

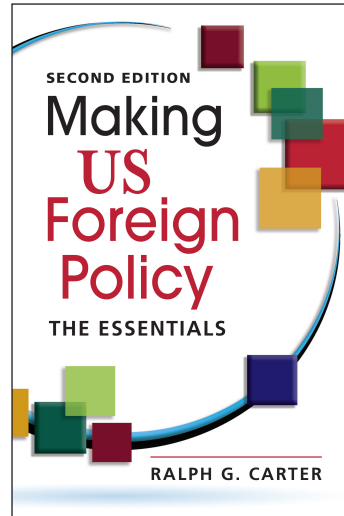
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Making US Foreign Policy: The Essentials

SECOND EDITION

Ralph G. Carter

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1

Making US Foreign Policy

Learning Objectives

- Define “foreign policy.”
- Describe the five stages of the foreign policy input-output process. Explain the formal foreign policy powers of the three main branches of the US government.
- Differentiate between the concentric circles approach and the shifting constellations approach to foreign policy making.

On January 20, 2017, President Donald J. Trump took the oath of office, vowing to protect the United States from all enemies, foreign and domestic. In his inaugural speech, he stressed that Americans were threatened by terrorists and criminals. One week later, he issued an executive order banning travel to the United States by people from a number of Muslim-majority countries. Chaos ensued as officials tried to determine if those already in the air bound for the United States with valid visas would be admitted, if those with permanent residency status were included in the ban, and so on. Critics demonstrated across the country, and many called the ban an unconstitutional religious test. Ultimately, it took the administration three tries to produce a travel ban that the Supreme Court would accept as constitutional. Then in early 2018,

the Justice Department announced a “zero tolerance” policy toward illegal immigrants, a policy whose consequence was the separation of children from their parents, who would be prosecuted. The outrage created by family separations and the impounding of children—which critics called “kids in cages”—was overwhelming. After denying that he could change the policy, President Trump signed an executive order doing so.

Both these examples demonstrate problematic foreign policy making. Were they just bad ideas? Were they policy options that had not been carefully considered through a good vetting process that included all of the agencies involved? Were they the result of an inexperienced administration and a passive Congress controlled by the president’s own political party? If nothing else, these examples show that foreign policy making is rarely simple or easy, and the challenge of making foreign policy is nothing new. From the earliest days of the republic, international events and US responses to them affected where Americans could travel, the safety risks to which they were exposed, the availability and prices of goods, and the quality of life they could expect. Like other countries, the United States has to adapt to events beyond its borders, as these events present either challenges to be solved or opportunities to be exploited. That adaptation process involves making foreign policy.

Simply defined, **foreign policy*** refers to the goals and actions of the US government in the international system. Thus, foreign policy may be what the US government wants to achieve, and the steps taken in that regard toward other international actors (for example, North Korea, the United Nations [UN], or Hezbollah) and issues (such as foreign trade, genocide, or global climate change). The overarching thesis of this book is this: *how policies are made, and by whom, affects the substance of the resulting policies*. That means the actors (the individuals, groups, and organizations) involved in making the policies, their motivations, their differing amounts of power or influence, and the processes by which they make foreign policy decisions combine to shape the resulting policy outputs, and ultimately their overall outcomes. These actors, motivations, processes, outputs, and outcomes are the focus of this book.

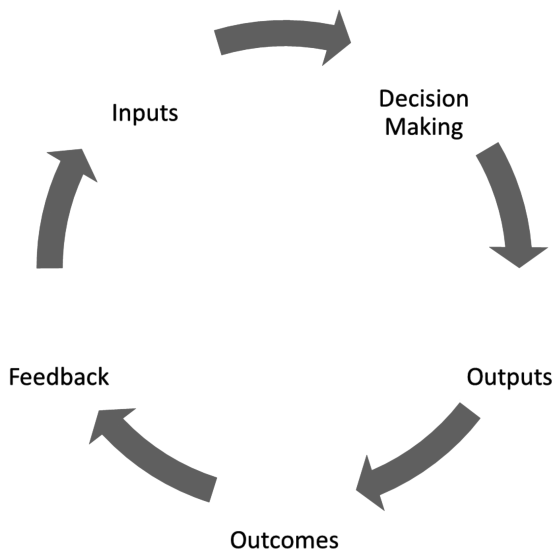
* Terms that are defined in the glossary appear in **boldface** on first substantive use.

