After the 9/11 attacks, U.S. citizens could not ignore the fact that U.S. foreign policy choices affected them as well as others.
Source: dpa picture alliance/Alamy
Introduction

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City’s World Trade Center and the Pentagon headquarters, Washington, DC, did more than kill nearly 3,000 people from over 90 different countries. The attacks also changed the mind-sets of most Americans. Many no longer felt safe at home, something most had taken for granted for their entire lives. In trying to understand why a coalition of Takfiri terrorists would launch such attacks, many Americans were rudely reminded that they were all affected by (1) the policies of the U.S. government in international affairs, (2) how those policies were made and implemented, and (3) how those policies and subsequent actions were perceived by others beyond U.S. borders. Perhaps not since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 had these realities been brought home so forcefully to so many Americans.

Recently, the United States withdrew its troops from Iraq, launched air-strikes to protect civilians from their repressive government in Libya, encouraged other repressive regimes to modify their rule or step aside, and called on its allies to do more to help in these regards. It also began the process of disengaging troops currently posted in Afghanistan. The United States initiated steps to try to organize a coordinated multinational effort to recover from the Great Recession of 2008–2010, sought to improve the health care of millions of people suffering from HIV/AIDS, and tried to empower women in places where their essential human rights have not been respected. In all these ways, the U.S. government addressed its own national interests and the interests of others in the international system, and the consequences of those actions continued to affect the lives of Americans—both at home and abroad.

Yet it has always been that way. From the earliest days of the republic, international events and U.S. responses to them impacted where Americans could travel, the safety risks to which they were exposed, the availability and prices of goods, and the quality of life Americans could expect. Like other countries, the United States had to adapt to events beyond its borders, as these events present either problems to be solved or opportunities to be exploited. That adaptation process involved making foreign policy.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define “foreign policy.”
- Describe the five stages of the foreign policy input–output process.
- Explain the formal foreign policy powers of the three main branches of the U.S. government.
- Differentiate between the concentric circles of foreign policy–making approach and the shifting constellations approach.
Simply defined, foreign policy refers to the goals and actions of the U.S. government in the international system. Thus foreign policy may be what the U.S. government wants to achieve, and the steps taken in that regard, toward other international actors (e.g., China, the World Trade Organization, or al Qaeda) or issues (e.g., foreign trade, genocide, or global climate change). The overarching thesis of this book is how policies are made and by whom affects the substance of the resulting policies. That means the actors (the individuals, groups, or organizations) involved in making the policies, their motivations, their differing amounts of power or influence, and the processes by which they make foreign policy decisions combine to shape the resulting policy outputs and ultimately their outcomes. These actors, motivations, processes, outputs, and outcomes are the focus of this book.

**How Is Foreign Policy Made and by Whom?**

Foreign policy making is very much like domestic policy making in the United States. While there are some differences between the two basic processes, overall the similarities found outweigh these differences. At its most fundamental level, policy making is a five-stage process. As shown in Figure 1.1, it starts with inputs—things that stimulate potential policy makers to act. Such inputs could be international events that seem to require or invite a response, or they could be domestic pressures by those who seek a foreign policy change. In the second stage, policy makers make decisions about whether and how to address these inputs. This is the decision-making stage. There are many different ways
to make such decisions; we will discuss many of them in the pages to follow. The result of the decision is the foreign policy output. It is the response by the foreign policy makers to those inputs. Sometimes outputs are words—signals of what the United States is willing to do—or broader policy declarations; other times they are more assertive actions on the part of the government. These outputs have results called outcomes that answer the “so what?” question; policy makers chose a course of action, so what happened then? The “what happened then” is the outcome. Finally, outcomes can create a feedback loop: Based on those outcomes, what new inputs arise?

Some foreign policies are the results of decisions made in the executive branch; others are the result of interactions between a number of interested governmental and nongovernmental actors—like presidents, other administration officials, formal and informal presidential advisers, individual members of Congress, representatives of relevant interest groups, the broader public, foreign leaders concerned, and at times the federal courts. All these interactions are reported by the various elements of the national news media, which may also become a factor in determining whether policies get made and how. Compared to many other countries, the United States has foreign policy–making processes that are extremely open to numerous participants who may become significantly involved.

In the crucial decision-making phase of any foreign policy process, the amount of influence these actors wield is a unique blend of the intersection of the nature of the issue, the political context involved, the timing, the actors’ position in government or politics, and so on. However, presidents and members of Congress have important foreign policy advantages in terms of powers granted to them by the Constitution, and we should note that from the outset.

