INTRODUCTION

“International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power.”
—Hans J. Morgenthau

“Human rights is the soul of our foreign policy, because human rights is the very soul of our sense of nationhood.”
—Jimmy Carter

Today it is difficult for the United States, or any nation, to accomplish goals and important tasks on its own. Countries have to work together on issues such as terrorism, the economy, the environment, and the spread of disease, to name just a few. It is becoming so difficult for nations to make decisions entirely on their own that the world now is sometimes referred to as the global community.

How the United States gets what it wants in this global community is complicated; how the United States decides what it wants can be even more so. What are the goals of the United States in the global community? What issues and objectives are the most important? Should economic interests outweigh security interests? And what role should ideological interests play?

For the United States, answering these questions is not always easy. Many different groups work to influence foreign policy. In Congress, both the House of Representatives and the Senate have several committees that work on foreign relations, national security, trade, and defense issues. In the executive branch, there are more competing agencies, although the president has the final say. International groups, such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) influence U.S. foreign policy as well.

With all of these groups trying to influence the foreign policy agenda, international relations can be a complex undertaking. Further complicating the creation of foreign policy is the difficulty of enforcement, as countries cannot impose their ideas on one another. If one nation succeeds, another nation may lose out. As the world becomes more intricately linked, it is important to understand how nations like the United States develop and implement foreign policy.
RECENT HISTORY

The United States in the World. Since the end of World War II, the United States has been a dominant force in world politics. The instability that persisted from the beginning of World War I until the end of World War II caused the international community to look to a stabilizing force—a vacuum that, at first, only the United States was able to fill.

Several international institutions were created during the post-war period and were headquartered in the United States. The UN was established with the aim of maintaining and promoting international peace and order. The major Allied victors of the war—the United States, China, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom—gave themselves the most control over the UN, including granting each country veto power over all Security Council initiatives. The Allied nations also came together to create rules regarding trade and monetary policy that became known as the Bretton Woods system. This system recognized the primacy of the United States and of the dollar and also created the World Bank and the IMF to provide loans to war-shattered and developing countries.

This brief era of international cooperation was darkened by the onset of the Cold War, which became a long-standing conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Cold War was a standoff between a communist bloc in the East, led by the Soviet Union, and a capitalist bloc in the West, led by the United States. The two blocs in this conflict engaged in a power struggle, each seeking to spread its ideology and to bolster its economy.

At times during this standoff, there were wars, like the Korean and Vietnam Wars; at other times, there were threats of war, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Other battles were waged in the field of technology, such as the nuclear arms race and the space race. However, much of the Cold War happened behind the scenes in the world of covert agencies, such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Ultimately, the Cold War never became the full-scale global conflict that many feared; instead, it ended quietly. The Soviet Union collapsed from within and its satellite states, such as East Germany and Poland, pushed for their own independence.
**The Post–Cold War World.** With the end of the Cold War, the United States was again perceived as the only true world power. This image was reinforced by the U.S. military’s resounding victory in the Persian Gulf War of 1990–1991. Although there were bombings and acts of terrorism committed against U.S. government personnel abroad, such as the embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998 and the bombing of the *USS Cole* in Yemen in 2000, the 1990s were a time of relative peace and prosperity for the United States.

This peace was shattered on September 11, 2001, when terrorists hijacked four American commercial airliners and crashed them into the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon outside the District of Colombia, and a field in rural Pennsylvania. The terrorist group al-Qaeda, led by Saudi national Osama bin Laden, executed the attacks. Al-Qaeda is a terrorist network based in Afghanistan and Pakistan that is supported by the Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist group of warlords.

The United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to root out al-Qaeda and to dismantle the Taliban. Since then, the United States has been significantly more active abroad than at any time since the end of the Cold War. In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq over fears that it may have had weapons of mass destruction and that its government may have been sponsoring terrorism. Although there is still some dispute about whether these concerns were justified, the United States remains engaged in the rebuilding and protection of Iraq, although U.S. troop levels there are now very low.

