



## U.S DOMESTIC POLICIES AND MAKING OF FOREIGN POLICY.”

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**Abstract:** This analytical report examines how domestic political factors shape the foreign policy of the United States. It explains how the interaction between the President, Congress, political parties, interest groups, and public opinion determines the direction of U.S. foreign relations. The report highlights the way institutional checks and balances, combined with electoral competition, create both cooperation and conflict in the process of foreign policy decision-making. Special attention is given to how internal political debates and partisan divisions influence major diplomatic choices and military interventions. The analysis also considers how public opinion and lobbying groups can constrain or promote specific foreign policy goals. By linking domestic institutions with international behavior, the study shows that U.S. foreign policy is not driven solely by global interests but also by internal political calculations and democratic pressures. Examples such as the Iraq War, the Iran Nuclear Deal, and U.S.–Israel relations demonstrate how domestic political dynamics directly affect America’s international actions and its image as a global power.

**Keywords:** NATO, Democrats, Republicans, Vietnam war, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the House of Representatives, The National Security Council, Trans-Pacific Partnership, AIPAC

### INTRODUCTION

The United States has long been recognized as one of the most influential actors in international politics, shaping global norms, institutions, and security arrangements since the end of the Second World War. However, despite its dominant international position, U.S. foreign policy is not guided exclusively by external threats or strategic interests abroad. Instead, it is profoundly influenced by domestic political forces that define how and why the United States engages with the rest of the world.

Understanding these internal factors — institutional, ideological, and societal — is crucial for analyzing both the consistency and contradictions in America’s global behavior. The foundations of U.S. foreign policy-making lie in the constitutional separation of powers, which distributes authority between the executive and legislative branches. While the President acts as Commander-in-Chief and the primary architect of diplomacy, Congress retains control over funding, ratification of treaties, and the power to declare war. This institutional balance often generates a dynamic of cooperation and confrontation, making foreign policy a negotiated outcome rather than a unilateral presidential act. The judiciary, although less visible, also influences foreign policy indirectly through rulings on executive power, human rights, and international agreements.

Domestic political competition further complicates the process. The two-party system, dominated by Democrats and Republicans, introduces ideological polarization that



extends into foreign policy debates. Whereas Democrats generally emphasize multilateralism, diplomacy, and international institutions, Republicans have tended to prioritize national sovereignty, defense strength, and unilateral action. These partisan differences produce frequent policy reversals between administrations, as seen in the contrasting approaches of Barack Obama and Donald Trump toward climate agreements, Iran, and NATO cooperation. Beyond institutions and parties, a diverse network of interest groups, economic lobbies, and public opinion also exerts influence. Organizations such as AIPAC, business associations, and advocacy movements mobilize resources to shape legislation and diplomatic priorities. At the same time, public sentiment — shaped by media framing, national identity, and wartime experiences — can constrain or propel leaders toward specific actions.

In sum, U.S. foreign policy emerges from a complex interaction between international pressures and domestic political realities. This report seeks to analyze how internal political structures, actors, and public forces collectively shape the United States' foreign policy decision-making, revealing that America's global conduct is, to a large extent, a mirror of its domestic political landscape.

#### Structure of domestic politics in the United States

The political system of the United States is founded on the principle of separation of powers and a framework of checks and balances, which together ensure that no single branch of government dominates the policy-making process. This constitutional design profoundly influences how foreign policy is formulated and implemented. The U.S. Constitution assigns distinct but interdependent responsibilities to the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, creating an institutional structure that blends cooperation with competition<sup>2</sup>.

