

United States Foreign Policy

**Choices
and
Tradeoffs**



Miroslav Nincic

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Preface

World affairs are becoming more and more complicated, and the external challenges facing the United States have less-apparent solutions than they once seemed to have. If ever there was a time when countries could be easily divided into friends and foes, it has long since passed. If ever the ends and means of foreign policy were linked in an obvious and simple fashion, this too is no more. Ideology is no longer a predictable measure of rivalry, and national interests are too complex to yield simple clues to friendship and enmity. Military force, as evidenced in ventures from Vietnam to the Persian Gulf, has proven a much less effective way of imposing the national will than it was once thought to be. Politics and economics have become increasingly intertwined, and more international interactions have become more politicized than ever before. Ethical distinctions, which had seemed so clear in the world of earlier decades, have become blurred to all but the most dogmatic eyes.

This book is built around a central assumption: that the conduct of foreign policy is the business of confronting dilemmas which often have no optimal solution, that it is in essence a matter of making appropriate compromises and establishing workable tradeoffs. The dilemmas are of three sorts. There is, first of all, a need to choose between goals that are mutually irreconcilable, or between means of pursuing them that are largely incompatible. This may be termed the *dilemma of effective choice*, and it is a permanent part of the making of foreign policy. Second, there is a need to translate a variety of differing individual, group, and institutional preferences into a national foreign policy—a challenge called in this book the *dilemma of aggregation*. Finally, policy cannot be divorced from the values on which a society rests, and the conduct of U.S. foreign policy should be brought into line with the principles

that stand at the core of the nation's political system. This may be referred to as the dilemma of political principle.

The book seeks to establish a factual and conceptual foundation that will help the student of U.S. foreign policy come to intellectual grips with these dilemmas. It will begin by providing an overview of the mechanisms by which foreign policy is made and of the problems which they occasionally create. The book will then explore the more general issues of international conflict and cooperation, especially as they concern the United States, and specific contemporary issues such as the use of military force for political ends, the danger of nuclear war, the goals and future outlook of arms control, and the problems of constructing an acceptable international economic order. Finally, the ethical challenges that pervade the conduct of U.S. foreign policy will be addressed.

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The Challenges
and the Setting

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The Foreign Policy Challenge

TO MANY PEOPLE foreign relations are simply a matter of morality versus immorality. The world consists of peaceful nations and aggressive nations, cooperative nations and recalcitrant nations, friendly nations and enemy nations—in short, good guys and bad guys. Politicians along with the mass media often reinforce these conceptions, depicting “our” people as heroes, with all the qualities one admires, and “theirs” as villains who would stop at nothing to make their evil empire prevail. The task of foreign policy is to ensure that the good guys win in the end.

In reality matters are not that clear-cut. Countries that are usually friendly to the United States may occasionally act in ways that run counter to U.S. interests, and normally hostile nations sometimes help the United States (and, hostile though they may be, the United States may in turn do them a favor). A nation that is cooperative in one set of circumstances may be quite uncooperative in other circumstances. Some citizens may want the government to behave abroad in ways that others regard as improper or perhaps outrageous. Very frequently, people find that their own moral principles conflict with other, equally important moral principles—as when a very commendable goal can be reached only by distasteful or even repugnant means—and in such situations it is all but impossible for a government to avoid actions that are objectionable on some level. And perhaps most common of all are instances in which it is extremely difficult even to decide what the “moral” course of action is, because situations are so complex and the consequences of a nation’s actions so unpredictable.

The making of foreign policy—the determination of a nation’s behavior in its relations with other nations—is thus an agonizing affair. Because of the problems just described, it can be thought of as a continuous effort to resolve

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dilemmas—making tradeoffs between needs that are barely if at all compatible, dealing with problems whose solutions yield undesirable consequences, and simultaneously pursuing goals among which one cannot establish satisfactory priorities. Overlaying this process is the ever-present realization that mistakes can place in jeopardy the lives of individual people or the very existence of a nation. In the case of the United States, this realization is intensified by the fact that this country has more power to harm or to benefit the rest of the world than does any other country. Though our first concern is often to ask how the government's foreign policy will affect our individual interests or those of the nation as a whole, it is reasonable to suggest that exceptionally powerful nations should also be judged by their impact on persons residing outside their borders. In other words, and more than in most areas of domestic policy, the manner in which the dilemmas of U.S. foreign policy are resolved have consequences of global proportions.

Toward the end of this chapter, three specific types of foreign policy dilemmas will be described, but before that can be done, the main elements that go into the making of foreign policy must be set forth.

The Objectives of Foreign Policy

A natural starting point in trying to understand any nation's foreign policy is to ask what its goals are: What does it wish to achieve by the activities which its government directs toward other nations? Some isolationists claim that most U.S. national objectives can be pursued domestically and that the less America has to do with other nations, the better. Other, more sophisticated observers recognize that the international environment affects the United States in many profound ways and that it can be ignored only at grave peril to the nation's goals. If the nation wishes to achieve much that it considers important, it can do so only by interacting with other countries: by encouraging foreign behavior that furthers its goals and discouraging activities by which they may be frustrated. The nature and meaning of U.S. foreign policy can be understood only by first grasping the aims and objectives by which it is guided.