Since 2003, much has changed in Iraq and in the United States’ efforts to combat terrorism. Al-Qaeda has been significantly weakened by U.S. military and covert operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen. However, turmoil in countries such as Syria, Somalia, and Nigeria have made space for the rise of new regional terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), al-Shabab, and Boko Haram. These terrorist organizations pose different levels of threat to the United States, but each plays a significant role in destabilizing its base country and region. Of these, ISIL is considered the greatest threat to the United States and its interests, largely because it is causing instability in Iraq and is engaged in Syria’s civil war.
When crafting its foreign policy, President Barack Obama’s administration has placed greater emphasis on cooperating with other nations. For example, during the civil war in Libya, which removed long-time dictator Moammar Gaddafí from power in 2011, the United States joined many European nations in assisting the forces opposed to Gaddafí. However, the United States did not take a leading position, instead choosing to allow rebel forces and European nations to take the lead role. This represented a shift in U.S. policy and angered some observers, particularly those who believed the United States should play a more robust role in global affairs.

The world of international relations is a complex one; countries are constantly trying to figure out what they want while weighing their goals against the needs and desires of other nations. The tangled web created by competing interests, competing countries, different agencies, and different branches of government working to define and protect national interests makes for intricate work.

**SETTING FOREIGN POLICY**

National interests, loosely defined, are what a country wants or needs to survive and to improve its situation. Just as any individual makes decisions by balancing self-interest and personal values, nations operate in the world based on national interests and beliefs. Most of these interests and beliefs can be divided into three broad categories: economic, security, and ideological interests.

**Economic Interests.** Trade policy, contracts, taxes and tariffs, and monetary policy all fall within the realm of economic interests. Governments do their best to make sure that their export products make it to retail shelves in other countries; they also try to protect their domestic industries through the use of import tariffs and subsidies.

The category of economic interests is difficult to navigate because governments have different levels of control over the economy in different countries. China, for instance, has a planned economy in which the government is in charge of most aspects of the marketplace, including the value of its currency. Other countries, such as many in Western Europe, have a mixed economy in which the government
WHO SETS U.S. FOREIGN POLICY?

According to the Constitution, both the legislative and executive branches have a say in the creation of foreign policy. Congress controls spending, declares war, approves treaties and presidential nominations to diplomatic posts, and can pass laws or resolutions stating specific policies.

The executive branch conducts war and commands military personnel, negotiates treaties and other international agreements, and has the power to appoint ambassadors and other diplomats. Within the executive branch, many individuals and groups create and enact U.S. foreign policy.

**The President.** The president ultimately has the power to make all foreign policy decisions within the realm of the executive branch. The president is also the commander-in-chief of the military and the country’s head of state.

**Secretary of State.** The secretary of state advises the president and acts as the nation’s chief diplomat. The secretary also implements policy decisions, oversees the embassies, and administers foreign aid.

**Secretary of Defense.** Along with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the secretary of defense advises the president on military matters. The secretary also implements military orders and policy decisions, and oversees military aid to other countries.

**National Security Council.** The National Security Council conducts policy studies, advises the president, and coordinates policymaking and implementation. The council includes the president, vice president, the secretaries of state and defense, and the national security advisor.

Other departments, such as the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, and the Treasury, and agencies such as the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, play a role in the creation of U.S. foreign policy.

has some control over large industries, such as health care, banking, and air travel, but leaves much of the economy uncontrolled. In the United States, almost all companies and industries are susceptible to free-market forces, although the government has moved to protect agriculture, transportation, and finance, among other industries.

In the past several years, many countries have worked to find common ground to deal with the worldwide economic downturn. Nations with different market philosophies have debated the proper level of government stimulus in the economy. Some countries and
international organizations are also considering the regulation of international trade and debating how much oversight is needed in the arena of world trade.

**Security Interests.** Of vital importance to every country is its safety. Any threats, or potential threats, fall into the realm of security interests. All countries do their best to keep their homelands safe, but security interests can also be about threats less obvious than military attacks.

Because the U.S. military is spread out, with bases and installations in more than 120 countries, threats and instabilities in these countries can have security implications for the United States. For example, the U.S. embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, was bombed in 1983 by the terrorist group Hezbollah. In 1998, groups linked to Osama bin Laden simultaneously bombed U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. And in 2011, the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, was bombed, killing four Americans, including Ambassador Christopher Stevens.

