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
At 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 government, 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.
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.

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<table>
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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 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

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

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.
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.
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

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