An overview of US foreign policy since 1945

How did - or didn’t - US foreign policy evolve?

1. Stability in goals & means
2. Change: adapting to the context

In international relations, too, there’s only one description for what, together, we have achieved: a complete turnabout, a revolution. Seven years ago, America was weak, and freedom everywhere was under siege. Today America is strong, and democracy is everywhere on the move. From Central America to East Asia, ideas like free markets and democratic reforms and human rights are taking hold. We’ve replaced “Blame America” with “Look up to America.” We’ve rebuilt our defenses. And of all our accomplishments, none can give us more satisfaction than knowing that our young people are again proud to wear our country’s uniform.

And in a few moments, I’m going to talk about three developments—arms reduction, the Strategic Defense Initiative, and the global democratic revolution—that, when taken together, offer a chance none of us would have dared imagine 7 years ago, a chance to rid the world of the two great nightmares of the postwar era. I speak of the startling hope of giving our children a future free of both totalitarianism and nuclear terror.

Tonight, then, we’re strong, prosperous, at peace, and we are free. This is the state of our Union. And if we will work together this year, I believe we can give a future President and a future Congress the chance to make that prosperity, that peace, that freedom not just the state of our Union but the state of our world.

President Reagan’s last State of the Union Address, January 25, 1988.

At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. The choice is too often not a free one. One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression.

The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio; fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms. I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.

I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way.

I believe that our help should be primarily through economic and financial aid which is essential to economic stability and orderly political processes.

The world is not static, and the status quo is not sacred. But we cannot allow changes in the status quo in violation of the Charter of the United Nations by such methods as coercion, or by such subterfuges as political infiltration. In helping free and independent nations to maintain their freedom, the United States will be giving effect to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

President Truman’s address before a joint session of Congress, 12 March 1947.

Jay “Ding” Darling, the New York Herald Tribune, 1947

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Structure

Key notions

Vocabulary

As for our common defense, we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals. Our Founding Fathers, [...] drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man [...]. Those ideals still light the world, and we will not give them up for expedience’s sake. And so to all the other peoples and governments who are watching today, [...] know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman, and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and we are ready to lead once more.

Recall that earlier generations faced down fascism and communism not just with missiles and tanks but with sturdy alliances and enduring convictions. They understood that our power alone cannot protect us, nor does it entitle us to do as we please. [...] We are the keepers of this legacy. Guided by these principles once more, we can meet those new threats that demand even greater effort, even greater cooperation and understanding between nations. We will begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan. With old friends and former foes, we will work tirelessly to lessen the nuclear threat and roll back the specter of a warming planet. We will not apologize for our way of life, nor will we waver in its defense. And for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken. You cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you.

President Obama’s 1st Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009.

Let me start by being clear about where the United States stands. The United States occupies a unique position in world affairs today. We recognize that, and we welcome it. Yet, with the cold war over, I know many people ask whether the United States plans to retreat or remain active in the world and, if active, to what end. Many people are asking that in our own country as well. Let me answer that question as clearly and plainly as I can.

The United States intends to remain engaged and to lead. We cannot solve every problem, but we must and will serve as a fulcrum for change and a pivot point for peace.

In a new era of peril and opportunity, our overriding purpose must be to expand and strengthen the world’s community of market-based democracies. During the cold war we sought to contain a threat to the survival of free institutions. Now we seek to enlarge the circle of nations that live under those free institutions. For our dream is of a day when the opinions and energies of every person in the world will be given full expression, in a world of thriving democracies that cooperate with each other and live in peace. [...] We will work to strengthen the free market democracies by revitalizing our economy here at home, by opening world trade through the GATT, the North American Free Trade Agreement and other accords, and by updating our shared institutions, asking with you and answering the hard questions about whether they are adequate to the present challenges.

Address by President Bill Clinton to the UN General Assembly, September 27, 1993.

“What a difference a day makes...”, David Horsey, Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 2001.
In the simplest terms, what we are doing in Korea is this: We are trying to prevent a third world war. I think most people in this country recognized that fact last June. And they warmly supported the decision of the Government to help the Republic of Korea against the Communist aggressors. […] It is right for us to be in Korea. It was right last June. It is right today.

