

# Theories of US Foreign Policy: An Overview

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## Abstract

This article reviews major theoretical perspectives to US foreign policy as well as on how these theoretical perspectives explain foreign policy decision making and conducting of the US. First, the paper will discuss the process of making foreign policy to sustain US core values and interests which are determined by five major categories of sources (i) the external environment, (ii) the societal environment of the nation, (iii) the governmental setting, (iv) the roles of foreign policymakers, and (v) the individual personalities of foreign policy-making elites (Wittkopf et al 2008, p. 15). Then, the paper will examine the defensive and offensive realism, liberalism, marxism, neoclassical realism, constructivism which can be based on to understand US foreign policy behaviour. It will be concluded that no single theory has the capacity to describe, explain and predict US foreign policy behaviour. A mixture of such theoretical approaches seems to be necessary to obtain a comprehensive picture of US foreign policy.

**Keywords:** US foreign policy, defensive and offensive realism, liberalism, marxism, neoclassical realism, constructivism

## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to examine some of the prominent approaches to US foreign policy which have been put forth by International Relations scholars to explain and predict the conduct of US foreign policy. American foreign policy refers to the actions taken by the United States abroad to pursue its goals: 'to create a more secure, democratic and prosperous world for the benefit of the American people and the international community' (The Department of State 2013, *Missions of the department of State*). It is admitted that security, democracy and prosperity have been the lasting values and interests of the United States (Wittkopf et al 2008, p. 25). The process of making foreign policy to sustain these values and interests are determined by five major categories of sources (i) the external environment, (ii) the societal environment of the nation, (iii) the governmental setting, (iv) the roles of foreign policymakers, and (v) the individual personalities of foreign policy-making elites (Wittkopf et al 2008, p. 15). Wittkopf et al also see these five sets of determinants as inputs and use the funnel metaphor to vividly describe how they together shape American foreign policy as illustrated in the Figure 1 (Wittkopf et al 2008, p. 15).

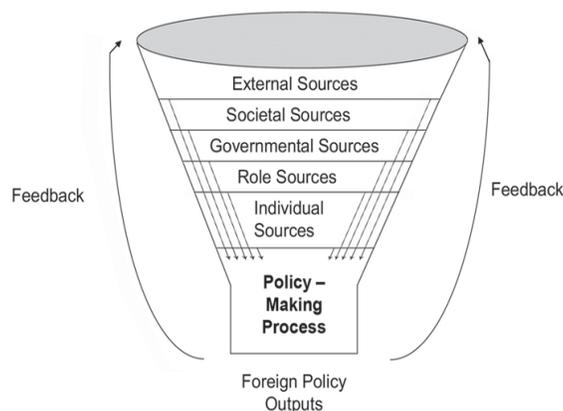


Figure 1. Five determinant categories of American foreign policy-making process

Source: E. R. Wittkopf et al (2008: 18)

A critical reading of American foreign policy-making process suggests that no single source category can dictate American foreign policy. These sources collectively influence American foreign-policy outcomes; therefore, they are all essential to get a comprehensive picture of how American foreign decisions are made.

The external or systematic sources point out that to understand the behaviour of US foreign policy it is necessary to take into account the events or dynamics taking place in the international system. Like any other country, the US can be affected by what is happening in the realm of world politics, therefore, US government has to take into consideration what is happening in the international system when it decides its foreign policy behavior. Put it simply, the making of US foreign policy is impacted by events in the international politics.

Yet, many foreign policy analysts argue that domestic sources of US foreign policy have a more important role to play than external sources. The societal sources represent the nongovernmental aspects of US society. It is believed that US foreign policy reflects the core values and ideology of its domestic political system. This can be seen in the way the US seeks to promote and expand democracy, freedom and human rights all over the world.

Besides, the formation and implementation of US foreign policy is strongly influenced by its governmental structure, or governmental sources. Power diffusion is a prominent feature of American policy-making process. The high decentralisation means that no single actor can dictate the country's policies. Under the constitution, power is shared between the presidency and a bicameral Congress. The main policy institutions are the departments of State and Defense, the National Security Council (NSC), and the intelligence agencies as shown in Figure 2 Cameron (2003:37).

