

# GREAT DECISIONS

1918 • FOREIGN POLICY ASSOCIATION

HIGH SCHOOL

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TEACHERS:  
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# FOREIGN POLICY

WHAT IS IT, AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

TRADE, BORDERS,  
AND OTHER  
**BIG ISSUES**

WHAT COMES  
**NEXT?**

**FINDING OUT  
FOR YOURSELF**

INTERNATIONAL  
COOPERATION



BY JOSH GREGORY



# A WORLD OF NATIONS



*U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken (left) and President Joe Biden (center left) meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin (center right) and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (right) to discuss the relationship between their countries in 2021.*

**A**t some point, you have probably noticed groups of kids in school who stick together and exclude others, or kids who start out as friends and turn into rivals. You'd think that by the time you get out of high school, cliques would be a thing of the past, but in reality, even the governments of the world's countries play favorites, exclude peers, and develop rivalries.

Today more than ever, we live in a global society where each country's government must consider not only the needs and desires of its own people but also those of other nations. There are almost 200 countries in the world today, each with its own history, culture, style of govern-

ment, and goals for the future. This leads to a great deal of complexity and difficult decision-making for world leaders. Countries must constantly be calculating what effects their actions will have on relationships with their **allies**, rivals, and everyone in between.

A nation's plan for interacting with other countries is known as its **foreign policy**. This is opposed to domestic policy, which concerns issues that primarily affect the people living within the nation. Most nations have officials whose primary responsibilities are to deal with the government of other countries. **Ambassadors** and other **diplomats** typically live in foreign countries during the term of their

service. They work with foreign governments to develop relationships and deals.

Back home, each country typically has a division of its government that focuses exclusively on foreign policy. In the United States, this responsibility is given to the State Department, which is headed by the secretary of state, a part of the president's **cabinet**, or top advisors. This department works to carry out the foreign policy decisions of the president. The U.S. Congress also has the power to make decisions about foreign policy, particularly regarding the military. As a result, foreign policy issues can play a major role in elections.

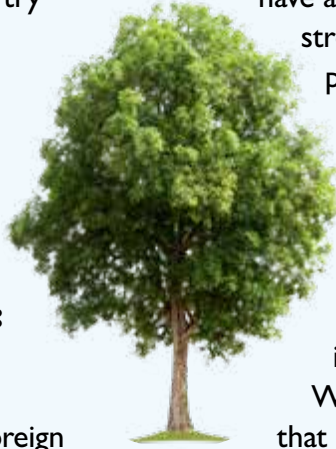
# THE BIG ISSUES

## Trade and the economy:

The global economy is a complex web of resources, labor, and goods moving between countries. Naturally, this can lead to disputes as nations try to protect their own interests, make money, and secure important resources for themselves.

## Human rights:

Sometimes powerful nations determine that a foreign government is treating its people so poorly that they must step in. For example, in recent years the United States has pursued military interventions in Iraq and Syria because those nations' governments were found to be imprisoning and executing civilians. These kinds of military actions are often



controversial. Some people argue that governments should avoid intervening in the affairs of foreign countries, while others believe that powerful countries have a duty to use their strength to help everyday people.

## Climate and the environment:

In recent years, climate change has become a major focus of the international community.

While most countries agree that something should be done, opinions remain divided over how best to handle the situation. Additionally, countries shift their positions depending on who is in power. For example, in 2015, representatives from most of the world's countries signed an agreement in Paris to pursue a plan for limiting the global rise in temperature. After taking

office in 2017, President Donald Trump announced a plan for the United States to withdraw from the agreement. But in 2021, newly elected president Joe Biden reversed Trump's plan.

## Borders and immigration:

Neighboring countries have long debated where their borders should lie and who should be allowed to cross those borders. Consider the ongoing controversy over the border between the United States and Mexico. Some Americans want strong security and strict enforcement of laws to prevent people from entering the country through Mexico. Others want to reform laws to make it easier and more straightforward for people to enter the country legally. The country's official stance on this issue changes depending on who is in office.

Credit: Shutterstock

There are several schools of thought concerning the right way to conduct foreign policy. Some people believe strongly in **isolationism**. This is the idea that each country should keep to itself and avoid getting involved in others' business. **Internationalists** believe in strong cooperation between countries for the greater good of all. Some people argue for **selective engagement**, which is when a country only intervenes in another's business when it provides a clear benefit.