I want to remind you why this is true. The Communists in the Kremlin are engaged in a monstrous conspiracy to stamp out freedom all over the world. If they were to succeed, the United States would be numbered among their principal victims. It must be clear to everyone that the United States cannot— and will not— sit idly by and await foreign conquest. […]

The aggression against Korea is the boldest and most dangerous move the Communists have yet made. The attack on Korea was part of Communist imperialism greater plan for conquering all of Asia. It was the Soviet Union that trained and equipped the North Koreans for aggression. The Chinese Communists massed 44 well-trained and well-equipped divisions on the Korean frontier. These were the troops they threw into battle when the North Korean Communists were beaten.

From 1945 to 1950 relations between the United States and the Soviet Union went from alliance to Cold War. To make matters worse it seemed like the Soviets might be winning. In 1948 a communist government seized power in China, the world's most populous country. The following year Moscow successfully tested an atomic device of its own, and in 1950 troops from the Soviet satellite state of North Korea launched a war of aggression against South Korea.

How could these setbacks be explained? The arrest and prosecution of a number of Soviet spies in the United States seemed to provide at least a partial answer. Perhaps it was the activity of disloyal Americans that allowed China to “go communist,” that handed Russia the bomb, and invited Stalin's puppets in North Korea to attack their neighbors to the South. But what constituted disloyalty? Was it only to be defined as outright spying or sabotage? Might someone who belonged to the Communist Party be considered disloyal, whether or not he had committed any overt act against the United States? And what about a screenwriter who interjected pro-Soviet themes into a Hollywood movie, or a songwriter who criticized some aspect of American society in one of his songs?

In October 1947, ten subpoenaed Hollywood writers, producers and directors were cited for contempt of Congress for refusing to answer questions of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) about their membership in the Communist Party. The so-called Hollywood Ten based their refusal on First Amendment grounds. Challenging HUAC’s right to inquire about their political beliefs and associations, they condemned this inquiry as a witch-hunting attempt to censor artistic freedom. HUAC responded aggressively, first introducing evidence that the Ten held Communist Party membership cards and then citing them for contempt. Two of them, John Lawson and Dalton Trumbo, were successfully prosecuted by the Justice Department and convicted in 1948. The Hollywood Ten’s refusal to admit or deny Communist Party membership rendered them vulnerable to the charge that their real purpose was to hide their involvement in a foreign-directed conspiracy. Indeed, in November 1947, film industry executives suspended the Hollywood Ten without pay and announced that none would be rehired until “he had been acquitted or declined under oath that he was not a Communist.” The film executives also affirmed their future intent not to “knowingly” employ Communists.


The Second Red Scare*, Anticommunism in Postwar America 1945-1954, EDSITEment!, 2010

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Key notions

- *Refers to the start of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s career. In February 1950, he captured headlines by claiming he held in his hand, a list of 205 communists in the State Department which he did not reveal.
- * On December 2, 1954 the Senate censured McCarthy thus ending his investigation of suspected communists.

Vocabulary


Structure

2. The Cold War at home: anticommunism 1946-1954

How did the USA fight communism at home and abroad?
With fervent calls for a new era of peaceful understanding, President Reagan and Mikhail S. Gorbachev today signed the first treaty reducing the size of their nations' nuclear arsenals. […]

The new treaty, which provides for the dismantling of all Soviet and American medium- and shorter-range missiles, establishes the most extensive system of weapons inspection ever negotiated by the two countries, including placing technicians at sensitive sites on each other's territory. […]

The visit to Washington by Mr. Gorbachev was the first by a Soviet leader since Leonid I. Brezhnev was here 14 years ago, and it took on immediate drama as Mr. Reagan, who entered office with deep suspicions of the Soviet Union, welcomed Mr. Gorbachev on the South Lawn of the White House. An immediate mood of warmth was established as the two leaders agreed this morning to call each other by their first names, a White House official said.


President Reagan's Star Wars, TIME, April 4, 1983.