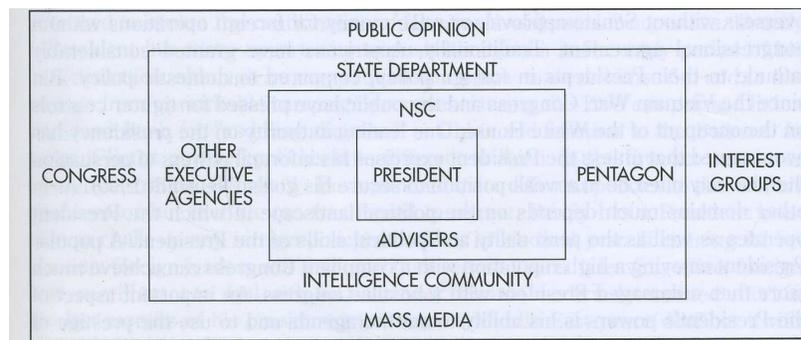


Figure 2. US foreign policy making

Source: F. Cameron (2003: 37)

Although Presidents play the most important role within the administration, they have to 'contend with an active Congress, oversee a complex executive bureaucracy, and respond to pressures and ideas generated by the press, think tanks, and public opinion.' The sharing and separation of powers between the President and the Congress summarised in Table 2 have invited their struggle for the control of foreign policy. That struggle can be viewed as a brake on 'the overriding force in American foreign affairs', thus guarantees a certain extent of democracy in U.S. foreign policy formulation (Hamilton and Dussen, 1978)

In comparison with other governmental structures, the US governmental structure allows a wide range of actors to play a part in the process of making US foreign policy. This comprises of the President, the Secretary of the State Department, the Secretary of Defense Department, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, advisers to the President, domestic and foreign lobbyists and interest groups. This is not a full list, and it is quite easy to add this list more actors who are likely to take part in the making for US foreign policy.

Logically, this partial list draws our attention to the role sources in US foreign policy formulation process. For many, the characteristics of the bureaucratic bodies are more significant than the personalities of the individuals and a person's influence is limited by the policy making role he/she occupies. However, the role sources simply indicate a different understanding that is 'where you stand depends on where you sit' (Berman DR, Martin LL and Kajfez LA 1985, p. 232)

It implies that the stance and position that a person has on any issues of foreign policy is dependent upon the bureaucracy that he/she belongs to.

The individual sources points out that the personality traits, beliefs, past experiences, upbringing, and the personal convictions of individuals who have access to the formulation of US foreign policy exert an impact on the US external behaviour.

The funnel metaphor created by Wittkopf et al (2008) can help us to identify the source categories of US foreign policy making but it does not how much the five source categories influence the foreign policy making process and which categories are the most influential ones. This means that it can only fulfill one of the main functions of a theory: It draws our attention to what should be concentrated on to understand US foreign policy formulation process and explain US foreign policy behaviour. Thus, the funnel metaphor created by Wittkopf et al can be seen as a 'pre theory.' Scholars who have tirelessly struggled to establish a theory of foreign policy have taken part in intense debates over which are the most significant source categories of a nation state's foreign policy behaviour. A theory of foreign policy aims to explain what makes a state to employ a certain type of foreign policy at a specific point of time as Rose (1998) has defined: A theory of foreign policy is able to 'explain what states try to achieve in the external realm and when they try to achieve it' (Rose 1998, p.145). In this sense, some prominent theories of US foreign policy will now be examined.

## **2. External Theories: Defensive Realism and Offensive Realism**

Defensive realism and offensive realism are two dominant theories which put forth strong arguments that US foreign policy are the consequences of external pressures stemming from the distribution of power in the international system. Both defensive realists and offensive realists have the same assumptions about the international system which in their viewpoints play a decisive role in shaping US foreign policy behaviour. These assumptions include the anarchic structure of the international system; states' uneven levels of capabilities; states' uncertainty about the intentions of the other states; survival as the ultimate aim of states; and the rationality of states. Defensive realism and offensive realism view the lack of a higher power above the state governments in the international system as the major driver behind the power-seeking behaviour of states. It implies that the US foreign policy character at a particular point of time in the history is shaped by its relative amount of power.