#### The executive branch

The President serves as both the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, giving the officeholder a central role in foreign relations. The President directs diplomacy, appoints ambassadors, negotiates treaties, and makes critical national security decisions.<sup>3</sup> However, presidential authority is not absolute. Decisions related to war, trade, and international agreements are subject to congressional oversight, budgetary approval, and sometimes judicial review. Presidents often rely on executive agreements — rather than formal treaties — to bypass potential opposition in the Senate.<sup>4</sup> The National Security Council (NSC) and the Department of State function as key instruments in executing the President's foreign policy agenda. The NSC, established in 1947, coordinates intelligence, defense, and diplomatic strategies, ensuring coherence between domestic political priorities and global commitments.<sup>5</sup>

#### The legislative branch

The U.S. Congress, consisting of the Senate and the House of Representatives, holds substantial influence over foreign policy through its constitutional powers to allocate

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Constitution, Articles I–III.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of State, "The Role of the President in Foreign Policy."

<sup>4</sup> Goldstein, J., & Pevehouse, J. International Relations (2023), p. 128.

<sup>5</sup> The National Security Act of 1947, Public Law 80–253



funds, ratify treaties, and declare war.<sup>6</sup> Congressional committees, such as the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, scrutinize executive policies, conduct hearings, and approve appointments of ambassadors and senior diplomatic officials. Congress also acts as a critical check on presidential authority. During the Vietnam War and later conflicts, the War Powers Resolution of 1973 reaffirmed Congress's right to limit unauthorized military actions. Similarly, Congress frequently shapes U.S. diplomacy through economic measures, including sanctions, aid allocations, and trade agreements — demonstrating that foreign policy often reflects internal legislative bargaining.

### The Judiciary

Although less visible in daily diplomacy, the judiciary plays a meaningful role in defining the legal boundaries of U.S. foreign policy. The Supreme Court occasionally intervenes to interpret the constitutionality of executive actions in foreign affairs, as in the landmark case *Youngstown Sheet & Tube Co. v. Sawyer* (1952), which restricted presidential power during wartime.<sup>7</sup> Judicial review thereby ensures that foreign policy remains consistent with constitutional principles and individual rights.

### Political parties and civil society

Beyond formal institutions, the two-party system — dominated by Democrats and Republicans — and a vibrant civil society contribute to a pluralistic environment in which foreign policy is continuously debated and redefined. Political parties present differing ideological approaches to diplomacy, defense, and international cooperation, while media, think tanks, and advocacy organizations influence public perception and policy priorities.<sup>8</sup> In sum, the structure of U.S. domestic politics establishes a complex yet balanced system in which authority is shared among multiple actors. This institutional diversity ensures democratic accountability but also makes foreign policy a product of negotiation, compromise, and competing domestic interests.

### The President and executive power in foreign policy

The President of the United States occupies a central and highly visible role in the making of foreign policy. As Head of State, Chief Diplomat, and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, the President represents the nation in international relations, articulates its strategic priorities, and directs the conduct of diplomacy and war.<sup>9</sup> This constitutional concentration of authority makes the presidency the most influential institution in shaping America's global role. Yet, in practice, presidential power is conditioned by legal limits, institutional checks, and domestic political realities that continually define the boundaries of executive action.

The U.S. Constitution (Article II, Section 2) grants the President the power to negotiate treaties, appoint ambassadors, and receive foreign representatives<sup>10</sup>. Through these powers, the President defines the diplomatic tone of U.S. engagement abroad. However, foreign policy formulation is not a unilateral endeavor. All treaties must be

<sup>6</sup> Rosati, J. A., & Scott, J. M. *The Politics of United States Foreign Policy* (2019), p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> *Youngstown Sheet & Tube Co. v. Sawyer*, 343 U.S. 579 (1952).

<sup>8</sup> Pew Research Center. *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (2022).

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Constitution, Article I, Sections 8–10.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of State. "The President's Role in Foreign Policy."



ratified by a two-thirds vote in the Senate, and appropriations for foreign programs or military interventions depend on Congressional approval.<sup>11</sup> This system of checks and balances — embedded since 1787 — ensures that foreign policy reflects not only the President's vision but also the will of the broader political establishment. The Institutional and Strategic Dimensions: Modern presidents rely on a sophisticated bureaucratic network to implement foreign policy decisions. The National Security Council (NSC), established in 1947, integrates the efforts of the State Department, the Department of Defense, and the intelligence community.<sup>12</sup> The NSC assists the President in evaluating threats, setting priorities, and coordinating interagency actions. The Secretary of State manages diplomatic relations and represents the U.S. in global institutions, while the Secretary of Defense oversees military strategy and defense commitments. Together, these actors form what is often called the “foreign policy establishment”, an institutional ecosystem centered around the presidency.