The high-tech Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) was designed to shield the USA by stopping incoming Soviet missiles in space.

RONALD REAGAN was widely eulogized for having won the cold war, liberated Eastern Europe and pulled the plug on the Soviet Union. Margaret Thatcher, Joe Lieberman, John McCain, Charles Krauthammer and other notables offered variations of The Economist's cover headline: "The Man Who Beat Communism."

Actually, Jack F. Matlock Jr. writes in "Reagan and Gorbachev," it was "not so simple." He should know. A veteran foreign service officer and respected expert on the Soviet Union, he reached the pinnacle of his career under Reagan, serving first as the White House's senior coordinator of policy toward the Soviet Union, then as ambassador to Moscow. In both the title of his memoir and the story it tells, he gives co-star billing to Mikhail Gorbachev. […]

Matlock puts the best light he can on Reagan's dream of a Star Wars anti-missile system, but he doesn't claim, now an article of faith among many conservatives, that the prospect of an impregnable shield over the United States and an arms race in space caused the Soviets to throw in the towel. Instead, Matlock focuses on Reagan's attempt to convince Gorbachev that American defense policy posed no threat to legitimate Soviet interests and should therefore not prevent the two leaders from establishing a high degree of mutual trust.

How did the USA win the Cold War?

2. The collapse of the Soviet model

1989 was a truly unforgettable year. Never before, has there been such a world-changing upheaval. One after another, faster and faster, nations have shaken off the chains of communist delusion and freed themselves from an imposed ideology that brought them nothing of what it had promised.

The nations of Europe have fully worked this miracle and Newsweek this year dedicated them its cover. But Der Spiegel selected a Soviet leader as "Man of the Year, Man of the Hour" and Time even awarded Mikhail Gorbachev the title of "Man of the Decade".

In fact, Mikhail Gorbachev initiated the conditions for this revolution to happen. Although he didn’t guess what his reforms of political glasnost and economic perestroika would trigger, he did not prevent the process once it was set in motion. By refusing to resort to traditional Soviet military interference, he allowed the collapse of one regime after another.

"When the ice breaks...", Der Spiegel, January 1st, 1990.

Approval of Change to Capitalism

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Market democracy in the Czech Republic, 1998

Approval of Change to Democracy

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The US and the world since 1991

How did the USA adjust to a changing world?

1. Multilateral interventionism: the Gulf War

Structure

Key notion

Vocabulary

When the Gulf War began, U.S. intelligence had believed Saddam Hussein to be years away from developing a nuclear weapon. But post-war inspections revealed he had been within a year of reaching that capability. Then, the U.S. and international inspectors believed Saddam’s biological weapons programs had ended; yet a defector in 1995 proved that false. So the U.S. required that U.N. inspection regimes be imposed on Iraq and tightened as time progressed. The Iraqi president repeatedly frustrated international weapons inspectors; and then, in 1998, he blocked inspections altogether. After 9/11, U.S. intelligence services told President George W. Bush and his Secretary of State Colin Powell that Iraq sought WMD, which would justify invading Iraq in 2003.

Meanwhile, as Iraq defied the U.S., and the United Nations, Islamist fundamentalists repeatedly struck at America starting in 1993 and in 1998, al-Qaeda’s first strike destroyed U.S. embassies in Africa. According to Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda’s leader, this was a direct consequence of the First Gulf War. For, according to him, its prosecution by American forces had been unnecessary and had led to an unprecedented outrage—infidel Americans occupying Saudi Arabia, “the land of the two holy places.”


The war was a defining moment, everyone thought. What exactly did it define? Another chapter in an age of astonishments that has brought down the Berlin Wall, ended the cold war and begun the disintegration of the Soviet Union? The dawn of a new world order? The birth of a new American century - onset of a unipolar world, with America playing the global cop? The end of the old American depression, the compulsive pessimism, called the Vietnam syndrome? The first post-nuclear big war, almost as quick and lethal but smarter, fairer, precisely selective in its targets, with no radioactive after-effects? The first war epic of the global village’s electronic theater? The apotheosis of war making as a brilliant American package - a dazzling, compacted product, like some new concentrate of intervention: Fast! Effective! All of those and much, much more. Or somewhat less.

