

THE SETTING OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

PART

I

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Do not copy, post, or distribute



Israeli soldiers maneuver armored military vehicles along Israel's border with the Gaza Strip, in southern Israel, on Monday, November 20, 2023.

JACK GUEZ/AFP via Getty Images

1

THE UNITED STATES IN A TURBULENT WORLD

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- 1.1** Explain how culture, institutions, and civil society create the paradox of U.S. world power.
- 1.2** Discuss the basic indicators of world power and where the United States stands.

In the nation system of the seventeenth century, each nation depended on itself. From World War II until 9/11, the United States maintained this “predominance of power” (Leffler 1992). With more than 20 years of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. faced declining power and influence around the world. With chaotic and unsuccessful ends to the conflicts, the U.S.’s ability to build and sustain democracies abroad is now questioned and even challenged by other rising powers such as China and Russia. We live in dangerous and unstable times.

Several fateful actions have taken place in recent years. First, President Donald Trump’s refusal to concede to Joe Biden in the 2020 U.S. presidential election set off an unprecedented attack on the democratic election process that culminated in an attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, by Trump supporters. The perception of the U.S. as a politically stable democracy dropped significantly worldwide leading to a decline in confidence in the U.S. as a global leader in democratic values. Second, President Putin’s blatant invasion of Ukraine in 2022 shocked the world and challenged both NATO and the U.S. to respond to prevent the collapse of a sovereign, democratic U.S. ally on the border of the EU. This brutal war has led to dramatic changes in geopolitical relations, including a tightening relationship between China and Russia, two of the greatest challengers to U.S. leadership.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched a well-coordinated and planned terrorist attack on Israel that struck at the core of Israeli identity. Israel responded with a declaration of war and, with unwavering U.S. support, launched a full-scale attack on the Gaza Strip. Israel’s response and worldwide reaction to both attacks promises to test the fragility of Middle East stability as well as President Biden’s 2024 reelection campaign.

Questions

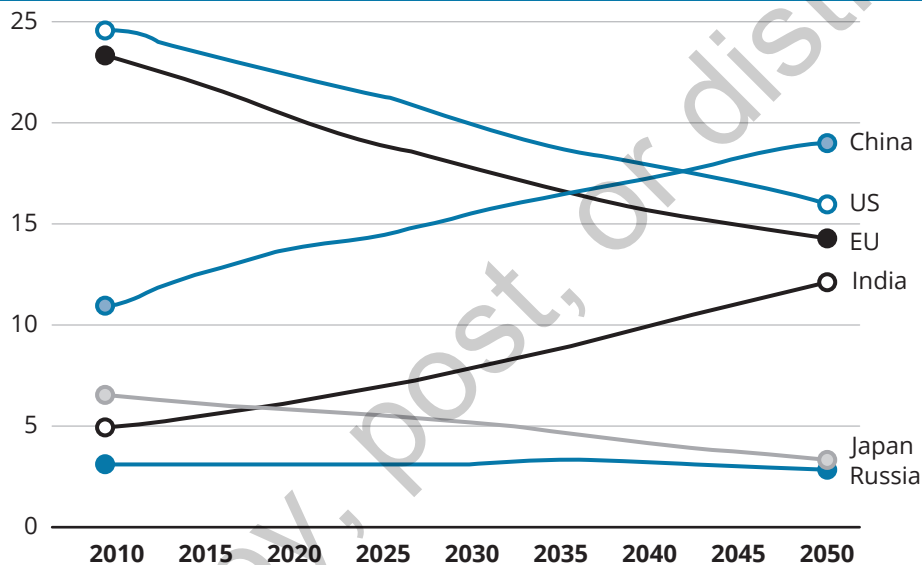
This book seeks to strengthen our understanding by exploring the process by which leaders face pressures at home and overseas. Achievements of both the United States and its people face uneasy relationships. Some key questions we will consider include the following:

1. Can the United States maintain its strength in the midst of threats?
2. Can Americans keep up their economic growth amid growing competition?
3. Will the United States uphold its political institutions, social values, and cultural appeals?
4. Will the United States overcome challenges to democracy both at home and abroad?

