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Foreign Policy and International Politics

Chapter Summary

International studies sees countries as the primary unit of analysis, which means the relationship between countries is of fundamental importance. How one country does or should relate to another country is called its **foreign policy**, which is the main focus of this chapter. Before discussing the general goals and specific tools of foreign policy, the concept of power is examined. The topic of Canada–US relations is used as a case study to apply themes explored in the chapter.

At its most basic, **power** is about the ability to get what one wants (or what a country wants). A further distinction is made between **hard power** (getting what you want through “bucks and bullets”) and **soft power** (getting what you want via ideas, values, and culture). Taking all these factors into account, a continuum is used to categorize countries in international politics in terms of their relative power status. The strongest are the **great powers**, and in declining order of strength, the continuum also includes **regional powers**, **middle powers**, **small powers**, **rogue regimes**, and **failed states**. International studies is particularly interested in two other types of countries: **emerging powers** and **declining powers**, as both are likely to have tremendous impact on global politics.

Next, the section tackles **foreign policy**, specifically the goals and possible means (or tools) used to achieve such goals. In terms of basic goals in foreign policy, there is a classic division between two doctrines: **realism** and **idealism**. The former emphasizes the advancement of national interests and pursuit of objectives that solely benefit one’s own country; the latter believes countries ought to help each other make the world a better place. There are deeper distinctions within each doctrine, but certain areas of compromise and common ground as well (a blended approach between these two doctrines to foreign policy is possible, but there are key limitations). There are four tools primarily used to achieve foreign policy goals: **diplomacy**, **economic incentives**, **sanctions**, and **armed force**. Diplomacy can be positive (praise/negotiation) or negative (threats/criticism); economic incentives can also be positive (cash/trade) or negative (withholding cash/canceling trade); sanctions can be targeted (affects the elites of society only) or sweeping (affects all of society); and armed force can be precise (targeted/pinpointed force) or general (war/widespread “hot” conflict).

Finally, the topic of Canada–US relations is presented as a case study to better examine the goals and tools of foreign policy in the real world. The conventional wisdom that the US pursues a realist agenda in foreign policy (where Canada pursues an idealist one) is challenged. The true objectives for both sides are identified, contemplating the future of this significant and interesting relationship.

Key Concepts

Armed force: deliberate, organized violence, deployed as a tool of foreign policy to achieve a political objective. It can range from a show of force, like a military drill or exercise, or small-scale “pin-point” force aimed at a strategic target, to all-out classical, fully mobilized, “hot,” shooting war. (p. 144)

Assurance problem: a key concept within the doctrine of realism, which suggests that fundamentally, countries cannot trust each other and so they must rely only on themselves. This means a country should pursue only those objectives which benefit it and it alone. (p. 134)

Bipolar: a way of describing the world during the Cold War, when two powerful countries dominated the entire world, each with its own separate sphere of influence (the United States in the West and the Soviet Union in the East). (p. 132)

Declining powers: countries whose impact and stature on the world stage are decreasing. A commonly cited example today is Russia. (p. 131)

Diplomacy: a tool of foreign policy in which one attempts to persuade another country to adopt one’s point of view and act accordingly. Diplomacy may involve talking, negotiating, lobbying, dealing, rational argument, or the offer of positive political incentives. (pp. 140–141)

Domestic policy: concerned with how one’s national community is or should be governed. (p. 122)

Economic incentives: the use of money, as a tool of foreign policy, to gain leverage on another country in order to influence it to act or behave in a particular way. Economic incentives may be either positive or negative (the proverbial “carrot” and “stick,” respectively). (p. 141)

Emerging powers: a country whose economic and/or military stature is increasing on the world stage, perhaps even to the point of moving from one category on the continuum of power to the next. China is commonly cited as an example of an emerging power today. (p. 127)

Failed states: countries whose government exists but can no longer effectively govern its people or provide for their vital needs. The government fails to do the most basic things people expect of their state: keep the peace, protect them from foreign invasion, enforce law and order, ensure social services are provided. A current example of a failed state is Somalia. (pp. 126–127)

Foreign policy: focused on how one’s country does or should relate to other countries and their national governments. (p. 122)

Great powers: countries with the richest economies and the largest armed forces, which have true global impact in their decision-making. They include (among others) Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States. (p. 124)

Hard power: use of economic resources and/or armed force to get what a country wants in international politics. Summarized as a “bucks and bullets” approach to foreign policy, which means either buying or forcing the compliance of others to a country’s will. (p. 123)

Human security: a concept at the centre of idealism, with a more universal, transnational implication. The concern is for all of humanity, and not one particular country or subgroup within it. (p. 136)

Idealism: a foreign policy doctrine that says countries should not tend to their own self-interests, but rather, to contribute what they can towards the creation of a better world for all. Idealists believe in an ethos of universal improvements; they emphasize economic growth, international law, and human rights in foreign policy. An influential doctrine, that is opposed by realism. (p. 135)

Middle powers: countries with a level of influence/capability in between that of the great powers and the small powers. Typically, they are from the Global North, developed and wealthy societies, but lack the population size, military force, and cultural influence to become great powers. Examples include Australia, Canada, and Sweden. (p. 124)

Multilateral: countries taking “multi-sided” approaches to international problems, such as joining others so everyone can help each other. (p. 138)

National security: a concept at the centre of realism, a focus on the security of one particular country and group, which naturally entails a sense of egoism and self-centredness, consistent with the doctrine of realism. (p. 136)

Policy: how a community should be run, and why. Further distinction between domestic policy and foreign policy. (p. 122)