According to offensive realists, there is a trend that weaker states will bandwagon with the stronger or the most threatening power in order to be out of fear or to gain profit, rather than balance against it. Henceforth, offensive realists' strategy for maximizing power and achieving hegemony is to exploit the weaker states' tendency to bandwagon with the superior power (Schweller 1994). Once having gained primacy in the international system, the hegemon has to defend its power preponderance by maintaining a wide power gap between itself and potential challengers. It will use force to deter any threats to its predominance. Without such measures, its rivals are likely to grow mightier at its expense and will pose a challenge to its security as well as its superiority. This is what has been underlined by Meirsheimer: 'the best way to ensure their survival is to be the most powerful state in the system' (Meirsheimer 2001, p. 33) According to Meirsheimer (2008), the United States is the only state to ever obtain the hegemonic position in the international system. A careful reading of US history of foreign policy in the nineteenth century indicates that the United States succeeded in expanding across the North America and gained a number of offshore territories after the Spanish and American War (1898). This leads to Mearsheimer's conclusion that the US is 'well suited to be poster child for offensive realism' (Meirsheimer 2001, p. 238). When the US became a regional hegemon, offensive realism's prediction is that US foreign policy's goal was to prevent the emergence of a hegemonic state in other regions in the world. It means that the US has tried to deter the emergence of a hegemon in either the European continent or Asian continent. Offensive realism is supportive of an offshore strategy, and Mearsheimer (2001) believed that this is also the strategy that has been pursued by the US since the end of the Second World War.

Defensive realism places emphasis on security maximization through balancing, deterrence and multilateral arms control. Defensive realists argue that power maximization can be counterproductive and harm state security (Jervis 1978; Waltz 1979; Posen 1984; Walt 1987, 2005; Snyder 1991; Glaser 1994/5; and Van Evera 1999).

They hold that states are status quo oriented and the primary goal of states is survival or security rather than power maximization. According to defensive realists, states need to protect themselves from threats and minimize a relative loss, any attempt at expansion beyond that is not necessary for state survival and might backfire.

Besides, defensive realism argues that hegemonic status is non-feasible in the international system due to the efficient operation of the equilibrium mechanism. Put it differently, because the balancing tendency is inherent in the international politics, a countervailing coalition will be shaped up to prevent a threatening power from achieving its hegemonic goals (Wight 1973; Waltz 1979; and Waltz 1987). Therefore, for security purposes, states should behave in a moderate manner and should not attempt to threaten others.

Based on its main line of argument, the defensive realism' prediction is that US foreign policy behaviour would be featured by constraint, particularly when the US' degree of security is very high. However, US recent history shows that this prediction seems to be incorrect when the US has sought to sustain its primacy and hegemony in the world politics by increasing its relative power to other states. Defensive realism supposes that this is because of the domestic politics which is able to prevent the US from following the imperatives of the world politics.

### **3. Internal Theories: Liberalism and Marxism**

Internal theories refer to the theories which take the domestic or internal factors into consideration and do not place an emphasis on systematic or external factors in their explanations of US foreign policy behaviour. Such domestic factors as socio-political and economic situations, public opinion will be taken in to account by the US presidents his advisers and cabinet officials in any foreign policy analysis and formulation. US politics and politics rather than the international politics or the international system have been argued to play a crucial role in determining the scope and direction of this nation's foreign policy.

That liberalism is seen as one of the most important theories of US foreign policy may not surprise many people because the United States has been seeking to promote the values of liberty and democracy since its independence declaration in 1776 (Hartz 1991).

The core character of the liberal theory implies that US foreign policy had better a vivid reflection and promotion of the liberal and democratic features of US domestic institutions. In this logic, the main goal of US foreign policy is to bring individual freedom and human rights to people around the world. Arguably, this is likely to be beneficial to the US itself because its security is heightened when there are more nation states in favour of liberalism. This is also beneficial to the rest of the world because at the heart of liberal theory is the goal to bring freedom and human rights to everyone. Though liberalists share the same view that US foreign policy had better reflect the country's political values and identities, they have differences in how to best extend the value of freedoms and liberty around the world.