THE PARADOX OF AMERICA'S WORLD POWER

The global dominance of the United States faces significant challenges in the current global environment. The global Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated both the interconnectivity of the world as well as the speed at which that same interconnectivity can spread crisis, disease, and conflict. As U.S. power wanes and other countries gain prominence, the system set up and perpetuated by the U.S. has also made possible rising challengers and interconnectedness that expose societies to new risks and threats (Figure 1.1). This is the paradox of American power.

FIGURE 1.1 ■ The World in 2030: The Global Power Index Forecast



Source: National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*. December 2012.

This book explores the process of making U.S. foreign policy in a changing global environment. Of particular interest are the institutions of power inside and outside the U.S. government that define the roles of public and private actors; create and reinforce common values, norms, and codes of conduct; and define what is possible among contending foreign policy choices. These institutions of power are becoming more complex as the global order shifts, as the lines between domestic and foreign policy concerns are increasingly blurred, as the number and magnitude of problems crossing national borders increase, and as more individuals and groups become stakeholders and participants in the foreign policy process. This paradox is visible in several recent examples:

- Divisions over foreign policy in the 1990s prevented the United States from adopting a coherent world role despite its victory in the Cold War and global power. When participants in a national survey were asked in 1999 to identify the biggest foreign

policy problem facing the United States, they most often replied, “Don’t know” (Rielly 1999, 98).

- President George W. Bush’s intelligence brief on August 6, 2001, featured the headline “Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U.S.” The White House was warned to prepare for “hijackings or other types of attacks.” No one acted on warnings, however, as intelligence agencies “lacked the incentives to cooperate, collaborate, and share information” (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States 2004, 12).
- Entrepreneurs in the United States led the way in the development of social media and Internet-based communications. Such technology, however, enabled adversaries of the United States to advance their political and military agendas. The technology allowed Russian hackers to gain access to governments, schools, and industrial powers.
- As the world has grown more connected through communications technology, trade, and the movement of people, that very connectivity has divided and fragmented people and countries as individuals retreat more and more into information silos and echo chambers.

THE NUMBERS OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

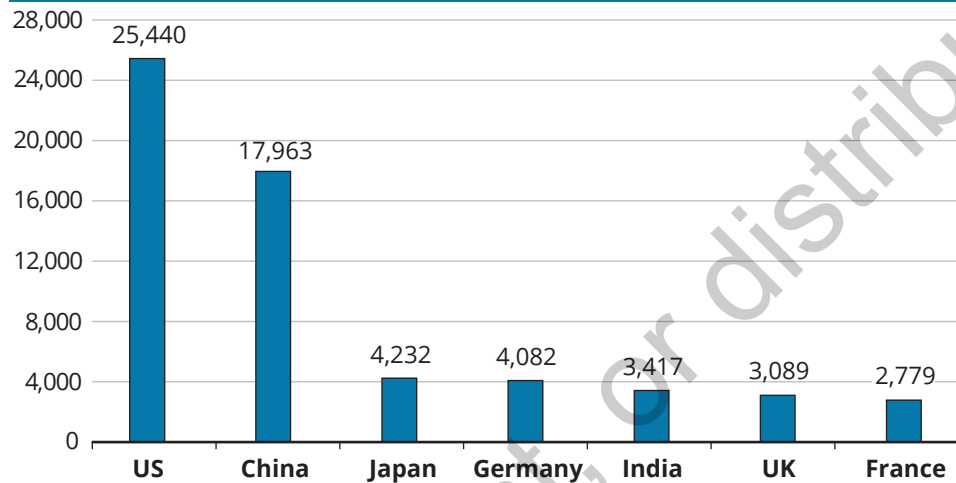
Since the end of the Cold War, most foreign policy debates have accepted the reality of U.S. **primacy** as a starting point and focused instead on the extent, consequences, and likely future of the **unipolar** world power. The concentration of America’s world power is notable given that the United States is home to less than 5 percent of the world’s population. Much of the nation’s advantage derives from the scale of its economy, which produces much of the world’s total output (see Figure 1.2). The degree of U.S. predominance is even greater in the military realm. The United States, the only country that has divided the world into regional military commands, also maintains “command of the commons—command of the sea, space, and air” (Posen 2003, 7). In 2023, the U.S. government spent over \$800 billion on its military, or about one-third of the global total.

