

# A Political History of American Foreign Policy: From Constitutional Foundations to Global Leadership

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DOI: [10.22178/pos.120-11](https://doi.org/10.22178/pos.120-11)

LCC Subject Category: E11-29

Received 27.06.2025  
Accepted 27.07.2025  
Published online 31.07.2025

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the historical development of U.S. foreign policy from the perspective of its domestic political system. From the early doctrines of neutrality and isolationism to today's global involvement, American foreign policy has been influenced not only by international factors but also by the structure and functioning of its constitutional institutions. The study examines major historical events, including the Monroe Doctrine, World War I and World War II, the Cold War, and the War on Terror, to illustrate how the relationships between the executive and legislative branches, public opinion, and political parties have influenced foreign policy decisions. Special focus is placed on institutional changes, such as the War Powers Resolution and the Authorisation for the Use of Military Force, emphasising the ongoing tension between presidential independence and congressional oversight in determining America's role worldwide.

**Keywords:** U.S. foreign policy; American political system; executive-legislative relations; isolationism; Monroe Doctrine; Cold War; War Powers Resolution; international relations; constitutional powers; Congress and diplomacy.

## INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy is a crucial tool through which the United States manages its relationships with other nations and defines its national interests. These interests encompass a broad spectrum, including political, economic, military, ideological, and humanitarian aspects, and guide the U.S. in its efforts to ensure security, foster economic growth, and uphold democratic values worldwide. Since its founding, the United States has sought to establish diplomatic and political ties with nearly 200 sovereign nations, navigating the complexities of international power dynamics while upholding the principle of state sovereignty. Over time, American foreign policy has shifted between isolationism and active global engagement, influenced not only by changing strategic challenges abroad but also by the constitutional separation of powers and domestic political forces.

This article argues that U.S. foreign policy has consistently evolved in response to shifting national interests and global circumstances, striking a balance between the demands of security, economic growth, and ideological influence with-

in a political system characterised by checks and balances. To grasp this evolution, it is essential to examine how different historical periods prioritised these goals and how domestic institutions and public opinion have influenced the direction and implementation of these policies.

## Literature review

Scholars have thoroughly examined the formation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy. Scholars such as Bean (1957) and Bryce (1891) have highlighted the essential role of constitutional principles and national interests [1, 2]. The Monroe Doctrine (1823) remains a key element in understanding early U.S. strategic positioning regarding European colonial ambitions [3]. Hogan (1987) analysed the Marshall Plan as a transformative foreign aid effort after World War II [4]. Henriksen (2017) examined patterns in U.S. foreign policy, especially the shift from Cold War containment to modern counterterrorism and global security issues [5]. Others, such as Saffell (1998) and the U.S. Senate (1992), describe the legislative and institutional framework behind foreign policy actions [6, 7]. Together, these

works offer a comprehensive understanding of how domestic institutions, international forces, and shifting strategic priorities have shaped the evolution of U.S. foreign policy.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*The Establishment of Foreign Policy and the Political System.* The development of American foreign policy reflects both external pressures and internal dynamics of the U.S. political system, especially the constitutional balance of power between Congress and the Executive Branch. Since the country's founding, foreign policy has been influenced not only by overseas events but also by debates within the American political system, with changes in presidential leadership, Congressional influence, and public opinion all playing key roles.

The American foreign policy has developed, reflecting shifts in national interests. After the War of Independence (1775–1783), the primary foreign policy objective was to minimise reliance on European powers and maintain neutrality in international conflicts. The 1787 Constitution established a system of checks and balances, in which the President was granted the authority to negotiate treaties and conduct diplomacy, while Congress retained the power to declare War and ratify treaties. This division of responsibilities became a fundamental aspect of U.S. foreign policy.

President George Washington established a strong precedent for executive-led foreign policy with the Proclamation of Neutrality (1793), asserting presidential authority without Congressional approval. However, the controversy over the Jay Treaty with Britain (1795) revealed early tensions: while the President negotiated, the Senate's ratification power influenced the final agreement, illustrating the political system's role in limiting executive foreign ambitions [8].

In 1823, President James Monroe, with strong support from Congress, announced the Monroe Doctrine, which declared the Western Hemisphere off-limits to new European colonisation. Although a bold foreign policy move, it reflected institutional consensus and America's desire to assert hemispheric leadership without involving itself in European affairs, consistent with Washington's earlier warnings [3].