How Is Foreign Policy Made and by Whom?

In the United States, foreign policy making is very much like domestic policy making. Although there are some differences, overall the similarities between the two basic processes outweigh those differences. At its most fundamental level, policy making is a five-stage process involving inputs, decision making, outputs, outcomes, and feedback. As shown in Figure 1.1, the first stage begins with **inputs**—things that stimulate policy makers to act. Such inputs could be international events that seem to require or invite a response, or they might be domestic pressures by those who seek a foreign policy change. In the second stage, policy makers make decisions about whether to address these inputs, and if so, how. There are many different ways to make such decisions, as will be discussed in the pages to follow. In stage three, the results of the decision are foreign policy **outputs**. They are the response by the foreign policy makers to the inputs. Sometimes outputs are words—signals that convey what the United States is willing to do—or broader policy declarations; other times they are more assertive actions on the part of the government. In stage four, these outputs produce results called **outcomes**, which answer the “so what?” question: once policy makers choose a course of action, what happens next? The “what happens next” is the outcome. Finally, in stage five, outcomes can create a feedback loop: based on the outcomes, new inputs may arise.

Some foreign policies are the results of decisions made in the executive branch; others are the result of interactions between a number of interested governmental and nongovernmental actors—such as presidents, other administration officials, formal and informal presidential advisers, Congress or its individual members, representatives of relevant interest groups, the broader public, concerned foreign leaders, and at times the federal courts. All these interactions are reported by the various elements of the national media, which may also become a factor in determining whether policies get made and how. Compared to many other countries, the United States has processes that are extremely open to inputs from numerous participants who may become significantly involved in foreign policy making.

In the crucial decision-making phase of any foreign policy process, the amount of influence these actors wield is a unique blend of the intersection of the nature of the issue, the political

Figure 1.1 The Process of Foreign Policy Making

context involved, the timing, the actors' positions in government or politics, and so on. However, presidents and members of Congress have important foreign policy advantages in terms of powers granted to them by the Constitution, and that should be noted from the outset.

Let's begin with presidents. The constitutional powers presidents have in foreign policy making are significant. Presidents serve as the commander in chief of the nation's military. This power allows them to order troops into conflict and determine military strategies. Presidents also have other constitutional roles that allow them to serve essentially as the nation's chief diplomat. For example, the role of sending and receiving ambassadors gives presidents the sole power to recognize diplomatically other regimes as being legitimate representatives of their population. Presidents often attend summit conferences where they meet with other countries' leaders to discuss issues of mutual concern. Presidents have the power to nego-

tiate treaties with other countries, but the Senate must approve such treaties by a two-thirds vote of those present. Presidents can also make personal commitments in the form of executive agreements with other world leaders, and those do not require Senate approval. Like other handshake agreements, executive agreements are only as good as the word of the leaders who made them. At least while those leaders are in office, their executive agreements are normally seen as the functional equivalent of treaties. Of course, subsequent presidents are under no obligation to adhere to executive agreements they did not make, and presidents may later change their minds about their own prior agreements with others.

As the nation's chief executive, presidents appoint (with Senate approval) a number of other foreign policy officials. These officials range from cabinet officers (for example, secretaries of state, defense, treasury, or homeland security, and diplomats given cabinet rank such as the US trade representative or ambassador to the United Nations) to the directors of national intelligence and central intelligence and to the different ambassadors who represent the United States in foreign capitals. Presidents also appoint some other influential foreign policy officials without Senate confirmation. A good example is the post of national security adviser. The Constitution further gives presidents the power to see that the nation's laws are faithfully executed, a power that provides presidents with considerable authority to conduct the nation's foreign affairs. Finally, because presidents, along with their vice presidents, are the only nationally elected officials in the country, they are uniquely situated to speak for the entire nation when dealing with other international actors or issues.