Presidential decision-making, however, is rarely isolated from domestic considerations. Scholars of foreign policy, such as James Rosenau and Graham Allison, have shown that U.S. presidents act within a framework of bureaucratic politics, partisan pressures, and public expectations.<sup>13</sup> The President must consider approval ratings, party control of Congress, and electoral promises when making foreign decisions. For instance, interventions abroad are often timed to coincide with favorable domestic conditions or to divert attention from internal political controversies.

#### Partisan and ideological influences

Political ideology and party identity significantly shape presidential approaches to foreign affairs. Democratic administrations have generally favored multilateral diplomacy, alliance-building, and cooperative engagement, emphasizing international law and human rights. In contrast, Republican administrations often prioritize national sovereignty, defense expansion, and strategic unilateralism.<sup>14</sup> For example, Barack Obama's administration pursued engagement through dialogue and coalition-building — evident in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Iran Nuclear Deal, 2015) and the Paris Climate Accord. Conversely, Donald Trump's “America First” policy emphasized economic nationalism, border security, and withdrawal from multilateral commitments such as the Paris Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).<sup>15</sup> These policy reversals illustrate how domestic ideology and electoral mandates redefine America's global orientation with each administration.

#### Domestic constraints on Presidential power

While the President enjoys considerable autonomy in crisis management and diplomacy, domestic constraints remain powerful. The War Powers Resolution of 1973 limits the executive's ability to engage in prolonged military actions without congressional authorization.<sup>16</sup> Historical precedents — such as the Vietnam War, the Iran-Contra affair,

<sup>11</sup> Goldstein, J., & Pevehouse, J. International Relations (2023), p. 145

<sup>12</sup> The National Security Act of 1947, Public Law 80-253

<sup>13</sup> Allison, G. Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis. (1971).

<sup>14</sup> Mead, W. R. Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World. (2001).

<sup>15</sup> Council on Foreign Relations (CFR.org), “Comparing Obama and Trump Foreign Policies.”

<sup>16</sup> The War Powers Resolution of 1973, Public Law 93-148.



and U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan — demonstrate that unchecked presidential initiatives often provoke political backlash and public skepticism. Furthermore, the rise of media influence and public opinion has transformed foreign policy into a highly scrutinized and politically sensitive domain. Presidents must now justify international commitments not only to Congress but to the electorate, whose support is essential for sustaining long-term military or diplomatic initiatives. The public's opposition to extended wars, as seen during Vietnam and post-2003 Iraq, exemplifies how domestic sentiment can restrict presidential maneuverability.<sup>17</sup>

In summary, the President's executive power in foreign policy is extensive but conditional. The modern presidency functions at the intersection of institutional authority, domestic politics, and global expectations. Although the President serves as the principal architect of U.S. diplomacy, every decision is shaped by the need to reconcile national interests with political realities at home. The dynamic interplay between domestic legitimacy and international leadership defines both the strength and the limitations of the American presidency in global affairs.

#### The role of Congress in decision-making

The U.S. Congress plays an important part in shaping foreign policy. It has the power to declare war, approve treaties, and control the national budget. The Senate confirms ambassadors and other key foreign policy officials.<sup>18</sup>

Congress checks the President's actions through committees such as the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. The War Powers Resolution (1973) limits how long the President can send troops without approval.

Political parties also influence Congress — Democrats often prefer diplomacy and cooperation, while Republicans focus more on defense and national interests. In this way, Congress helps balance the President's power and keeps foreign policy under democratic control.

