encourages consideration of the conditions under which it is more or less likely, as well as the roles and resources of other players in the foreign policy process, including the foreign policy bureaucracy and Congress, and the roles and resources they bring to the process as well.

Organized by this analytical framework, our examination of the players and process of US foreign policy addresses two central and overarching themes: (1) the patterns and changes in the politics of US foreign policy, and (2) the conditions for and challenges to presidential leadership of foreign policy. We begin our examination of the politics and processes of US foreign policy with the international and historical contexts, which set the stage and provide the foundation for understanding the politics of US foreign policy. Chapter 2 provides the global and historical context, focusing on an overview of international settings, US orientations to roles in the world, and the major historical patterns of US foreign policy since the founding of the country. Our discussion in Chapter 2 thus incorporates factors and forces from the international and societal circles of our analytical framework.

In Part II of our text, we turn to the inner core of our analytical framework, focusing on the three circles at the center of the policymaking process: the major governmental institutions and players from the White House, the foreign policy bureaucracy, and Congress.

The White House. The role of the president and top aides and advisers stems from the president's position as the chief executive. The person of the president and his or her individual characteristics and the nature of the presidency and its institutional characteristics are important aspects that affect the politics and processes of US foreign policy and the opportunities for presidential leadership.

The Foreign Policy Bureaucracy. This circle consists of the State Department, the Defense Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, as well as economic agencies created to provide advice and implement policy decisions. The bureaucracy's expertise and control of information place it in a position to shape the formulation of policy by performing much of the generation and consideration of policy alternatives. Moreover, the various agencies of the foreign policy bureaucracy shape policy with their primary role in its day-to-day implementation. In both roles, the role and influence of the officials and agencies of the foreign policy bureaucracy are affected by the nature and organizational characteristics of bureaucracy.

Congress. This circle includes the leadership, committees, individual members, and staff of both houses of Congress. While Congress and its members are affected by many structural characteristics and electoral constraints, including its size, decentralized nature, limited access to information, and procedures, the institution and its individual members have access to potentially potent avenues of influence. These include tools such as the ability to pass laws; the constitutional and statutory authority to hold oversight hearings, require reports, and request individual briefings; the advise-and-consent authority over treaties and appointments; and the "power of the purse."

Our framework invites consideration of the opportunities and challenges of presidential—or White House (i.e., the president and top staff/advisers)—leadership, and we devote considerable attention to the conditions under which White House leadership is enhanced but also

constrained. However, our framework also directs consideration to foreign policy leadership by the foreign policy bureaucracy and by Congress, as well as competition among some or all of the three governmental circles over foreign policy influence. Thus, although our framework highlights the importance of presidential leadership and management, it accounts for shifting patterns of leadership and influence among the governmental actors. In effect, we treat presidential leadership as a variable, not a given.

We examine the players and institutions at the center of the foreign policy process in the eight chapters that make up Part II of our text. Chapter 3 examines presidential power and the president's ability to direct US foreign policy. This sets the stage for examination of the major institutions of the foreign policy bureaucracy and their input in the policy process: the State Department in Chapter 4, the military establishment in Chapter 5, and the intelligence community in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 discusses how the president attempts to manage foreign policy and makes use of the National Security Council within the executive branch. Chapter 8 focuses on the players, institutions, and processes of foreign economic policymaking. Chapter 9 examines the role of Congress in foreign policy and the nature of interbranch politics. Part II concludes with Chapter 10, which offers a summary overview and theoretical synthesis of presidential, bureaucratic, and congressional policymaking power and employs different policymaking models to discuss the interaction of these actors and the opportunities for leadership to explain the dynamics of the policymaking process.

Part III turns to the examination of how the larger society and domestic politics affect the government and the foreign policymaking process. We begin in Chapter 11 with the role of the public and its beliefs—public opinion, political ideology, and American national style—in the making of US foreign policy. Then we examine the role and influence of interest groups and group politics in Chapter 12. Chapter 13 addresses the nature and effects of the media and the role of communications in the politics of US foreign policy.

The book concludes in Part IV with Chapter 14, which provides a summary of all that we have covered. In the concluding chapter, we synthesize our discussions of the global, governmental, and societal factors; we explore key patterns of influence and the shifting leadership that our analytical framework leads us to, returning to the two central themes of our text; and we also offer final insights on the politics of US foreign policy for the future.

POLITICS AND UNCERTAINTY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Our text is organized by our Shifting Leadership and Politics framework and the two themes we build around throughout its pages. The analytical framework thus provides a meaningful way to make sense of the complexity and politics of US foreign policy. We hope the net result will be your acquisition of better insights into and understanding of how and why the United States engages in foreign policy as it does.

This is a particularly interesting time to examine the complex politics of US foreign policy. The United States has entered the twenty-first century, and the nation has experienced the September 11 terrorist attacks, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Great Recession, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Significant changes in global politics and power have ensued, and

disagreement and uncertainty about the role of the US and its engagement in the world have heightened throughout the presidencies of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joseph Biden. How has the global context shaped the patterns and politics of US foreign policy? How will the interaction of global context, government, and society shape the future patterns of the politics of US foreign policy and presidential leadership? We take up these questions throughout this book.

THINK ABOUT THIS

Hubert Humphrey, who served in the US Senate from 1949 to 1964 and from 1971 to 1978, and as vice president from 1965 to 1969, once said, “Foreign policy is really domestic policy with its hat on.” Think about the nature of the foreign policy process as we have initially presented it in this chapter.

What makes the politics of US foreign policy complex and messy?

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