Let’s begin with the president. The constitutional powers presidents have in foreign policy making are significant. Presidents serve as the commander in chief of the nation’s military. This power allows them to order troops into conflict and determine military strategies. Presidents also have other constitutional roles that allow them to serve essentially as the nation’s chief diplomat. For example, the role of sending and receiving ambassadors gives presidents the sole power to diplomatically recognize other regimes. Presidents have the power to make treaties with other countries, but the Senate must approve them by a two-thirds vote of those present. Presidents also can make personal commitments in the form of executive agreements with other world leaders that do not require Senate approval. The Supreme Court recognizes executive agreements as essentially the same as treaties, at least for the presidents who make them.3

As the nation’s chief executive, presidents appoint (with Senate approval) a number of other foreign policy officials. These officials range from Cabinet officers (e.g., secretaries of state, defense, treasury, or homeland security and a few others like U.S. trade representatives) to the directors of national intelligence and central intelligence and to the different ambassadors who represent the United States in foreign capitals. Presidents also appoint some other influential foreign policy officials without Senate confirmation. A good example is the post of national security adviser. The Constitution also gives presidents
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the power to see that the nation’s laws are faithfully executed, a power that provides presidents with considerable authority to conduct the nation’s foreign affairs. Finally because presidents, along with their vice presidents, are the only nationally elected officials in the country, they are uniquely situated to speak for the entire nation when dealing with other international actors or issues.4

Congress—the legislative branch—actually has more enumerated constitutional foreign policy powers than do presidents. These include the specific powers to:

• declare war;
• raise, support, and regulate the nation’s military;
• make rules regarding piracy and its punishment;
• regulate international commerce;
• regulate immigration; and
• make any other laws “necessary and proper” for carrying out the above powers.

Not willing to wait around for an administration to act, some individual members of Congress will take these powers and push and prod the U.S. government into making new policies; these legislators will use whatever political leverage they can to put their imprint on foreign policy.

More generally, as a collective body, Congress has the power to pass whatever legislation its members desire—prohibiting any cooperation with the International Criminal Court or calling for the overthrow of the Iranian government, just to name two examples. Presidents have the right to veto such legislation, but Congress can override presidential vetoes by a two-thirds vote of each chamber. Finally, virtually everything done by the U.S. government requires money, and the Constitution provides Congress the sole power to authorize and appropriate funds. Put another way, every part of a presidential administration is dependent on Congress for its annual budget. Just like parents dealing with their children’s allowances, Congress can provide or withhold funds to reward or punish the administration for its policy actions.

Long ago these overlapping foreign policy powers were described as an “invitation … to struggle,” and that depiction remains an appropriate one.5 When their policy preferences diverge, the presidential administration and Congress struggle for control of the policy-making process, because the actor who controls the process will have the best chance to decide the resulting policy output. Some situations favor presidential control, such as decisions to send U.S. troops into harm’s way, recognize a foreign regime, undertake a covert operation abroad, or make an executive agreement with another country’s leadership. In such instances of presidential preeminence, the foreign policy process can be seen as a series of concentric circles as illustrated in Figure 1.2. The innermost and most important circle is dominated by presidents and their advisers and top political appointees. Executive branch departments and agencies play a secondary role and are therefore in the second circle. Finally, the least significant actors are in the outermost circle of influence. These include Congress, interest groups, public opinion, and the mass media.6
The fact that presidents are undoubtedly the single most important foreign policy makers in most cases does not mean other actors are without significant influence. At times, foreign policy bureaucracies or Congress dominates foreign policy making. Therefore, a more accurate depiction of ongoing interbranch foreign policy interactions is captured by the idea of “shifting constellations” of power. In a triangular relationship, presidents (along with other White House actors), Congress, and the foreign policy bureaucracies interact to make foreign policy. However, instead of executive branch actors being central to policy making regardless of the issues involved, each of these three groups has the potential to play a dominant role vis-à-vis the others for some foreign policy issues but not others. The president and other White House actors may dominate some issues, Congress may dominate others, and various foreign policy bureaucracies may dominate still others. All three of these major sets of actors are impacted
by societal forces in the public arena like interest groups, public opinion, and the media, and all are also impacted by forces from the international arena.