The enterprise is still surrounded by a daze of astonishment: that it should have been so quick, so “easy,” so devastating. That coalition casualties should have been so light. That Saddam Hussein should have been so cartoon-villainous. That his soldiers should have committed atrocities that took the moral onus off the carnage that the coalition left in the desert.

By Lance Morrow; TIME Magazine, Monday, March 18, 1991

What is at stake is [...] a big idea: a new world order, where diverse nations are drawn together in common cause to achieve the universal aspirations of mankind -- peace and security, freedom, and the rule of law. Such is a world worthy of our struggle and worthy of our children's future. [...] The end of the cold war has been a victory for all humanity. [...] Europe has become whole and free, and America's leadership was instrumental in making it possible. Our relationship to the Soviet Union is important, not only to us but to the world. [...] I want to continue to build a lasting basis for U.S.-Soviet cooperation -- for a more peaceful future for all mankind. [...] For two centuries, America has served the world as an inspiring example of freedom and democracy. For generations, America has led the struggle to preserve and extend the blessings of liberty. And today, in a rapidly changing world, American leadership is indispensable. Americans know that leadership brings burdens and sacrifices. But we also know why the hopes of humanity turn to us. We are Americans; we have a unique responsibility to do the hard work of freedom. And when we do, freedom works.


The UN authorized ‘Member States cooperating with the Government of Kuwait […] to use all necessary means to […] restore international peace and security.’

The UN authorized ‘Member States cooperating with the Government of Kuwait […] to use all necessary means to […] restore international peace and security.’
How did the USA adjust to a changing world?

2. A changing interventionism: the global war on terror

Structure

Key notion

Vocabulary

We last met in an hour of shock and suffering. In four short months, our nation has comforted the victims, begun to rebuild New York and the Pentagon, rallied a great coalition, captured, arrested, and rid the world of thousands of terrorists, destroyed Afghanistan's terrorist training camps, saved a people from starvation, and freed a country from brutal oppression. [...] Thanks to the work of our law enforcement officials and coalition partners, hundreds of terrorists have been arrested, yet tens of thousands of trained terrorists are still at large. These enemies view the entire world as a battlefield, and we must pursue them wherever they are. [...] What we have found in Afghanistan confirms that, far from ending there, our war against terror is only beginning. [...] But some governments will be timid in the face of terror. And make no mistake about it: If they do not act, America will. [...] Rogue states like North Korea, Iran & Iraq, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.

President George W. Bush's State of the Union Address, January 29, 2002.

"America must always lead on the world stage," the president said. "But U.S. military action cannot be the only — or even primary — component of our leadership in every instance. Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail." [...] Mr. Obama disputed critics who say his cautious response to crises like Syria's civil war and Russian aggression toward Ukraine had eroded America's leadership in the world. The President told the graduates they might be the first class since 2001 not sent to serve in Iraq or Afghanistan. [...] He presented Afghanistan as a mission all but fulfilled, described a world of threats that require a more targeted and varied American response and added, the overriding objective is to avoid an error on the scale of the Iraq war. Mr. Obama said the Iran nuclear negotiations, normalizing relations with Cuba and a new climate-change accord would be among his top foreign policy priorities for his final years in office. President Obama is finally getting to apply his diplomacy-first foreign policy following the lessons from Iraq and the Arab Spring. "It does not serve America's interests to try to push a country toward collapse," he said. "Even if that worked we know from hard-earned experience that countries are more likely to enjoy lasting transformation if their people are not subjected to chaos."

In what way has China become both a partner and rival of the USA?

1. Competing powers
2. Geopolitical confrontation?

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Not only is American kit better; American troops, unlike China's, have lots of experience of using it in battle. Chinese commanders talk about not being able to match American hard power until 2050 at the earliest. Unlike China and Russia, who have few real friends, America has allies everywhere. US military power retains global reach (it is working on supersonic cruise missiles, and long-range drones).