If formal military allies of the United States are taken into account as elements of U.S. world power, the nation’s military potency is even greater. The United States also provides the largest volume of weaponry to other countries, and its share of the market is growing. In 2023, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reported that the U.S. generated 40 percent of all arms exports during the period 2018–2022, compared with 33 percent during 2013–2017. All these military programs fortify U.S. strength.

American primacy also derives from its **soft power**, the expression of its political values and cultural dynamism in ways that other societies and governments may find appealing (see Nye 2004). The United States is often regarded as an “idea” rather than an ordinary nation-state, traditionally defined by physical boundaries, common ethnic or religious identities, and material interests. The soft power of the United States enhances U.S. security by highlighting shared rather than opposing interests and values. A recent study found that eight of the world’s top ten

universities—ideal centers for the sharing of ideas, knowledge, and culture—are located in the United States (see Table 1.1). American fashions, popular music, movies, and television programs are so pervasive overseas that they provoke charges of “cultural imperialism.”

FIGURE 1.2 ■ World Economic Output, Seven Largest Producers by GDP, 2022



Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators, July 1, 2022, <http://data.worldbank.org/>.

Note: Figures are current U.S. dollars in billions.

TABLE 1.1 ■ Top Ten Universities in the World, 2023

Rank	University	Country
1	Harvard University	United States
2	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	United States
3	Stanford University	United States
4	University of California–Berkeley	United States
5	University of Oxford	United Kingdom
6	University of Washington	United States
7	Columbia University	United States
8	University of Cambridge	United Kingdom
9	California Institute of Technology	United States
10	Johns Hopkins University	United States

Source: Best Global Universities Rankings, *U.S. News & World Report*, 2023. www.usnews.com/education/best-global-universities/rankings.

Shifts in the Balance of Power

Some political scientists see U.S.-dominated world order as advantageous not only for the United States but also for the international system as a whole. A benign **hegemon** maintains stability in the international system, discouraging conflicts among regional powers and covering most of the costs of military security and global economic development. Less powerful states have incentives to align with the dominant power rather than challenge it by forming rival blocs. Others fear the concentration of power in one country and believe that “unbalanced power, whoever wields it, is a potential danger to others” (Waltz 1997, 915).

A related argument identifies historical cycles in the global balance of power. Historian Paul Kennedy traced *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987) to a pattern of **imperial overstretch** by which the Roman, Dutch, Ottoman, Spanish, British, and Russian empires bit off more than they could chew and then succumbed to uprisings in their far-flung provinces and to political infighting at home. World history has revealed the “increasing costs of dominance” that accompany global primacy (Gilpin 1981). According to **long cycle theory** (Modelski 1987), the dominant power’s strength in relation to others inevitably peaks and then erodes as smaller powers benefit from the leader’s technological advances, economic aid, and military protection. This cycle of hegemonic boom and bust prompts major wars and restructurings of the global power balance.