## THE DEBATE

### SHOULD POWERFUL COUNTRIES INTERVENE WHEN OTHER COUNTRIES TREAT THEIR PEOPLE POORLY?

#### YES

- ✓ Some governments imprison and even kill their own people for unfair reasons.
- ✓ If other countries don't step in, no one will.
- ✓ Human rights are more important than a country's laws.

#### NO

- ✗ Each country should be allowed to do as it pleases within its own borders.
- ✗ Countries should not put their troops at risk to protect foreign citizens.
- ✗ Intervening can make the situation worse.





Credit: Xinhua News Agency/eyevine/Redux Pictures

*People fleeing Taliban rule line up to board a German plane in Kabul, Afghanistan, during the 2021 withdrawal of U.S. troops from the country.*

## **FOREIGN POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES**

Foreign policy has been essential to the United States since its founding. The country's first major action as an independent

**As of 2021, almost 330 million people call the U.S. home.**

nation was to fight a war against Great Britain—the American Revolutionary War. Battling a powerful, well-developed military, the collection of colonies sought an alliance with France to help win the war and secure a future as an independent country.

Today, the United States is the world's third most populous country, home to almost 330 million people. It also has a tremendous economic and military power. As a result, its

actions often have an immense impact around the world.

Even a country as powerful as the United States can run into trouble in its dealings with foreign countries. One example of this took place in 2021, when President Joe Biden announced that the United States would withdraw its remaining military forces from Afghanistan, where they had been battling a group called the **Taliban** for almost 20 years—the longest war the United

States has ever fought. However, as U.S. forces began leaving the country, the Taliban swiftly moved in to take over territory from the official government of Afghanistan. The group also captured helicopters and other U.S. military equipment for its own uses. Afghan civilians, along with diplomats from the U.S. and other countries, scrambled to get out of the country while it was still possible. Though both Republicans and Democrats have supported plans to withdraw from Afghanistan, the decision of when and how to withdraw was extremely controversial, both at home and abroad. Some praised Biden for making the bold choice to end a war that

had gone on for so long. Others criticized him, arguing that the U.S. military was still needed to preserve peace in Afghanistan.

## GLOBAL GIANTS

The United States is not the only country that is able to exert its influence worldwide. Countries such as China and Russia are also among those considered to be global “superpowers.” Superpowers have the economic, military, and cultural power to potentially upend the entire world if they wanted to. During the **Cold War**, which was a period lasting from roughly the end of World War II until 1991, the United States and the Soviet Union were the world’s two superpowers.

Though they never actually went to war with each other, they were in a constant state of competition. Both sides built powerful arsenals, and the entire world looked on in fear that a potential war would destroy the planet. It took decades of tense negotiation and the eventual fall of the Soviet government to end the conflict.

## FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

Countries with shared goals, similar values, or even just a history of friendly relations often form alliances with one another. The United States counts many countries among its allies, from Canada to Japan to Israel. These countries have open dialogue with



*U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris meets with South Korean President Moon Jae-in in May 2021. South Korea has been one of America’s closest allies since the Korean War (1950–1953).*

Credit: BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP/Getty Images



# THE UNITED NATIONS

Formed in the aftermath of World War II, the United Nations (UN) is an international organization devoted to maintaining peace and encouraging cooperation between countries. Today, almost all of the world's nations are members. The UN is not itself a government. It does not have the power to directly control what member countries do. However, there

are certain accepted standards and rules among the world's nations concerning the ways they interact with each other.

These rules are often referred to as international law, but enforcing them is not as straightforward as enforcing the laws of a country, state, or city where there is an established legal system. Instead, violations

of international law are typically discussed and debated among the member countries of the UN. Together, they determine what action, if any, should be taken in response to the violation. For example, the UN might enact economic **sanctions**, reduce aid to nations that violate international law, or recommend military engagement.