Foreign policy goals are often shrouded in rhetoric. The aims of a government's external behavior are professed to be lofty (security, human welfare, democracy), and its means peaceful and enlightened, by those who formulate and implement it. Similarly, some of the harshest domestic criticisms of a nation's foreign policy are linked to the interests of political challengers, and the alternatives they propose may be couched in oratory that is just as inflated and self-serving. Thus, we must first strip away the layers of rhetoric if we are to examine the essence of foreign policy dispassionately and with analytical rigor.

The United States is in certain ways similar to other nations and in other ways significantly different. Accordingly, some of its objectives are of the kind that virtually all nations pursue, while others, because they are rooted in its own

conditions and beliefs, are more specifically U.S. objectives. The two most prominent among the universal foreign policy goals are *national security* and *national prosperity*. More specifically U.S. goals would include such external *ideological* objectives as the defense abroad of those political principles that the United States espouses at home. These objectives will be briefly discussed in this chapter and dealt with more extensively throughout this book.

National Security

Most people would agree that the principal task of U.S. foreign policy is to preserve and enhance national security. Security refers to the absence of threats to those things we most value; in the case of *national security*, the absence of threats to the things we most cherish as a nation. Although some threats to these values may be rooted in domestic sources, the sort of threats we most often have in mind come from outside our borders and spring from external coercion and aggression. What are the principal values that can be thus threatened?

To begin with, and perhaps most fundamentally, they are the lives and physical well-being of Americans and the institutions and norms that they have chosen to live by. It is against these that the threats we usually fear most are directed. Indeed, the image of invading foreign armies wreaking vast human destruction and inflicting an unwelcome system of political and economic organization is one that is typically associated with threats to national security.

However, the United States has been subjected to this kind of danger less than have most other countries. Almost alone among the nations of the world, the United States has never (with the exception of brief skirmishes with British troops during the War of 1812) been the victim of direct foreign aggression. It has fought a war of national independence against a colonial master, but never a war against a foreign invader. Due to a combination of its insular geographic position and its obvious strength, no foreign armies have crossed its borders or alighted on its shores. Most European countries (on both sides of the Cold War divide) have suffered directly from the ravages of intense fighting, both in World War I and in World War II. Many Europeans have seen their cities destroyed, have lived where armies were fighting within earshot, or have experienced foreign military occupation. Nations that did not fall victim to hostile foreign troops on their territory have suffered devastation of another kind: by enemy airplanes, buzz bombs (as in the case of Great Britain), or even (in the Japanese case) atomic weapons. Numerous developing countries have also been victims of external aggression and conflict. By contrast, and although U.S. lives have been lost in battles on distant shores, Americans have had the unusual historical fortune not to have experienced war in the streets of their cities, the bombardment of their industries, or the indignities of foreign occupation.

Moreover, the United States has been for many decades the most powerful nation on earth and, because of this, one might assume that it would not be alarmed about its security—yet clearly it is. To some extent, this might be an

instance of what Karl Deutsch has called the "Parkinson's Law of national security," according to which a nation's feeling of insecurity expands in direct proportion to its power. The more powerful a nation, according to Deutsch, the higher its level of aspiration in world affairs and hence the greater the scope of its objectives that could be threatened by others.¹ To some extent, too, the current sense of insecurity has much to do with the existence of nuclear weaponry. Although an invasion of the United States by foreign troops is as unlikely now as it ever was, the march of military technology has made invasions unnecessary: the development of atomic and thermonuclear weapons and of the means of delivering them across great distances has changed the nature of external threats, and traditional military calculations have had to be revised.

Despite some confusion on this score, it is important to bear in mind that national security is not coextensive with military policy. The latter deals with the choice of weapons and strategies needed to meet national objectives by military means. Its purpose is to prepare the country to fend off foreign onslaughts, to deny an enemy all hope of military victory, or to threaten an adversary with a retaliation so devastating as to make aggression an unwise course of action. It may also be used to coerce other nations into behaving in a certain way. Military policy is a necessary, but plainly very limited, tool of national security. What it does not do, and is not designed to do, is eliminate or lessen the causes of rivalry or enmity with other nations so as to make aggression unlikely at the outset. It is in a nation's interest to convince an adversary that aggressive objectives cannot be successfully achieved; it is even more in its interest to have as few adversaries as possible. In fact, it can be argued that when military competition makes rivalries more bitter, and when it makes conflicts of interest appear even greater than otherwise, armed force undermines the very need by which it is justified.

This is certainly a problem: insufficient military power may render a nation vulnerable to foreign aggression or pressure, but too vigorous a pursuit of armed might can heighten international tension, complicate the resolution of differences with other countries, and thus, ultimately, make the nation *less* secure.

National Prosperity

A distinction is frequently made in international relations between "high" politics, which concerns matters of national security and major diplomacy, and "low" politics, which involves mainly economic matters (for example, trade policy). The implication is that the former is somehow grander and more vital than the latter. This is often disputed, and in fact most nations, including the United States, devote as much of their foreign policy efforts to dealing with matters of low politics as with high politics.² There is an obvious overlap between national security and national prosperity: the massive material abundance of the United States could, in principle, fall victim to coercive threats from abroad, no less than the security of its population or of its political institutions.