Three episodes in early U.S. foreign policy revealed that for all its rhetoric about freedom and justice, the U.S. government often observed a Darwinian logic of survival of the fittest: the wars against Native American tribes, the practice of slavery before the Civil War, and interventions in Latin America. Slavery has long been condemned as an ultimate denial of human rights, and the U.S. treatment of Native Americans fits the commonly accepted definition of *genocide*.¹ American forces seized northern Mexico in the late 1840s and then intervened more than sixty times in the Latin American–Caribbean region prior to World War II (Grimmett 2001).² This pattern continued during the Cold War, when U.S. leaders turned to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to overthrow elected regimes in Guatemala (1954) and Chile (1973).

Elsewhere, the United States supported dictators such as Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines and Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire. American leaders aligned with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq during its war against Iran in the 1980s even after Saddam used chemical weapons to massacre Iranian forces and ethnic minorities in his own country. These actions, including the catastrophic Vietnam War, cast doubts on the virtues of U.S. foreign policy even as the nation fought successfully against fascism and communism in the twentieth century. During George W. Bush’s **war on terror**, the morality gap appeared in the prisoner abuses by U.S. guards at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison and in the February 2012 burning of Korans, the religious text of Islam.

Such actions damaged U.S. credibility while provoking friends around the world. Theocratic regimes were seen as an affront to U.S. policies, or **blowbacks** (C. Johnson 2000). Iran and Saudi Arabia considered them regional hegemons. Others within the Red Sea region sought territory within Somalia, Ethiopia, Yemen, and Sudan. As President Trump said in 2018, “If the United States has any real strategy to achieve a successful outcome within Syria, it was one of the best-kept secrets in its history” (Cordesman 2018).

In recent years, world leaders have sought to challenge the United States and its growing world power. The most prominent were Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, and Chinese president Xi Jinping, whose country's financial growth is larger than that of the United States. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy," both world leaders are looking beyond their borders to a new international system that supports their domestic ambitions in stark contrast to many U.S. values.



In recent years, several world leaders have sought to challenge the United States and its unprecedented world power. Most prominent among these challengers were Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, and Chinese president Xi Jinping. These two leaders shared a desire for more influence in world politics. In their frequent meetings, they looked for ways to gain an upper hand in their relations with the United States.

How Hwee Young - Pool/Getty Images

Resistance to Globalization

Yet another challenge to the United States stems from the process of **globalization**, which is the linking of national and regional markets into a single world economy (see Stiglitz 2002). Advances in transportation and communications technology, intellectual developments, and public policy shifts in the eighteenth century first spurred this historic trend. The Internet revolution late in the twentieth century accelerated the pace of globalization. In today's world economy, goods, services, and financial investments cross national borders at a record pace.

Commerce is taken in multinational corporations with headquarters around the world. Although Great Britain was at the forefront of economic globalization through the nineteenth century, the primary catalyst since then has been the United States. Globalization conforms to a national consensus that private enterprise, unfettered by government interference, provides the surest path to prosperity as well as to individual liberty.

According to this consensus, a prosperous world economy resembles that of the United States, with few internal barriers to the movement of goods, services, labor, and capital. Trade, not political or military competition, is the primary arena of foreign policy. Furthermore, “trading states” have strong interests in a stable international system and are reluctant to wage wars against each other. Globalization, according to this view, is a harbinger of world peace.

The quickening pace of economic globalization brought improved living standards to many nations, but others fell behind, unable to attract foreign investment or find new markets for their goods. The growing gap between the world’s rich and poor placed new strains on the international system. Critics believed that globalization produced a variety of other problems as well: the triumph of consumerism over cultural diversity, heightened pollution and deforestation, and the exploitation of sweatshop workers. The U.S. model of political economy has come under greater scrutiny as China and other rising powers have boosted economic growth while suppressing the political rights of their citizens.

Cultural Roots of the Paradox

The roots of this paradox are found in the U.S. **national style**—that is, the cultural influences that historically have shaped the country’s approach to international relations (Dallek 1989). Although national style is an ambiguous concept and cultural influences are difficult to identify with precision, the conduct of every country’s foreign policy reflects its distinctive sense of place within the international system. This sense of place is shaped by tangible factors such as geographic location, the availability of natural resources, and the size and characteristics of the population. Other factors, such as a country’s historical experience, also influence its national style.