#### Political parties and electoral influence

Political parties in the United States strongly influence foreign policy. The country mainly has two major parties — the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Their different values often lead to contrasting foreign policy goals. Democrats usually support multilateral diplomacy, cooperation with international organizations, and focus on issues like climate change or human rights. Republicans, on the other hand, often emphasize national security, defense spending, and economic self-interest.<sup>19</sup>

Elections also shape U.S. foreign policy. Presidential candidates often promise specific international actions to gain voter support. For example, Barack Obama promoted global cooperation and the Iran Nuclear Deal, while Donald Trump's "America First" policy focused on U.S. domestic interests.<sup>20</sup> Overall, political parties and election cycles make

<sup>17</sup> Pew Research Center (2022). Public Trust and Presidential Decision-Making in Foreign Policy.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Constitution, Article I. War Powers Resolution (1973) matni – H.J.Res.542 — Congress.gov

<sup>19</sup> Republican Party Platform (2016) – gop.com ([https://gop.com/platform/american-exceptionalism/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://gop.com/platform/american-exceptionalism/?utm_source=chatgpt.com))  
Council on Foreign Relations – The Impact of U.S. Elections on Foreign Policy ([https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/impact-us-elections-foreign-policy?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/impact-us-elections-foreign-policy?utm_source=chatgpt.com))

<sup>20</sup> BBC News – Obama vs. Trump: Different Foreign Policy Visions ([https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51716410?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51716410?utm_source=chatgpt.com))



foreign policy dynamic and sometimes inconsistent, as each new administration may change or reverse previous policies.

#### Public opinion and interest groups

Public opinion and interest groups play an important role in shaping U.S. foreign policy. In a democratic system, leaders must consider how citizens view wars, alliances, and international cooperation before making major decisions.<sup>21</sup> When public support is low, it becomes difficult for the government to continue costly or unpopular actions — as seen during the Vietnam and Iraq wars.

Interest groups also strongly influence foreign policy by representing specific ideas or industries. Organizations such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and human rights NGOs lobby Congress and the President to promote their goals.<sup>22</sup> These groups often use media campaigns, donations, and reports to shape political debates and decisions. Public opinion, social media, and lobbying together form a powerful domestic force that can support or block U.S. foreign policy initiatives.

#### Interest groups and lobbying power

Interest groups and lobbying organizations play a major role in shaping U.S. foreign policy. They represent specific economic, ethnic, or ideological interests and try to influence government decisions through funding, advocacy, and public campaigns.<sup>23</sup> In the U.S., lobbying is a legal and powerful tool protected by the First Amendment, allowing citizens and organizations to petition the government.

Some of the most influential foreign policy lobbies include the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which promotes strong U.S.–Israel relations, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which supports trade liberalization and investment abroad.<sup>24</sup> Defense contractors and energy companies also lobby for policies that benefit their industries, such as military aid or access to global markets. Lobbyists influence both Congress and the executive branch by providing information, campaign donations, and expert analysis. While this process can enhance democratic participation, it can also create policy bias when powerful groups dominate decision-making. As a result, U.S. foreign policy sometimes reflects domestic lobbying interests as much as national or humanitarian goals.

#### case studies: Domestic constraints in practice

The impact of domestic politics on U.S. foreign policy can be best understood through real examples where internal constraints limited or redirected executive decisions. Three major cases — the Vietnam War, the Iran Nuclear Deal, and the Syrian Intervention Debate — show how Congress, public opinion, and party politics shape foreign policy outcomes.<sup>25</sup>

1. The Vietnam War (1960s–1973) Public protests, negative media coverage, and growing congressional opposition eventually forced President Nixon to end U.S. military

<sup>21</sup> Pew Research Center (2023) – Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy ([https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/04/12/americans-views-of-us-role-in-the-world/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/04/12/americans-views-of-us-role-in-the-world/?utm_source=chatgpt.com))