Still, the frustratingly inconclusive campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have dented its image of invincibility and burned through cash that could have been invested in even better technology. [...] Financial constraints make it harder to repair the damage done by the wars of the past 12 years. [...] Congress hates curbing military pay or closing unwanted bases, two things the Pentagon says are needed if enough money is to be spent on new weapons. The yawning gap between Uncle Sam and his potential foes seems bound to shrink.


In the White House, China is considered a major rival to the United States - but also a crucial global partner. Obama has enlisted Beijing's support on issues such as the Iran nuclear deal and a major pact to reduce carbon emissions. Last week, China joined the United States in support of a U.N. Security Council resolution to enact new economic sanctions against North Korea because of its atomic bomb test last month.

Inside the West Wing, aides have been divided over how hard to push Beijing on areas of disagreement, including cybersecurity, human rights and the South China Sea, for fear of damaging the cooperation on other matters.

Last fall, Chinese President Xi Jinping vowed that China would not militarize the Spratly Islands. But last week, a Washington think tank published satellite images that analysts said showed that China was installing a powerful radar system in the Spratlys. Separately, U.S. officials said China had deployed surface-to-air missiles and jet fighters on Woody Island, which is closer to China and has been under its control for decades.

Administration officials point out that China's intimidation has pushed several neighbors into greater partnerships with the United States. Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei are members of the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact led by the Obama administration. In 2012, Obama restored formal U.S. diplomatic relations with Myanmar also known as Burma, after 50 years of estrangement, and he will become the first U.S. president to visit Laos in the fall.


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Vocabulary

In the end of the Cold War, the U.S. was seen as the owner of the secret to the good life. It was a life that everyone wanted—one more alluring than the one Communism could provide as the Soviet Union failed to provide a standard of living equivalent to that of America's. The U.S. has been the country with the greatest soft power since then. The impact of American companies around the world is evident across the globe. People continue to drink Coca-Cola, eat at McDonald’s, and wear Levi’s. American products like iPhones are made in China. But they are not conceived there, they have an American nationality. They continue to sway the world and its desires in favor of the U.S., even if China may benefit from them economically.


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In the White House, China is considered a major rival to the United States - but also a crucial global partner. Obama has enlisted Beijing's support on issues such as the Iran nuclear deal and a major pact to reduce carbon emissions. Last week, China joined the United States in support of a U.N. Security Council resolution to enact new economic sanctions against North Korea because of its atomic bomb test last month.

Inside the West Wing, aides have been divided over how hard to push Beijing on areas of disagreement, including cybersecurity, human rights and the South China Sea, for fear of damaging the cooperation on other matters.

Last fall, Chinese President Xi Jinping vowed that China would not militarize the Spratly Islands. But last week, a Washington think tank published satellite images that analysts said showed that China was installing a powerful radar system in the Spratlys. Separately, U.S. officials said China had deployed surface-to-air missiles and jet fighters on Woody Island, which is closer to China and has been under its control for decades.

Administration officials point out that China's intimidation has pushed several neighbors into greater partnerships with the United States. Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei are members of the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact led by the Obama administration. In 2012, Obama restored formal U.S. diplomatic relations with Myanmar also known as Burma, after 50 years of estrangement, and he will become the first U.S. president to visit Laos in the fall.


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Structure
In coming years, we’ll hear a lot about the size of China’s economy surpassing that of the United States. President Obama himself often uses the language of competition to fend off countries like China and India. And if economics is a competition, then the best measure of success must be GDP, which economists use to measure the total value of goods and services a country produces. It does bring home the sheer size of the Chinese economy, in the services and goods and that people in China are producing.

But Americans should hope for the Chinese economy to grow because it will be a larger market for the goods and services we create in the U.S. Besides, in terms of economic output per capita, the U.S. is way ahead of China by a factor of more than 8. With its much larger population of 1.3 billion people, China barely ranks in the top 100 countries for income per person. Chinese consumers only have about one-tenth as much money to spend as Americans; that is about half the world average, on par with the Philippines, Bolivia or Iraq.