When it became the first independent country in the Western Hemisphere, the United States distanced itself from the great powers. This distance, combined with the ample territory and natural resources available within the thirteen original colonies, enabled the new nation to develop its political and economic systems with little outside assistance. The United States was distinctive in that its civil society, compared with those of most other countries, did not feature sharp divisions between a small but powerful aristocracy and a large but powerless feudal peasantry.

This consensus encouraged a sense of national exceptionalism, by which citizens felt the United States was destined not simply to survive as a nation-state but also to achieve the status of a superior world power. Long before the nation’s independence, the first European settlers to North America proclaimed the founding of a “city upon a hill” that would inspire societies far from its shores. Colonial leaders later believed that independence from Great Britain would create “a more perfect union” based on limited, representative government.

Americans tend to focus on domestic concerns. Only when foreign problems reach crisis proportions do they spark the public’s interest. As a result, the public hastily demands action by the government impulsively, with little deep background or understanding of the underlying problems that provoked the crisis. George Kennan (1951, 59), the architect of

U.S. Cold War strategy, found this aspect of democratic foreign policy making particularly troublesome:

I sometimes wonder whether in this respect a democracy is uncomfortably similar to one of those prehistoric monsters with a body as long as this room and a brain the size of a pin. He lies there in his comfortable primeval mud and pays little attention to his environment; he is slow to wrath—in fact, you practically have to whack his tail off to make him aware that his interests are being disturbed. But, once he grasps this, he lays about with such blind determination that he not only destroys his adversary but largely wrecks his native habitat.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Alexis de Tocqueville, an aristocratic Frenchman, traveled through the United States in 1831–1832 to chronicle the social, political, public, religious, and intellectual life of the emerging democratic nation. His account of these travels, *Democracy in America*, long considered one of the most astute observations of American life ever written, is still widely read and studied by historians and political scientists alike.

I have no hesitation in saying that in the control of society's foreign affairs democratic governments do appear decidedly inferior to others. . . . Foreign policy does not require the use of any of the good qualities peculiar to democracy but does demand the cultivation of almost all those which it lacks. . . .

Democracy favors the growth of the state's internal resources; it extends comfort and develops public spirit, strengthens respect for law in the various classes of society, all of which things have no more than an indirect influence on the standing of one nation in respect to another. But a democracy finds it difficult to coordinate the details of a great undertaking and to fix on some plan and carry it through with determination in spite of obstacles. It has little capacity for combining measures in secret and waiting patiently for the result.

Source: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, edited by J. P. Mayer (New York: Perennial Library, 1988), 228–230. First published in 1835.

CONCLUSION

A central question examined in this book is how well the United States can provide the international leadership it espouses in the face of the domestic and global constraints that are essential features of its political and social system. Of particular concern is whether a political culture that is largely indifferent to foreign affairs is compatible with a dominant world role. The institutions of power raise further concerns about the U.S. government's ability to overcome domestic divisions as well as pressures from transnational civil society, particularly economic pressures. How the government manages the paradox of its world power will determine how long U.S. primacy endures in the turbulent twenty-first century.

The mutual love-hate relationship between the United States and the world beyond its borders may be inevitable given the nation's unprecedented primacy. There is little doubt, however, that the country's successes and failures also stem from the peculiarities of U.S. government and social structures and the growing pressures imposed by transnational civil society. Historical patterns suggest that the U.S. political system is self-correcting. Previous bursts of "creedal passion" have been followed by restraint and moderation (Huntington 1981). In this context, it remains to be seen how effectively the U.S. government will adapt to vital changes in the strategic environment and global balance of power.

KEY TERMS

blowbacks
globalization
hegemon
imperial overstretch
long cycle theory

national style
primacy
soft power
unipolar
war on terror

Do not copy, post, or distribute