Power: the ability of a country (or a person) to get what it (or he/she) wants. Further distinction between hard power and soft power. (p. 123)

Realism: a foreign policy doctrine that says a country must look out for its own interests and advantages on the world stage; it expresses an ethos of national egoism. Realists emphasize the pursuit of power, wealth, and national security in foreign policy. It is very influential, and opposed by idealism. The doctrine is further distinguished between classical realism (countries should be egoistic and power-seeking because human beings are intrinsically the same) and structural realism (the insecure nature of international politics mandates the pursuit of power and security above all else, regardless of human nature). (pp. 134–135)

Regional powers: country whose level of power and influence is somewhere between that of a great power and a middle power, but the scope of their influence is limited to a particular region, and not global. For example, Brazil is a regional power within South America and South Africa is a regional power within sub-Saharan Africa. (p. 125)

Rogue regimes: countries that are established as “bad international citizens,” who refuse to play well with neighbours and actively create trouble and instability on an international scale. These countries break the rules, go their own way, and make the world worse. A current example would be North Korea. (p. 125-126)

Sanctions: a tool of foreign policy, marking a shift away from positive incentives and mutually beneficial deal-making, towards negative incentives: threats, non-cooperation, punishment, and actions taken deliberately to thwart the interests of the other country. Sanctions can vary in level, intensity,

and effect. Targeted sanctions are measures of punishment, lack of co-operation, and interest-thwarting focused on hurting only the elite decision-makers in the target country. Sweeping sanctions are those measures of punishment and refusal to co-operate that either deliberately target or at least directly affect the majority of citizens in the target country. (pp. 141–143)

Small powers: countries, both developed and developing, that have only a small degree of impact on international decision-making and global life. Typically, their population, economy, and military are simply too tiny to exert much influence globally. Examples range from the Czech Republic in Europe to Chile in South America. (p. 125)

Soft power: use of a country's language, ideas, values, and culture to get others to do what a country wants, especially in foreign policy. Spreading a country's culture is thought to create a commonality of worldview, a mutuality of interest, and a reservoir of goodwill, all of which bolster a country's ability to get what it wants. (p. 123)

Unilateral: countries taking “one-sided” approaches to international problems, such as doing everything by yourself. (p. 138)

Unipolar moment: period of time after the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War, when the United States was truly the one and only centre of global political gravity. (p. 132)

Study Questions

Scroll to the end for answers.

1. What is the difference between hard power and soft power?
2. What is the difference between a rogue regime and a failed state? Provide an example of each.
3. What is the difference between realism and idealism in foreign policy?
4. What are the four basic tools of foreign policy?

Weblinks

Council on Foreign Relations: Global Conflict Tracker

<https://www.cfr.org/interactives/global-conflict-tracker#!/global-conflict-tracker>

- Useful interactive tracker of all global conflicts and their potential impact on US foreign policy

Foreign Policy article: 10 Conflicts to Watch in 2018

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/02/10-conflicts-to-watch-in-2018/>

- Concise summary of ten major (and arguably most significant) conflicts in the world today, with regional and global implications

Vox video and guide to the Israel–Palestine conflict
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRYZjOuUnlU> (video)
<https://www.vox.com/cards/israel-palestine> (guide)

- Good analysis by Vox of one of the most intractable and long-running clashes in international politics today: the Israel–Palestine conflict

Further Readings

Waltz, Kenneth. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company.

- One of the seminal works in the realism tradition, this is the primary text on structural realism and how it differs from (and is arguably a stronger explanation than) classical realism.

Wendt, Alexander. 1999. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

- The primary work on constructivism, one of the newer branches of the idealist tradition in international relations. Offers a strong critique of Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*.

Drezner, Daniel W. 2011. *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Taking advantage of the popularity of zombies a number of years ago, a well-known and well-respected scholar applied different theories of international politics, like realism and idealism, to a potential zombie apocalypse to observe the real-world implications of these theoretical perspectives. Short, concise, and well-written, this book serves as a good entry point for students just getting into these conceptual frameworks.

Hampson, Fen Osler, and Stephen M. Saideman, eds. 2016. *Elusive Pursuits: Lessons from Canada's Interventions Abroad* ("Canada among Nations" Series, 2015). Montreal, QC and Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press.

- Ongoing series ("Canada Among Nations") about Canadian foreign policy, jointly published by the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University and the Centre for International Governance Innovation (think tank). Good research and analysis of the most recent developments in Canadian foreign policy from a wide range of scholars and practitioners.

Answers to Study Questions

1. Hard power relies on so-called “bucks and bullets” or economic wealth and military force to get what a country wants in international relations. Soft power refers more to the use of language, ideas, values, and culture in a country’s foreign policy to achieve its aims and get other countries to do what it wants. (p. 123)
2. Rogue regimes are countries whose governments do not follow global rules and like to cause trouble for their neighbours and the rest of the international community. An example of a rogue regime today is North Korea. Failed states are countries whose governments fail to do the most basic things a government is supposed to do (e.g., maintain peace and order, protect citizens from foreign invasion, provide basic social services). An example of a failed state today is Somalia. (pp. 125–127)
3. Realism and idealism are both doctrines that describe what the goals of foreign policy should be. Realism says countries should focus on their own self-interest and their foreign policy goals should be egoistic and seek power for themselves. Idealism says countries should pursue foreign policy goals that benefit not just themselves, but everyone as well, and help to make the world a better place. (pp. 134–135)
4. The four basic tools of foreign policy are diplomacy, economic incentives, sanctions, and armed force. (p. 140)