<sup>22</sup> Council on Foreign Relations – How Interest Groups Influence U.S. Foreign Policy ([https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/role-interest-groups-us-foreign-policy?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/role-interest-groups-us-foreign-policy?utm_source=chatgpt.com))

<sup>23</sup> Council on Foreign Relations – How Interest Groups Influence U.S. Foreign Policy ([https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/role-interest-groups-us-foreign-policy?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/role-interest-groups-us-foreign-policy?utm_source=chatgpt.com))

<sup>24</sup> AIPAC Official Website – About AIPAC ([https://www.aipac.org/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.aipac.org/?utm_source=chatgpt.com))

<sup>25</sup> Rosati, J. A., & Scott, J. M. The Politics of United States Foreign Policy (2019).



involvement in Vietnam.<sup>26</sup> The conflict revealed that without public support, even a powerful President could not sustain a long foreign intervention. This experience led to the War Powers Resolution of 1973, which restricted presidential war-making powers.<sup>27</sup>

2. The Iran Nuclear Deal (2015–2018) President Obama's administration reached the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, focusing on diplomatic conflict resolution. However, domestic opposition from Republicans in Congress and lobbying from interest groups like AIPAC made the agreement politically fragile. When President Trump took office in 2017, he withdrew from the deal, showing how internal political shifts can reverse international commitments.<sup>28</sup>

3. The Syrian Intervention Debate (2013) After reports of chemical attacks in Syria, President Obama considered military action but faced strong public opposition and limited congressional support<sup>29</sup>. Instead, his administration accepted a Russian diplomatic proposal to remove Syria's chemical weapons, demonstrating how domestic resistance can push foreign policy toward negotiation instead of intervention.

These cases demonstrate that U.S. foreign policy is deeply shaped by domestic institutions, partisanship, and public sentiment. Political legitimacy at home remains essential for successful international action.

### Conclusion

The study of the United States' foreign policy clearly shows that domestic political factors are central to understanding America's behavior in global affairs. Every major international action — whether military, economic, or diplomatic — begins with internal political debates and institutional interactions. The President, Congress, political parties, interest groups, and public opinion together shape what kind of role the U.S. plays in the world.

The structure of American government, based on the separation of powers, creates both balance and tension. The President leads foreign policy as Commander-in-Chief, but Congress has the authority to approve treaties, control budgets, and limit war powers. This balance makes foreign policy a negotiated process rather than a single leader's decision.

Political parties and elections add further complexity. Each administration brings a new set of priorities — Democrats often support diplomacy and cooperation, while Republicans emphasize defense and sovereignty. Such shifts explain why U.S. policies can change quickly, as seen in the differences between Obama's and Trump's foreign strategies.

At the same time, public opinion and lobbying groups strongly influence what is politically possible. The Vietnam War, the Iran Nuclear Deal, and the Syrian Intervention all show that domestic support is essential for sustaining international commitments. When public trust declines or partisan conflict grows, foreign policy becomes inconsistent and limited.

<sup>26</sup> History.com – Vietnam War Protest ([https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-protests?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-protests?utm_source=chatgpt.com))

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Congress – War Powers Resolution of 1973 ([https://www.congress.gov/bill/93rd-congress/house-joint-resolution/542/text?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.congress.gov/bill/93rd-congress/house-joint-resolution/542/text?utm_source=chatgpt.com))

<sup>28</sup> BBC News – Trump Withdraws from Iran Deal ([https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44045957?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44045957?utm_source=chatgpt.com))

<sup>29</sup> The Washington Post – Public Opinion on Syria Intervention ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/poll-syria-airstrikes/2013/09/03/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/poll-syria-airstrikes/2013/09/03/?utm_source=chatgpt.com))



In summary, U.S. foreign policy is a mirror of its domestic politics. America's global leadership depends not only on its military or economic strength but also on its ability to achieve consensus at home. The interaction between democratic institutions, political competition, and civic engagement ensures that foreign policy reflects both national interests and public accountability.

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