The colonial era had ended. No colonial powers considered North or South America as targets for colonisation anymore. By then, countries like the U.S., Argentina, and Mexico had gained independence from Spanish and British rule. However, Cuba had not yet achieved independence. In such cases, the U.S. was not opposed to European powers maintaining control over their existing colonies but opposed the acquisition of new ones.

The development of American foreign policy has consistently mirrored shifts in national priorities and strategic interests. According to the author [1], early U.S. foreign policy focused on neutrality and a cautious approach to foreign alliances. This principle of non-involvement was not only a practical response to the young nation's limited resources but also a deliberate strategy to protect its sovereignty and internal stability. The adoption of the U.S. Constitution in 1787 further emphasized this approach. It established a system of checks and balances, where the President was emphasized to negotiate treaties and manage foreign affairs. At the same time, Congress held the power to declare War and ratify international agreements. This division of responsibilities became a core feature of American foreign policy, ensuring that no single branch could unilaterally determine the nation's global stance.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American foreign policy largely favoured isolationism, focusing inward while avoiding permanent entanglements in foreign affairs. The U.S. expanded territorially and economically, but avoided entangling in European wars. In this era, Congress often exercised significant influence, particularly over tariffs, trade policy, and issues related to expansion.

However, as emphasized on sped up, the need for foreign markets and influence increased, and so did executive ambition. The Spanish-American War (1898) marked a turning point: the President (McKinley) and Congress jointly emphasized War, but growing imperial actions (like annexing the Philippines) sparked debates over constitutional limits and the U.S. role abroad [9].

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the U.S. began to emerge as a minor imperial power, competing with Spain over Cuba and the Philippines and taking control of territories like Hawaii. During World War I, the U.S. became involved in European affairs. However, after the War, a wave of isolationism swept across the

country; this meant that the U.S. did not form alliances with other nations for specific reasons and stayed neutral in international conflicts and wars. The only exception was Latin America, where the U.S. consistently took actions to protect its interests in the Western Hemisphere.

President Woodrow Wilson's involvement in World War I (1917) demonstrated the scope of his wartime powers. However, his ambitious League of Nations plan (1919) failed after the Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles due to concerns about losing sovereignty; this marked a turning point in U.S. political history, demonstrating how congressional opposition, even to a forward-looking foreign policy, can significantly influence outcomes [10].

Overall, the period between World War I and World War II was marked by significant changes in U.S. foreign policy. The United States shifted from a policy of isolationism to a more active containment approach, acknowledging the need to maintain a strong military to oppose external threats.

The U.S. decided not to join the League of Nations, focusing instead on domestic growth. After the economic boom of the 1920s and the severe depression of the 1930s, America's military strength started to decline. When the Japanese attacked the U.S. Navy at Pearl Harbour at the end of 1941, the country was caught off guard [4].

This rejection reaffirmed Congressional authority and reflected a public mood of returning to isolationism. The interwar years saw Congress pass neutrality laws in the 1930s to limit Presidential power and keep the U.S. out of global conflicts, demonstrating how the political system can act as a brake on executive foreign policy.

During World War II, the United States became the world's leading economic power and underwent a significant shift in its foreign policy. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour (1941) broke through isolationist sentiment and prompted Congress to declare War. Throughout the War, President Franklin D. Roosevelt took control of foreign policy, directing diplomacy, war strategy, and postwar planning. After the War, the President helped establish the United Nations and once again used his authority to shape the new world order, although the Senate still had to ratify the agreement.

The National Security Act of 1947, passed by Congress, established greater executive power by creating the National Security Council (NSC), the Department of Defence, and the CIA. These organisations provided the President with strong tools to act quickly, especially during the Cold War, when fast responses and covert operations were considered crucial. However, Congress remained influential through its control of the budget, ratification of treaties, and oversight hearings, particularly during contentious times such as the Vietnam War [11].

Presidential control over war-making reached its peak under Lyndon B. Johnson during the Vietnam War. However, public outrage and Congressional frustration grew, especially after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (1964) was seen as too vague and exploited by the executive.