Surprisingly, Congress—the legislative branch—actually has more enumerated constitutional foreign policy powers than do presidents. These include the specific powers to:

- Declare war
- Raise, support, and regulate the nation's military
- Make rules regarding piracy and its punishment
- Regulate international commerce
- Regulate immigration
- Make any other laws “necessary and proper” for carrying out the above powers

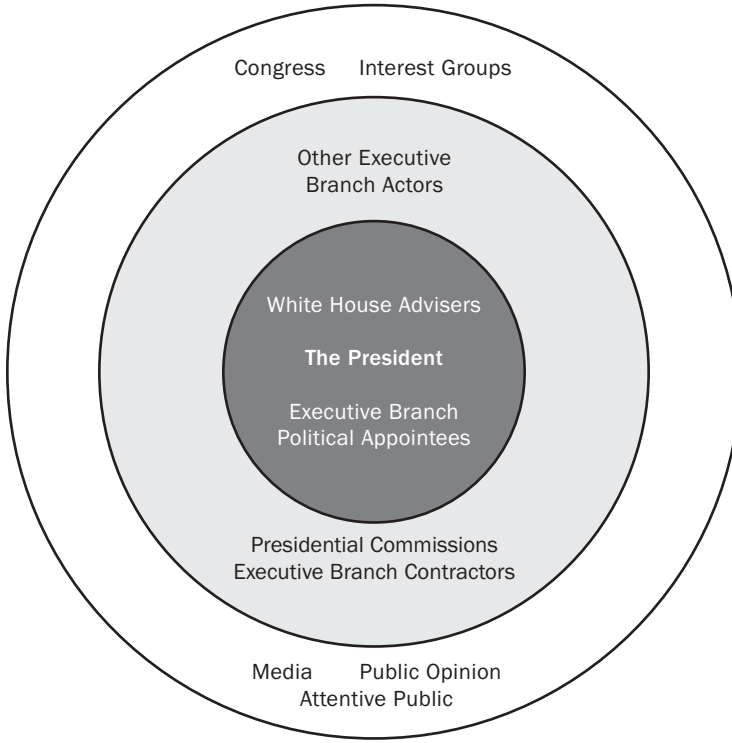
When they are not willing to wait for an administration to act, some individual members of Congress will take these powers and push and prod the US government into making new policies; these legislators will use whatever political leverage is available to put their imprint on foreign policy.

More generally, as a collective body, Congress has the power to pass whatever legislation its members desire—such as imposing economic sanctions on Russia or reaffirming the US commitment to defend North Atlantic Treaty Organization (**NATO**) allies, to name two recent examples. Presidents have the right to veto such legislation, but Congress can override presidential vetoes by a two-thirds vote of each chamber. Finally, virtually everything done by the US government requires money, and the Constitution provides Congress the sole power to authorize and appropriate funds. Put another way, every part of a presidential administration is dependent on Congress for its annual budget. Just like parents dealing with their children's allowances, Congress can provide or withhold funds to reward or punish the administration for its policy actions.

Long ago, these overlapping foreign policy powers were described as an “invitation . . . to struggle,” and that depiction remains appropriate.¹ When their policy preferences diverge, the presidential administration and Congress struggle for control of the policy-making process, because *the actor who controls the process will have the best chance of influencing the resulting policy output*. Some situations favor presidential control, such as decisions to send US troops into harm's way, recognize a foreign regime, undertake a covert operation abroad, or make an executive agreement with another country's leadership. In the case of the **presidential preeminence model**, the foreign policy process can be seen as a series of concentric circles, as illustrated in Figure 1.2. The innermost and most important circle is dominated by presidents and their advisers and top political appointees. Other executive branch departments and agencies play a secondary role and are therefore in the second circle. Finally, the least significant actors are in the outermost circle of influence. These include Congress, interest groups, public opinion, and the mass media.²

The fact that presidents are undoubtedly the single-most-important foreign policy makers in most cases does not mean other actors are without significant influence. At times, foreign policy bureaucracies or Congress dominates foreign policy mak-

Figure 1.2 Concentric Circles of Foreign Policy Making



Source: From Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 541–544.

ing. Therefore, a more accurate depiction of ongoing interbranch foreign policy interactions is captured by the **shifting constellations model** of power.³ In a triangular relationship, presidents (along with other White House actors), Congress, and the foreign policy bureaucracies interact to make foreign policy. However, instead of executive branch actors being central to policy making all the time and regardless of the issues involved, each of these three groups has the potential to play a dominant role vis-à-vis the others for some foreign policy issues but not for other ones. The

president and other White House actors may dominate some issues, Congress may dominate another set of issues, and various foreign policy bureaucracies may dominate still others. All three of these major sets of actors are impacted by societal forces in the public arena such as interest groups, public opinion, social media, and the news media, and all are also impacted by forces from the international arena.