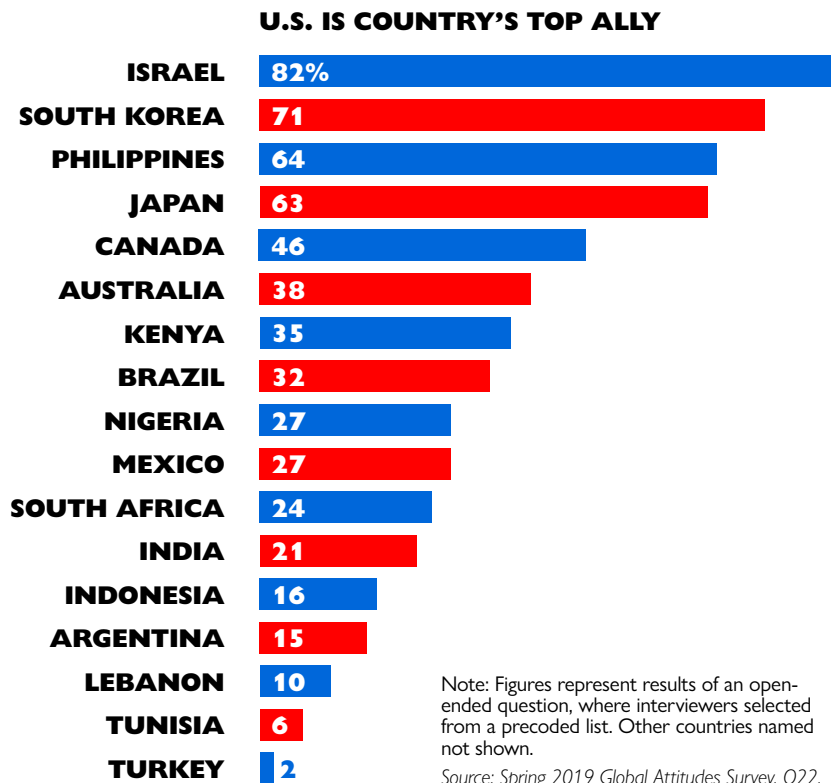


*Members of the United Nations General Assembly meet at UN headquarters in New York City in 2019.*

Credit: TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AFP/Getty Images

# MANY SEE THE U.S. AS THEIR COUNTRY'S TOP ALLY

Percentage of citizens who say their country can rely on the United States as a dependable ally in the future



Note: Figures represent results of an open-ended question, where interviewers selected from a precoded list. Other countries named not shown.  
Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey, Q22.

U.S. leaders. Their arrangements typically benefit each other economically, and in many cases it is understood that one ally will help another in times of war, if needed.

Just because countries are allied at one point, it doesn't mean they will remain friendly forever. Prior to the Cold War, the United

States and the Soviet Union fought on the same side in World War II. Similarly, countries that are adversaries at one point can become close allies. For example, though the United States and Great Britain battled each other in the American Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, they have

been close allies for so long that they are today often said to share a "special relationship."

Sometimes countries might find common ground temporarily, or only on a certain issue. They might sign trade agreements that allow for only certain kinds of economic exchange, or treaties to end conflicts so long as certain conditions are met. For example, at any given point the U.S. might have dozens of very specific treaties in place with a single country. Collectively, these treaties amount to the official foreign policy between the United States and the other nation.

Occasionally, an issue is severe and wide-ranging enough that much of the world comes together in an attempt to solve it. One example is the climate crisis, with most of the world's countries committed to playing a part in solving it. Only a handful of countries, including major oil producers such as Iran, have refused to participate. Another is the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as many countries have come together to develop life-saving vaccines and make sure those vaccines are distributed to countries that need them.



## THE DEBATE

### IS THE DECISION TO START A WAR EVER JUSTIFIED?

#### YES

- ✓ Sometimes war is the only way to stop an even worse problem.
- ✓ Countries should be able to rely on military power to make life better for their own people.
- ✓ Without the threat of violence, it would be impossible to keep some countries in check.

#### NO

- ✗ Wars result in loss of life.
- ✗ Many civilians are killed or displaced by wars.
- ✗ Wars are typically fought over things that aren't worth dying for.



# HIGH STAKES



Credit: Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post/Getty Images

*U.S. Border Patrol agents detain a family trying to enter the country from Mexico.*

When relationships sour between countries, the results can have a drastic and immediate impact for the people of those nations. As a result, many people have very strong opinions on matters of foreign policy.

**War:** The concept of war dates back to the dawn of human

civilization. When two or more governing bodies are at odds, it can lead to violence. Diplomats are charged with negotiating peace deals, but when all their efforts fail, war is often the last resort to resolve a disagreement. Today's wars are fought differently than they were centuries or even decades ago, but they still result

in loss of life and the destruction of homes and businesses.

**Covert action:** Not all conflicts are settled on a battlefield. Most countries also have resources for gathering **intelligence** and pursuing secretive attacks against their adversaries. For example, if a powerful nation is unhappy with the leader of another, smaller country, it might secretly pursue plans to remove that leader from power by supporting opposition groups.

