

Policy Connection



Does the president really control American foreign policy?

FOREIGN
POLICY

The Policy Challenge

As noted in Chapter 12, it was George Washington who established the president's dominant role in foreign affairs, and few of us would question the assertion that, as chief diplomat, the presidents have played a leading role in shaping foreign policy throughout the nation's history. This was especially true at the height of the Cold War; by the mid-1960s, presidential power in foreign and defense policy matters had become so significant that one prominent observer, Aaron Wildavsky, was able to claim that

the United States has one president, but it has two presidencies; one presidency is for domestic affairs, and the other is concerned with defense and foreign policy. . . .

In the realm of foreign policy [since World War II] there has not been a single major issue on which presidents, when they were serious and determined, have failed. The list of their victories is impressive. . . . Serious setbacks to the president in controlling foreign policy are extraordinary and unusual.³⁹

For Wildavsky, the major problem facing the president in the foreign-affairs arena was finding a "viable policy" for dealing with the realities of the Cold War. The challenge in this Policy Connection is that we consider the validity of Wildavsky's claim about the pivotal role of foreign policy to the presidency—in both the past and the present.

Containment Approaches

For most of the post-World War II period,⁴⁰ one overarching perspective dominated presidential

foreign-policy strategies—that of containment.⁴¹ **Containment** emerged as a middle ground between doing nothing in the face of growing Soviet influence and directly confronting the USSR and its allies on the battlefield. It called for diplomatically, economically, and militarily countering the expansionist tendencies of the USSR and its allies in Eastern Europe and Asia, especially China.

Inherent in the containment approach when it was first articulated by U.S. diplomat George F. Kennan were two complementary beliefs:

1. There was no need for the United States and its allies to offer a universalistic alternative to the Soviet model; instead, they should pragmatically promote diversity among nations.
2. "A long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies" would eventually result in the regime's "break up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power."⁴²

Containment led to significant changes in American foreign policy. It involved an historic break with two major themes that had driven U.S. foreign policy until then: isolationism and unilateralism. Built on George Washington's advice for the United States to avoid any "political connection" with other nations while engaging in "commercial relations" with all, isolationism called for avoiding what Thomas Jefferson called "entangling alliances" (and was later extended to a call for neutrality and nonintervention in world affairs), whereas unilateralism called for favoring a go-it-alone approach when confronted with the need to deal with international crises or issues.

U.S. involvement in the two world wars would alter those two positions, but it was the country's major post-World War II role in establishing the United Nations and the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 that formalized the break with both isolationism and unilateralism. Nevertheless, both themes have retained their power to influence U.S. foreign-policy choices, as the American public is often quick to question whether a given policy is in the country's national interest or whether some treaty obligation allows a foreign power to control the use of American military forces.

Although containment was the dominant post-war theory, each president put a special twist on his interpretation of the containment. For example, President Eisenhower's understanding of containment was to build a nuclear arsenal so large that it presented a real threat of massive retaliation to the Soviets. President Kennedy, in contrast, saw containment as actively supporting "the independence of nations so that one bloc cannot gain sufficient power to finally overcome us."⁴³ Rather than relying on nuclear weapons, Kennedy emphasized flexible U.S. forces, units that used limited conventional and counterinsurgency to meet external threats.

For President Nixon, containment included fostering détente—the relaxations of tensions—with the Soviet Union and China. Indeed, Nixon's visit to China was one of the most dramatic events of the Cold War. President Carter saw foreign power as "rooted in our moral values." He initially argued that "a policy based on constant decency in its values" could replace containment. Three years into his presidency, however, Carter focused on the Soviet threat to world peace and overseeing a foreign policy that was an extension of containment.⁴⁴ Similarly, President Reagan initially approached foreign policy with a commitment to containment that was a return to pre-détente days. By the time he left office, however, containment had moved closer to détente.

Postcontainment Approaches

Policymakers in George H. W. Bush's administration were extremely pleased with the events that unfolded between 1989 and 1991, but they found it difficult to establish a viable policy response in lieu of

containment. Major changes were clearly in the wind. American-Soviet relations had been the pivotal feature shaping U.S. foreign policy since World War II; significant changes in those relations were bound to affect other foreign-policy areas. By May 1990, most Eastern European nations had new, more liberal leadership or policies. Relations with China continued to improve, despite events such as the 1989 suppression of student protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. A more cooperative Soviet posture in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and other potential regional hot spots provided additional proof that real changes were taking place in the context in which U.S. foreign policy operated.

In an attempt to define what was taking place, President Bush spoke of a "new world order" in which the United States would focus its efforts on ensuring that the "rule of law" governed the conduct of nations.⁴⁵ The country was now in the precarious position of being the only superpower left, and Bush's actions in the Persian Gulf War indicated a willingness to take on the role of the world's police force, ready to take military action against those who would threaten the peaceful status quo. But, as other crises arose, especially in the former Yugoslavia, the United States under both Bush and Bill Clinton proved to be a "reluctant sheriff," unwilling to use its military resources to deal with disturbances that did not seem to involve U.S. interests.⁴⁶ For Clinton, the biggest threat to America's security was economic, not military, and early in his administration he gave top priority to policies that would enhance the U.S. position in the global economy.

The trend toward globalization presented American policymakers with a new set of challenges beyond those related to economics. The administration found itself dealing with transnational issues, including new forms of environmental degradation and organized criminal activity that knew no borders. Although it did not ignore questions related to nuclear proliferation and the continuing crises in the Middle East, they seemed more like legacy issues carried over from the Cold War era.