Liberalism put forth an argument that it is more likely for non-liberal regimes implement hostile policies. Also, there is a tendency that these regimes seek to acquire as many capabilities as they can. On the contrary, liberal-democratic states, which are generally more peaceful, will accumulate relative power necessary to safeguard themselves against hostilities from illiberal regimes. Additionally, liberalism believes that democratic states do not fight each other. In this logic, liberalism stresses on extending democratisation as the best strategy to keep peace around the world. Importantly, liberalism supposes that free-market economies have to be present in the process of spreading democracy. Liberal theory explains that free-market economies are more peaceful and mainly concentrate on economic thriving rather than on building military might or wars. Henceforth, the promotion of liberal democracies with free-market economies in liberal views constitutes the best way to ensure the benevolent intentions of opponents and promote peace.

Spreading democracy and liberty has been one of the main elements in US foreign policy. The difficulty facing US foreign policy makers is the choosing direct promotion of democracy through foreign aid for freedom movements, diplomatic negotiations or indirect promotion of democracy military intervention and regime change encourage democracy in non liberal states. Encouraging free trade and seeing the international institutions as facilitators of international cooperation constitute two other main elements of the liberal theory of US foreign policy. This is embraced by a liberal thinker, Ikenberry (2000): Three cornerstones of liberalism (democracy, free trade and international institutions) are mutually strengthened and they concurrently enhance US interests and make contribution to building a peaceful world order.

Marxism is a theory which bases on the internal economic factors of the US rather than the structure of the domestic political system to explain US foreign policy behaviour. Marxist theory places emphasis on the capitalistic nature of US economy and the burdens it puts on to mould the US foreign policy of expansionism and imperialism. The central argument of Marxist theory is that US foreign policy is a means to advance the benefits of the capitalist class in the US society and the huge enterprises they possess. Advocates of Marxism put forth that the real rationale for most of the interventions that the US conducted in Latin America, the Middle East, Asia or elsewhere was to serve the US domestic economy's needs for cheap sources of raw materials and markets (Kolko 1969). According to Marxist theorists, US foreign policy has had a history of imperialism and building empire and the source of this implementation stems from the capitalist nature of US economy system. Like any other economies built on capitalism, the US economy is very much likely to encounter such crises as high unemployment rate, recession, and overproduction. Thus, the US leadership tends to solve these issues by looking for sources of raw materials, markets and flows of capital from abroad. Marxist theory highlights that to safeguard the interests of the capital class, US foreign policy aims to provide and sustain stability in the international system for the expanding of capitalism. It

implies that the wars fought by the US in Vietnam, Bosnia, and Iraq or elsewhere were to bring stability to the international system, this stability really needed by the capitalists to invest their capital into overseas markets to reap greater profits. This is echoed by Williams in his much cited book 'The Tragedy of American Diplomacy' published in 1972. The US has tried to deal with its domestic economic difficulties by adopting the approach of expansionism, whereby the US has sought to obtain access to new markets, investment opportunities and sources of raw materials outside its national borders. Drawing on this, Williams (1972) concludes that domestic factors are the determinants of US foreign policy.

#### **4. Neoclassical Realism: A Combination of External and Internal Theories**

Ongoing attempts have been made to combine external/systemic and internal/domestic determinants to establish a theory of foreign policy with better explanatory power than external theories or internal theories. The emergence of neoclassical realist theory represents one of the best examples of that endeavour. Neoclassical realists hold that view that the best way to understand US foreign policy and explain US external behaviour is looking at the interactions between both systematic and domestic factors. According to neoclassical realism, systematic factors have an important role in explaining US foreign policy behaviour, however, our understanding of US foreign policy formulation and implementation will be incomprehensive if internal factors are deemphasized. For example, relative power that a state possesses is a systematic power is significant for setting up the independent variables of a foreign policy. However, power distribution in the international system is, in neoclassical realist belief, unable to give a clear and convincing explanation of US foreign policy implementation. Put it differently, domestic factors needed to be taken into account to understand how the systemic factors are based on by US leaders to make foreign policy decisions. Walt (2002) points this out when he asserts that neoclassical realism 'places domestic politics as an intervening variable between the distribution of power and foreign policy behavior' (Walt 2002, p. 211).

From neoclassic realist perspective, foreign policy makers' perceiving of relative power distribution in the international system and governmental structure are the two important intervening variables. It means that such domestic factors as individual sources and governmental sources are crucial to have a comprehensive picture of US foreign policy behaviour.