Regardless of the nature of these actors' interactions, the foreign policy outputs they produce have outcomes—not just in the international arena but also within the United States itself (as tariff increases on imported goods or immigration changes dramatically show). These outcomes may have limited or no impact on others, or they may fundamentally change the dynamics of international politics. Either way, the nature of these outcomes and their magnitude can often produce feedback that leads to new inputs to the system of foreign policy making. Thus, foreign policy making can be seen as a virtually never-ending process of adapting to external challenges and opportunities.

The Plan of the Book

In exploring how and why US foreign policy is made, we will follow the general framework depicted in Figure 1.1. In the first part of the book, we look at inputs. Perhaps the most important inputs are the ones in our minds—how we think the political world works, how it should work, and why. Chapter 2 focuses on these interpretive ideas, which leads to a discussion of four major theories of international relations. Next, Chapter 3 presents contextual factors: the inputs coming from the external political environment of the international arena, the internal political environment within US borders, and the environment of conditioning ideas that shape US behavior.

The next step is to examine various decision-making processes. That's right—processes plural. There are many ways decisions get made, and often the process used depends on who is in the decision-making group. Thus, Chapter 4 goes into greater depth in examining the major governmental actors involved in foreign policy making; Chapter 5 looks at how decisions are made by individuals and small groups; Chapter 6 explores bureaucratic politics

and policy making; and Chapter 7 focuses on how Congress participates in foreign policy making. Beyond these governmental actors, other societal groups—interest groups, think tanks, the various elements of the media, and individual opinion leaders—also get involved in foreign policy making. These societal actors, along with other societal factors such as political culture and public opinion, are the focus of Chapter 8. Chapter 9 examines how international actors—individuals, groups, and organizations—also get involved in the making of US foreign policy. Many different actors and their diverging viewpoints combine to shape US foreign policy decisions.

In wrapping up the examination of US foreign policy making, Chapter 10 briefly reviews the types of foreign policy outputs that are the product of this process and the kinds of outcomes that they generate. Chapter 11 presents some concluding thoughts by looking toward the future, including ideas about possible changes in the mix of actors who make US foreign policy, about how the processes of foreign policy making might change, and about how foreign policy outputs may shift in the future.

My goal in this book is to help you understand the people and politics involved in making US foreign policy. To assist in that effort, each chapter begins with learning objectives. Keep them in mind as you read the chapter; they can prove useful in guiding you through the reading. Periodically, boxes are inserted in the chapters. The material in these boxes provides more in-depth, real-life illustrations of the theories, concepts, and relationships discussed. Important terms and concepts appear in **boldface**; these are defined in the chapters and also included in the glossary at the end of the book.

Finally, I hope that by the end of the book you better understand certain things. These include:

- It matters who makes foreign policy.
- What motivates these actors can vary tremendously.
- Policy making is shaped by both international and domestic inputs.
- There are many different ways to reach foreign policy decisions.
- Those resulting decisions have impacts on others.

Once you have a firm grasp of these points, you will know far more about US foreign policy making than most Americans do, and you will be poised to act on that understanding for the rest of your life.

Suggested Reading

- Alden, Chris, and Amnon Aran. *Foreign Policy Analysis: New Approaches*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2017.
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- Neack, Laura. *Studying Foreign Policy Comparatively: Cases and Analysis*. 4th ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018.
- Snyder, Richard C., H. W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin, with new chapters by Valerie M. Hudson, Derek H. Chollet, and James M. Goldgeier. *Foreign Policy Decision-Making (Revisited)*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Notes

1. See Edwin S. Corwin, *The President: Office and Powers* (New York: New York University Press, 1957), 171.
2. Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 541–544.
3. See James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).