Foreign-policy actions taken during the first months of George W. Bush's presidency seemed to indicate a turn in the direction of isolationism and unilateralism, as the administration began to signal

its intent to withdraw from several international initiatives and to cut back on its military presence overseas. Whatever policy might have been emerging was soon put aside after the attacks of September 11, 2001, as Bush declared his position to the world community in blunt terms: “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”⁴⁷ In a sense, war policy replaced foreign policy during the Bush presidency. To give his policy some focus after the initial 9/11 military action in Afghanistan to attempt to deal with al-Qaeda, Bush highlighted the threats coming from the countries that harbored or supported terrorists, with special attention to three countries—Iraq, Iran, and North Korea—that he termed the “axis of evil.” Ultimately, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the drawn-out occupation that followed defined the Bush presidency, despite efforts during his second term in office to follow other policy initiatives in the Middle East and Europe.

When he assumed the presidency, Barack Obama made it clear that he did not want the War on Terror to define and drive U.S. foreign policy. When asked about the administration’s foreign-policy strategy, a key adviser summarized the strategy as ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, reestablishing America’s “standing and leadership” in the world, and refocusing on a “broader set of priorities” than those that had preoccupied the country in recent years.

The Myth of the Grand Strategy

Traditionally, two myths helped most Americans make sense of the country’s foreign and defense policies: the myth of vulnerability and the myth of American exceptionalism. To those two myths we now must add a third, which Aaron Wildavsky implied in his claims about the two presidencies. It is the *myth of the grand strategy*—a belief that each American president must, and eventually does, develop a core viable policy approach to dealing with other nations and carrying out the U.S. agenda in world affairs.⁴⁸

As with other myths, there is some truth to the fact that presidential policy choices are a major factor in shaping and directing U.S. foreign policy. But the myth itself begs the question of just how much leeway any president has in articulating or carrying

out some strategic vision of America’s policies abroad. The answer is that other factors also play important roles in the foreign- and defense-policy arenas, and these regard historical context, structural setting, and the presence of uncertainty.

In assuming the role of foreign-policy maker, every president knows that he or she must deal with the immediate past as well as the legacy of U.S. foreign policies tracing back to the founding. No one starts with a clean slate, and in the case of the Cold War presidents from Truman to George H. W. Bush, that history was closely tied to the relatively ambiguous idea of containment that emerged after World War II. Each of these presidents contributed his own variation of what containment entailed, but the actions of his predecessors—and their successes and failures—were always a factor. To some extent, each benefited from the constancy of a general strategic notion such as containment, and perhaps no one appreciated that more than George H. W. Bush, as he sought to make sense of the new world order he was attempting to shape in the early 1990s.

Another major factor is the structural setting of foreign- and defense-policy making. Any president who attempts to make decisions related to foreign or defense matters without at least consulting Congress is likely to regret not doing so, and in many cases the White House depends on explicit congressional authorization (as well as appropriations) to tackle even the most trivial of diplomatic defense-related tasks. And perhaps no one appreciates the questionable nature of the all-powerful-president myth more than the president’s national security policy team as they attempt to bring about changes in the operations of the vast bureaucracy of which they are part. Even the most well-articulated strategic policy emanating from the Oval Office will be perceived differently at the Pentagon than it will be perceived at the State Department. Add the Central Intelligence Agency and other parts of the intelligence community to the mix and what was initiated as a coherent approach to foreign and defense matters from within the White House might seem like a presidency in disarray to even the most casual observer.

The final factor—the existence of uncertainty—poses the most significant challenge to presidential efforts to control and direct America’s foreign policy.

Crises have been a constant feature of the history of American foreign policy since World War II. Some events, such as North Korea's invasion of South Korea in 1950 and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, might have been predicted with better intelligence, and to some extent the United States should have been better prepared to contend with the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 or the collapse of global financial markets in 2008. But, no matter how much effort presidents put into reducing uncertainties, it is not possible to develop or hold onto a strategic position that takes into account all possible scenarios and contingencies in world affairs. Things happen—and when they do, we are once again reminded of the limits to the development of a grand strategy that can guide U.S. foreign policy.

Conclusion

When we consider all these aspects, claims about the power and influence of the president in shaping and directing U.S. foreign policy seem overstated. To Wildavsky's credit, his initial claim was more nuanced and qualified. He spoke of the president's "dominant" role in foreign affairs relative to the more limited role the president plays in the domestic policy arena. In addition, his goal was to characterize that role during a specific time in the history of the Cold War when tensions with the Soviets were especially high. Unfortunately, the widespread belief in the myth of the grand strategy rarely takes into account the realities that should inform the public's understanding and appreciation of the nation's foreign and defense policies.

American foreign policy is constantly adjusting to international crises. In 2014, Russia "reclaimed" Crimea, a part of the former Soviet Union that had been part of Ukraine since the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Here, Russian troops stand guard in front of the Crimean parliament building after the annexation. The ensuing crisis led to the imposition of sanctions against Russia as well as a deterioration of U.S.–Russian relationships.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Russia's Vladimir Putin took military action against the countries of Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). These actions generated strong diplomatic responses from the United States and raised questions as to whether the Cold War was really over. Some analysts have argued that the United States should reconsider its abandonment of Cold War policies such as containment. Considering how different the world is in the post–Cold War era, would containment be the best American foreign-policy response to such crises?
2. Given the complex and often dangerous nature of world affairs today, some would argue that decisions about American foreign policy should be concentrated in the hands of the president. Others argue for more involvement by Congress, especially because issues are often more focused on economic questions than on military crises. Is it possible to conduct a coherent foreign policy when policymaking is shared?