In response, Congress enacted the War Powers Resolution (1973), requiring the President to consult Congress within 48 hours of deploying troops and to withdraw them after 60 days without Congressional approval. Although often overlooked, this law represents a significant institutional effort to restore balance between the branches and reaffirm congressional control over war powers [12].

Following World War II, U.S. foreign policy underwent a significant shift. Its main goal became stopping the Soviet Union and communism. Concerns focused on the use of the atomic bomb – the most potent weapon in the world – and the Soviet control of Eastern Europe to spread communism. These events convinced the U.S. and its allies that communism aimed for global domination, leading to a rivalry with democracy known as the Cold War.

During the Cold War, the United States and its allies engaged in military, economic, and ideological struggles against the Soviet Union and its allies. Both sides built large military forces and stockpiled nuclear weapons. Although neither side directly fought each other, the Cold War caused the U.S. to become involved in violent conflicts like the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

The Cold War influenced U.S. foreign policy from the late 1940s to the late 1980s. Initially, the U.S. relied on military and financial measures to contain Soviet expansion. To support this strategy, the U.S. and its allies signed mutual defence treaties, agreeing to protect one another in the event

of a communist attack. This containment focus aimed to stop the spread of communism, especially in Greece and Turkey.

Another critical aspect of Cold War foreign policy was collective security, which aimed to shield member countries from aggression by the communist bloc. The most well-known of these was the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Founded in 1949 by the U.S., Canada, and Western European nations, NATO's primary purpose was to defend its members from Soviet expansion and to maintain the balance of power in Europe.

The reagan administration's covert operations, such as the Iran-Contra affair, once again revealed tensions between executive action and congressional oversight. Congress conducted investigations and limited funding, but the event highlighted how Presidents often find ways to act independently – a recurring aspect of foreign policy-making.

The end of the Cold War in 1991 marked a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy, as the collapse of the Soviet Union left the United States as the world's sole superpower. This unipolar era brought new opportunities and challenges, shifting U.S. priorities from containing communism to tackling a broader and more complex range of global issues.

In the 1990s, U.S. foreign policy centred on promoting democracy and economic globalization globally, frequently through support for international organisations, including the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, and the International Monetary Fund. The Gulf War of 1990-91 demonstrated America's readiness to employ military force to maintain stability in key regions and safeguard energy supplies, particularly in the Middle East. At the same time, humanitarian interventions in the Balkans and Somalia reflected an increasing focus on peace-keeping and the duty to protect civilians in conflict zones.

However, the unipolar moment began to fade as new challenges appeared. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks significantly changed U.S. foreign policy, leading to the Global War on Terror. This period involved significant military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, aimed at dismantling terrorist networks and removing regimes to stop hostile states from forming. The wars also exposed the difficulties of nation-building and

counterinsurgency, sparking debates about the limits of American military power.

In recent years, U.S. foreign policy has shifted its focus to strategic competition with China and Russia, signalling a return to great-power rivalry. Issues such as cybersecurity, trade conflicts, influence over global governance bodies, and territorial disputes, including those in the South China Sea, underscore this shift. Along with these geopolitical challenges, the U.S. also faces transnational issues, including climate change, global pandemics, nuclear proliferation, and migration crises, which call for cooperative and multilateral solutions.

After 9/11, U.S. foreign policy became more executive-driven than ever. The President directed major wars, led international coalitions, and oversaw the expansion of intelligence and homeland security programs. Congress often acted reactively, providing funding and occasional oversight but rarely setting strategic direction [13].

In the post-Cold War era, presidents from Clinton to Obama increasingly relied on executive agreements instead of formal treaties, avoiding the need for Senate ratification when consensus was lacking. During this period, Congress passed broad Authorisations for the Use of Military Force (AUMFs), notably in 2001 for Afghanistan and 2002 for Iraq, which granted the President significant authority to wage War. However, the widespread and prolonged use of these authorisations has sparked controversy and ongoing debate over the proper limits of executive power.

Recently, deep partisan divisions have influenced U.S. foreign policy. Presidents like Trump favoured unilateral and transactional diplomacy, focusing on direct bilateral deals and often challenging traditional alliances. In contrast, President Biden has emphasized rebuilding alliances and reengaging with multilateral institutions. Throughout these changes, Congress has played a complex role – sometimes challenging executive actions, other times enabling presidential authority – reflecting the ongoing tension within the American political system.