**Trade conflicts:** Virtually all countries rely on trade to supply sufficient food, energy, and other resources. One way for a country to exert pressure on or cause harm to another country is to limit or shut down trade. These sanctions can cause widespread economic changes or shortages of goods in affected countries. For example, the U.S. has restricted trade with Iran and North Korea because those countries did not follow the deals they had agreed to about developing nuclear weapons

**Cyberattacks:** Increasingly, powerful nations are developing the ability to launch attacks on opposing nations without using any weapons at all. Because everything from banking systems to power grids rely at least partially on the internet, cyberattacks that disrupt these services or change information can cause huge problems.



## THE FUTURE OF FOREIGN POLICY

It's hard to tell which way foreign policy will evolve in the future. Much of it depends on the political climate of various countries. A single election can throw a country's foreign relations into upheaval. In the United States, for example, one president might pursue a certain set of policies, while the next takes an almost completely opposite approach. Unpredictable events like a pandemic or a natural disaster can also send things in an unexpected direction.

While it is nearly impossible to keep abreast of everything that is happening everywhere in the world, it is worthwhile to try and stay informed about global issues, especially those that concern your home country, where your decisions in elections can have a very real effect on the rest of the world. Keep up-to-date by reading trustworthy publications (like the one you're reading right now...or [this one](#)...or [this one](#)) as often as you can. And if you know other people who might be interested, try starting a discussion about the things you're reading. Your thoughts and opinions matter, and it's never too early to start learning about the world we live in.

**“There's no longer a bright line between foreign and domestic policy.”**

**—President Joe Biden**

## GETTING THE WHOLE PICTURE

In today's world, there is more information than ever before to sort through when you want to learn about an issue. Some sources of information are well-intentioned and work carefully to help people understand what is going on around the world. Others are misinformed, or worse, actively trying to influence your opinion by providing false information. These are especially big problems when it comes to foreign policy issues, where there are always many different perspectives, both foreign and domestic. However, there are steps you can take to make sure you are getting all the facts you need to develop an informed opinion:

- Seek out trusted news sources, such as long-running established newspapers. They are less likely to make reporting mistakes or

offer overly biased coverage.

- Consider different perspectives. Even good news sources typically have some bias in favor of their home countries. Foreign news sources such as the [BBC](#) or [Al Jazeera](#) can be helpful when considering these issues, but you still need to be careful that they are trustworthy.
- Be especially careful when reading about a foreign policy issue on social media. This is where you are most likely to find people spreading misinformation. If you see something that catches your attention, consider the source and try to verify the information elsewhere.
- Talk to those who you think are knowledgeable. If they tell you something interesting, do some research. If someone says something that doesn't sound right, look it up.

## THE DEBATE

### ARE WEALTHY COUNTRIES OBLIGATED TO PROVIDE AID TO COUNTRIES IN NEED?

#### YES

- ✓ Some countries are vastly wealthier than others, and they can spare the resources.
- ✓ Improving life for people in poor countries makes the world a better place for everyone.
- ✓ It is wrong to let people suffer unnecessarily.

#### NO

- ✗ A country should focus its resources on improving life for its own people.
- ✗ It's impossible to provide enough aid to every country that needs it.
- ✗ Foreign governments will come to rely on aid instead of building up resources to fend for themselves.



Credit: Sidney Harris/Cartoon Stock

## IT'S NOT ALWAYS SO SIMPLE . . .

1. What's going on in this cartoon? How often do you think this sort of situation happens in real life?
2. What might cause a country or group of people to be both an ally and an adversary at the same time? Do you know of any examples of this?
3. How much do you trust government leaders to understand foreign policy situations and make the right decisions? What are your reasons for feeling this way?

## NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. How well do your views match up with America's current foreign policy? If you could change just one thing about the way the government conducts foreign policy, what would it be?
2. How familiar are you with the governments and politics of foreign countries? Which countries do you think are most important to pay attention to, and why?
3. **YOUR STORY:** What methods do you use to resolve conflicts with other people? How do you think these methods would work in foreign policy situations?

### KEY WORDS & TERMS

allies  
ambassadors  
cabinet  
Cold War

diplomats  
foreign policy  
intelligence  
internationalists

isolationism  
sanctions  
selective engagement  
Taliban



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### GREAT DECISIONS FOREIGN POLICY

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