Regardless of the nature of these actors’ interactions, the foreign policy outputs they produce have outcomes—not just in the international arena but also on the United States itself (as the 9/11 attacks dramatically showed). These outcomes may have limited or no impact on others, or they may fundamentally change the dynamics of international politics. Either way, the nature of these outcomes and their magnitude can often produce feedback that leads to new inputs to the foreign policy-making system. Thus foreign policy making can be seen as a virtually never-ending process of adapting to external challenges and opportunities.

The Plan of the Book

In our effort to understand how and why U.S. foreign policy is made, we will follow the general framework provided by the model of the foreign policy-making process. In the first part of the book, we will look at inputs. Perhaps the most important inputs are the ones in our minds—how we think the political world works, how it should work, and why. Chapter 2 will focus on these interpretative ideas, which lead to a discussion of four major theories of international relations. Next we will look at the inputs that come from the external political environment of the international arena, the internal political environment within U.S. borders, and the environment of conditioning ideas that shape U.S. behavior. These environmental inputs are the focus of Chapter 3.

In the second part of the book, we will examine various decision-making processes. That’s right—processes plural. There are many ways decisions get made, and oftentimes the process used depends on who is in the decision-making group. So Chapter 4 will focus on the major governmental foreign policy-making actors, Chapter 5 will look at how individuals and small groups make decisions, Chapter 6 will examine bureaucratic politics and policy making, and Chapter 7 will focus on how Congress participates in foreign policy making. Beyond these governmental actors, other societal groups—like interest groups, think tanks, the media, and individual opinion leaders—also get involved in foreign policy making. These nongovernmental actors and their influence on policy making will be the focus of Chapter 8, and other societal factors like political culture and public opinion will be examined as well. Chapter 9 examines how foreign actors—individuals, groups, or organizations—also get involved in the making of U.S. foreign policy. As you will see, many different actors and their diverging viewpoints combine to shape U.S. foreign policy decisions.

In the third part of the book, we will wrap up our examination of the U.S. foreign policy-making process. In Chapter 10, we will take a brief look at the types of foreign policy outputs that are the product of this process and the kinds of outcomes that they generate. In Chapter 11, we will suggest some concluding thoughts by looking toward the future. We will offer suggestions about the changing nature of future foreign policy priorities, possible changes in the mix
of actors who make U.S. foreign policy, ideas about how the processes by which foreign policy is made might change, and how foreign policy outputs may shift in the future.

Our goal in this book is to help you understand the people and politics involved in making U.S. foreign policy. To assist in that effort, we will offer learning objectives at the start of each chapter. Keep them in mind as you read the chapter; they can prove useful in guiding you through the reading. Also periodically, we will have boxes inserted in the chapters. The material in these boxes provides more in-depth, real-life illustrations of the theories, concepts, and relationships we are trying to convey. Important terms and concepts will be presented in **boldface**. These are defined in the chapters and also included in the glossary at the end of the book.

Finally, we hope by the end of the book you better understand certain things. These include the following:

- Who makes foreign policy matters.
- What motivates these actors can vary tremendously.
- Policy making is shaped by both international and domestic inputs.
- There are many different ways to reach foreign policy decisions.
- Those resulting decisions have impacts on others.

Once you have a firm grasp of these points, you will know far more about U.S. foreign policy making than do most Americans and will be poised to act on that understanding for the rest of your life!

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**Glossary Terms**

**Foreign policy**  the goals and actions of the U.S. government in the international system.

**Inputs**  the stimuli that cause potential foreign policy makers to act.

**Outcomes**  the consequences of foreign policy outputs.

**Outputs**  the actions taken by foreign policy makers in response to the inputs they receive.

**Presidential preeminence model**  the idea that presidents dominate foreign policy making for the issues they care most about.

**Shifting constellations model**  the idea that presidents and their White House advisers, elements of the foreign policy bureaucracies, and Congress compete for policy-making influence and who dominates the process can change as foreign policy issues change.

**Takfiri terrorists**  Muslims who believe in Takfirism, the notion that any Muslim who does not believe as they do is an infidel and must be killed.

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**Endnotes**

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4. The Supreme Court agreed by noting that foreign affairs called for the nation to speak with one voice and that the president was the “sole organ of the nation in its external relations” in the 1936 U.S. v. Curtiss-Wright Export Corporation case. See Smith, The Constitution and American Foreign Policy, pp. 6–10.