The rise in international terrorism has left its mark in Madrid, London, New York City, and Washington, D.C., and in countries and communities across the Muslim world. As a result, many nations feel the need to work together on matters of security. Countries now work in concert to defuse threats and share intelligence, and to protect themselves, their friends, and their neighbors.

**Ideological Interests.** Ideological interests are those that relate to a country’s way of life and ideals. All countries have their own worldviews; some are in direct conflict with one another. Often these views are about forms of government, civil rights, or religion.

The United States has been regarded as a world leader since the end of World War II. Because of this status and the allure and influence of American cultural products, the United States has had a strong impact on world ideologies. However, it has also come into conflict with other countries because of ideological concerns—the chief example being the Cold War, in which the United States believed it was fighting international communism.
Some national objectives defy categorization. For example, the United States commits a great deal of energy and money to protect international shipping routes in order to keep the global economy functioning smoothly. Of course, the United States has economic motivations to do so—international trade is a major driver of the American economy. But there are also security reasons to do this work; it protects major harbors and keeps the crews of ships safe. Finally, the American belief in free trade provides an ideological reason to do this work as well.

Some, including former Vice President Dick Cheney, have argued that the sole reason terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and al-Qaeda do not like the United States is ideological. Vice President Cheney and others have declared that these terrorist groups hate American freedoms. President George W. Bush made the argument that one reason the United States went into Iraq in 2003 was to liberate the Iraqi people from a horrible dictator; this reason had no security or economic implications for the United States and is an example of an ideological interest.

Advocates of humanitarian intervention in Sudan have used ideological interests to argue that the United States should use its military power to stop or to prevent humanitarian crises. Pro-democracy advocates have also argued that the United States should have intervened more forcefully in the various uprisings of the 2011 Arab Spring.

**Which Interest is Most Important?** Sometimes an international interest fits into only one category; more often there is much overlap between the categories. The Iraq War, according to some, could be justified by all three types of interests. There were security concerns that Saddam Hussein was stockpiling weapons and harboring terrorists; there were economic concerns that oil supplies could be cut off by instability in the region; and the Bush administration had an ideological goal of bringing democracy to the Middle East through Iraq.

So what happens when these interests do not align? For example, it is in the United States’ economic interests to trade with China, but China’s human rights practices violate the American ideals of individual liberty.
and due process. It is also in American security interests to support and work with the regime in Pakistan, but doing so is expensive and, because of the way the regime treats its own citizens, counter to the United States’ ideological interests.

When conflicts arise, the competing interests must be worked out, and inevitably some citizens and decision-makers are unhappy with the resolution. And between Congress and the many executive agencies that deal with the international community, finding any resolution can be quite a challenge.

**NAVIGATING THE GLOBAL STAGE**

Although the work of setting foreign policy is difficult, given the many players in the game and the many priorities and interests the United States has, setting policy is actually the easiest part of the job. Implementing foreign policy is more difficult. When a country finally decides what it wants in the realm of international relations, achieving its goals can prove to be the more challenging part of the job.

For a long time in world history, the use of military force was the primary way to achieve international goals. In fact, humorist Will Rogers once quipped, “Diplomacy is the art of saying ‘nice doggie!’ until you can find a rock.” However, with the emergence of international institutions, alliances, and global trade, there are now more subtle means of approaching the world than with President Theodore Roosevelt’s “big stick.”

**Diplomacy and Cooperation.** Nations work together through their embassies and other government agencies to negotiate and enforce treaties, to build goodwill through cultural exchanges, and to enhance trade relationships. Some countries are “integrated,” meaning they are connected and sensitive to the global community. Other countries are more isolated, while some, such as North Korea, are isolated by the international community rather than by choice.

The United States is economically and diplomatically connected to the world at large. It is a member of many large international organizations, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the UN Security
Council, the World Bank, the IMF, and the Group of Eight developed nations with large economies (G8). These organizations are very influential in international relations.