#### **5. Constructivism**

Unlike the balance of power theory of realism or the democratic peace theory of liberalism, constructivism is a theory which embraces actors and factors that external theories and internal theories do not entail. In relation to actors, constructivists still acknowledge the primacy of states, but they also indicate the role of other actors namely states' agencies, social community, international organizations, think tanks in any dynamics in the international politics (Weber 2007, p. 98). Regarding factors, constructivists view that human consciousness and its influence in world politics. According to constructivism, the concept of human consciousness should be seen as the starting point to explain human behaviour (Busse 1999, p. 44). This is certainly a departure from the materialistic assumption of defensive realism, offensive realism, neo - classical realism and liberalism, which base on a rational actor model to explain the behaviour of states in the international system. They argue that states as unitary actors in anarchy seek to maximize their self-defined interests and their pursuit of survival, power, and wealth seem endless. Constructivism which does not place emphasis on such material factors put forth that states are social actors, whose behaviours are in accordance with domestic and international rules. From this logic, it is meant that the interactions among states are naturally social and more flexible (Busse 1999, pp. 44-45).

In addition, constructivism underscores the significance of identity in international politics (Kowert 2001, pp. 268-269). Identity as agent refers to the way people declare for themselves and think of the others. The academic debate on identity politics has grown in the discipline of international studies since 1990s. This was partly because that identity politics was uneasy to explain, especially by employing such mainstream theories as realism and liberalism. In reality, significant events in international politics like the Second World War and the Cold War have produced a dualist rhetoric that makes a clear division between personal ideology and national objectives to such well-defined notions as democratic and dictatorial. After the ended Cold War, identity has been getting more uncertain and challenging.

Constructivists associate identity with ideas (Houghton 2007, pp. 29-30). This makes material forces themselves become basically meaningless in constructivist view. People have their own ideas to socially build up the meanings for their own world. For the US, the possession of nuclear weapons by China, Russia, and Iran means differently from the possession of nuclear weapons by France and the United Kingdom. In terms of materials, their nuclear weapons are certainly similar. Yet, British nuclear weapons are not harmful from US perspective because of identity as a friend the US has given to the United Kingdom. Nuclear weapons in the hands of Iran are considered to be

dangerous because the US has established different identity for Iran. This exemplifies how identity matters in the international politics from constructivist approach.

In the logic of constructivism, ideas and identity has a very important role in explaining foreign policy of the United States. National ideas should be the starting point to analyse and explain US external behaviours. US identity partly represents a function of foreign policy and self-defined image. According to the theory of constructivism, identity is always in relations with the others and emerges from distinguishing itself from the others. Therefore, in the Cold War period, US national identity as the guardian of liberty, democracy and human rights was partly stemming from placing it in proximity to the Soviet Union which was supposed to be totalitarian. The document named NSC-68 can be referred to by constructivist theorists as the evidence of the significance of ideas in enhancing identities since this document sketched out US Cold War policy of containment and clearly distinguished the US national identities and the Soviet Union's national identities.

What makes constructivist theory different from material based theories is that constructivism put forth that national identities are the foundation of national interests which strongly impacts foreign policy formulating. While material based theories view interests as a function of material power, the theory of constructivism points out that they are a function of ideas. The ideas that US foreign policy makers have about the US establish the foundation of US national interests. It is noted that US foreign policy behaviours do not have one fixed pattern because identities and interests can be changed over time. In constructivist view, US national interests are internally formed through social interaction processes. This helps to comprehend the reason why the US behaves one way in its relations with other liberal democratic states and another way with non democratic states. (Nau 2002)With a concentration on ideas and identities, constructivism has its own logical arguments to analyse and explain US foreign policy formulation and implementation.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has brought an insight into prominent theoretical approaches to US foreign policy: defensive and offensive realism, liberalism, marxism, neoclassical realism, constructivism which can be based on to understand US foreign policy behaviour. Some have tried to indicate the significance of external/systematic factors in the making of US foreign policy. Others have sought to show the impacts of internal/domestic factors on US foreign policy. Also, there is an attempt to incorporate both external/systematic factors and impacts of internal/domestic factors in explaining US foreign policy. Particularly, efforts have been made in analysing US formulation and implementation on the basis of ideas and national identities. Though theories are sophisticated, their debates on sources of changes in US foreign policy in the international politics is crucial to have a clearer and more comprehensive picture of US conducts of foreign policy.

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