Meanwhile, public opinion, lobbying groups, and media scrutiny have become powerful forces influencing foreign policy decisions, particularly on issues such as military intervention, climate action, and relations with China. The U.S. political system, designed to provide checks and balances,

must continually adapt to new global challenges and changing domestic expectations.

Domestically, U.S. foreign policy is shaped by the constitutional separation of powers, partisan debates, and public opinion, which often expose deep divisions over the country's role in the world. Recent administrations have oscillated between strategies of multilateral engagement and alliance-building, as well as approaches favouring more unilateral and transactional policies.

In summary, U.S. policymakers have navigated the post-Cold War and modern eras with a careful balancing act, maintaining military and economic strength while promoting democratic values and human rights, and adapting to an increasingly interconnected and multipolar world. The United States must navigate this complex landscape by using flexible strategies that combine diplomacy, economic measures, and military readiness to protect national interests and uphold global leadership.

*Institutions and Actors in U.S. Foreign Policy.* The United States operates under a two-party system, with power alternating between the Democratic and Republican parties. In practice, regardless of which party is in power, and despite some differences in approach, the primary goal of U.S. foreign policy remains the protection and defence of national security. Over time, key constitutional principles and values have shaped U.S. foreign policy.

U.S. foreign policy endorses the right of nations to self-determination. Rooted in a constitutional form of government, the U.S. has consistently supported countries that practice democracy. However, these principles have sometimes conflicted with concerns about national security, economic interests, and various international political goals. In certain instances, the U.S. has backed authoritarian regimes or been involved in suppressing popular political movements.

One of the primary responsibilities of the government is to develop strategies and principles for managing relations with other countries. Policymakers collectively refer to these strategies and principles as foreign policy. A country's foreign policy states its position on key issues and outlines how it plans to interact with other nations. As a world leader, foreign policy is a central component of U.S. governance [14].

It is essential to recognise that a key and unique aspect of U.S. foreign policy development is the separation of powers within the U.S. government, consisting of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The influence of historical experiences and traditions in shaping these institutions, the vital role of public opinion, and the effective operation of political parties all contribute to this process [7].

U.S. foreign policy has four main objectives:

1) National Security – The primary goal is to safeguard the country from attacks or harm.

2) International Trade – In a connected world, trade relations are essential for economic growth. Trade creates markets for American products and generates jobs for American workers, while also allowing foreign goods to enter the U.S. market.

3) Promoting World Peace – Wars, even those far from U.S. borders, can disrupt trade and threaten national security. Therefore, the U.S. aims for close cooperation among nations and supports the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

4) Promoting Democracy and Human Rights – Americans strongly believe in the principles of democracy and human rights. Using various foreign policy tools, the U.S. aims to defend these principles and encourages other nations to do the same [15].

So, what role does the political system play in shaping U.S. foreign policy? The political system has a direct influence on foreign policy. As mentioned earlier, the division of powers forms the foundation of this system in the U.S. As the chief diplomat, the President is one of the key figures responsible for shaping foreign policy. The President has powers such as negotiating treaties and appointing ambassadors.

Several government officials and agencies support the President in this task:

1) The Department of State is directly responsible for implementing foreign policy. It oversees U.S. diplomats and gathers information to assist the President in making decisions.

2) The Department of Defence supports the President's military decisions and influences foreign policy by maintaining troops at U.S. military bases worldwide, enabling quick responses to any military crisis.

3) The National Security Council (NSC) advises the President and provides analysis on foreign policy and military issues, aligning with national goals. Its members include the Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defence, FBI Director, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The NSC also oversees the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which collects intelligence on governments and political movements worldwide [16].

Congress and the American public also play essential roles in foreign policy. These include overseeing imports and exports, regulating foreign trade and immigration, and declaring War. Only Congress has the authority to declare War and allocate funding for foreign policy initiatives officially. Furthermore, Congress must approve treaties negotiated by the President and confirm the appointments of ambassadors. Congress also sets immigration quotas, determines which countries benefit most from trade agreements, allocates foreign aid, and establishes the defence budget. However, Congress frequently has the power to approve, amend, or reject policy proposals from the President [10].

The Supreme Court has a limited role in shaping foreign policy. It holds judicial authority over issues like treaties, naval and coastal matters, ambassadors, and other public concerns. Additionally, the Supreme Court has jurisdiction over disputes between U.S. states and foreign countries or their citizens.