In addition, the United States is a signatory of many trade agreements. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is a far-reaching partnership between Canada, Mexico, and the United States that has had significant impacts on the economies of all three countries. The Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) is a similarly expansive trade agreement between the United States, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. As of 2015, the United States was negotiating two additional large-scale trade agreements: the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which would tighten trade relations with Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam; and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T-TIP), which would tighten relations between the United States and the European Union (EU).

Whereas trade agreements bring two or more countries closer together, economic sanctions and embargoes can be used to punish or to isolate countries. The American economy is the largest in the world; the United States has the ability to seriously influence the economy of any other nation through its trade policy. However, embargoes and sanctions can be more effective if other countries join them. As of 2015, the United States, the EU, and their allies were imposing economic sanctions on Iran to curb its nuclear ambitions. However, because of energy needs, the EU was less eager to participate in the economic sanctions the United States has placed on Russia.

**Economic and Military Aid.** Countries can give money, food, medicines, and loans to other countries or choose to withhold those items. Nations can also choose to extend or withhold military aid in the form of weapons, training, technology, equipment, ammunitions, and personnel. Nations do this to build partnerships with other nations, to promote stability and security in key regions, and to help other nations in times of turmoil and crisis.
According to the Center for Global Development, in 2013, the United States ranked 20th in foreign aid to other nations as a percentage of gross national product (GNP), a rough estimate of the size of a nation's economy. In terms of total giving, the United States gave more money than any other nation. In 2012, four nations received the bulk of American foreign aid: Israel ($3.07 billion); Afghanistan ($2.3 billion); Pakistan ($2.1 billion); and Iraq ($1.7 billion).

Some foreign aid is given with restrictions or conditions. For example, when nations give loans to other nations, they often include provisions that benefit the lending country. This may mean that a guarantee of a certain amount of trade is built into the loan, or it could mean that a particular company is allowed to mine for minerals in the nation receiving the loan. Some foreign aid is not given in the form of money at all. Much of the U.S. aid given to Israel, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, for example, has been in the form of military aid.

**Multilateralism vs. Unilateralism.** In the past, states frequently aimed to create foreign policy without entanglements and alliances. This policy, unilateralism, calls for states to rely on their own resources and abilities to carry out their foreign affairs. Many leaders prefer unilateralism because it enables each government to retain a maximum amount of sovereignty and to act without the approval or support of another country. States pursue unilateralism when cooperation to achieve a goal is unnecessary or when a country decides it has enough power to impose a desired policy. Recently, countries have used unilateralism to set an example and to demonstrate their resolve to follow a certain course of action. South Africa did this when it unilaterally committed to nuclear disarmament in the early 1990s. And although the use of this approach continues to have supporters, there is increasing pressure for countries to work together to create and execute international policies in the face of growing global interdependence.

In today's global community, the actions of one state often directly or indirectly affect other states. In the face of this reality, many states have turned toward international cooperation and the policy of multilateralism. Multilateralism engages at least three countries,
and often seeks to bring as many states into agreement as possible to achieve mutual goals. Multilateralism is usually the preferred option when dealing with issues that require communication and cooperation between numerous states. Within multilateral accords, states must compromise with others in order to achieve a cohesive policy. This requires ceding sovereignty in return for an assurance of alliance and concerted action. Advocates point to the Montreal Protocol, ratified by 196 countries and the EU, as a successful multilateral action aimed at preserving the Earth’s ozone layer.

In the disorganized global arena, where states may pursue any number of means to implement policy, intergovernmental organizations promote multilateralism and provide a forum for governments to talk through solutions. Foremost among these is the UN, which claims almost every state in the world as a member. There is widespread disagreement over the benefits and influence of these organizations, in which membership is voluntary and policy enforcement is difficult. Believers in international organizations argue that they provide a model as we move toward global governance and away from the importance of sovereign states. Challengers dismiss this view, and regard these organizations as an ineffective façade for states that actually act unilaterally through them.

**CONCLUSION**

All nations face significant challenges when they enter the arena of global affairs. Countries compete for scarce resources, seek to impose order and security in dangerous places, cooperate with some nations and come into conflict with others, and take any available actions to advance their national agendas. Navigating the chaos of global affairs will be one of the United States’ most important challenges in the 21st century.