Throughout history, tensions have sometimes arisen among the three branches of government over foreign policy. For example, the President has occasionally pursued actions that the Senate was hesitant to approve. A notable example is President Woodrow Wilson's effort to establish the League of Nations after World War I. However, the Senate opposed its creation and refused to ratify the treaty.

Another area of tension involves Congress's authority to declare War versus the President's role as commander-in-chief. Several presidents have involved the U.S. in major military conflicts, such as the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War, without prior Congressional approval.

Public opinion also influences the development of foreign policy. Foreign lobbying groups try to sway Congress and the President on specific issues. Business associations aim to shape decisions on international economic and trade mat-

ters. Especially in the area of military intervention, groups and individuals with strong opinions on particular foreign policy topics often organise protests and other political actions to influence lawmakers. The American public directly affects foreign policy through the leaders they elect. It can also engage with interest groups – such as environmental, peace, or human rights organisations – to help shape policy on specific foreign issues [13].

*Tools and Strategies of U.S. Foreign Policy.* What tools do U.S. government officials use to accomplish foreign policy goals? The United States relies on diplomacy, economic leverage, and military power to protect its global interests.

One key aspect is diplomacy, which involves government representation abroad to promote national values and interests through peaceful means. Diplomacy helps resolve disputes or encourage cooperation, such as building trade relationships or uniting against common threats. The President often meets with foreign leaders to discuss foreign policy topics, treaties, and agreements. The Secretary of State, ambassadors, and other diplomats also participate in what is called public diplomacy.

Through economic aid or economic sanctions, the U.S. aims to promote specific behaviours and discourage unwanted actions by offering incentives or penalties to other countries.

Another way to implement foreign policy is by providing foreign aid, which can include financial, military, or food assistance, to countries in need. A prominent example of this was the effort to rebuild factories and business infrastructure in Western European countries after World War II.

Alliances are another tool used in foreign policy. These are formal agreements or partnerships between countries, often for mutual defence. A well-known example is the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Alliances can also be economic, such as the European Union and OPEC, as well as similar organisations.

The International Monetary System, comprising the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), was established in 1944 to stabilise the global economy by providing loans to countries in need.

Governments also conduct foreign policy through trade agreements by determining which goods are traded, setting tariffs, and addressing other

commercial issues in international trade. The United Nations, established in 1945, serves as a platform for diplomacy and a mechanism for resolving global conflicts through peaceful means.

## CONCLUSIONS

The development of U.S. foreign policy reflects the country's complex shift from its isolationist roots to its status as a leading global superpower. Historical experiences, strategic needs, and ideological beliefs have driven U.S. foreign policy in its pursuit of national interests – specifically, ensuring national security, promoting economic growth, upholding democratic values, and maintaining global stability and peace.

From the post-Revolutionary efforts to avoid European entanglements to the assertive Monroe Doctrine, and from the interventionist shifts of the 20th century to the global counterterrorism campaigns of the 21st century, each period of American foreign policy has been shaped by its unique geopolitical challenges. The Cold War, in particular, established a foreign policy of containment, military alliances, and ideological rivalry that transformed U.S. international engagement.

Equally important are the domestic structures that influence foreign policy. The U.S. Constitution envisions a balance of powers between the Executive and Legislative branches, with the

President leading diplomacy and Congress overseeing trade, war declarations, and treaty ratifications. Various agencies, including the Department of State, the Department of Defence, and the National Security Council, play crucial roles in shaping, implementing, and coordinating foreign policy. Public opinion, interest groups, and the media further enrich and complicate the foreign policy-making process, reflecting the democratic character of the U.S. political system.

In the 21st century, the United States faces a range of new and persistent challenges, such as strategic competition with China and Russia, global climate change, cyber threats, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, migration crises, and pandemics. These issues demand a comprehensive foreign policy approach that balances diplomacy, economic tools, military preparedness, and international cooperation.

Ultimately, U.S. foreign policy remains flexible and responsive, grounded in a blend of historical traditions, constitutional principles, and the ever-evolving realities of international politics. While different administrations may vary in their strategies or rhetoric, the primary goal remains the same: to protect and promote the national interests of the United States in an increasingly interconnected and unpredictable world.

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