

Foreign policy is often the topic of intense debates. But whatever the specific country or issue at hand, many debates tend to fall into one of three baskets.

The most basic is how much foreign policy to have. This is often framed as isolationism or engagement. Some leaders try to isolate their country from international affairs — to focus on internal challenges, to limit outside influence, to avoid getting dragged into other countries' conflicts. However, there's no guarantee that other countries won't try to interfere in another country's affairs just because they're isolationist. And today, major challenges like climate change and pandemics ignore borders, so shutting out the rest of the world is pretty much impossible. Instead, leaders can choose to engage with other countries — to increase economic opportunities; form security arrangements meant to deter, or if need be, fight wars; to promote political and economic reform; and provide humanitarian assistance.

Another fundamental debate is between idealism or realism. Idealists aim to reflect a country's domestic values in their foreign policy. If a country strongly believes in a particular form of government, such as democracy, it may take actions to encourage other countries to respect human rights and adopt democratic policies. Realists, on the other hand, prioritize shaping what other countries do in their foreign policy, rather than what they do at home. Most leaders have both realist and idealist goals, leading to policies that can be balanced but also require difficult choices. For example, many free and democratic countries encourage the spread of freedom and democracy, but they still enter into relationships with governments that repress their own people, in order to advance national security and economic interests.

A third debate concerns how best to accomplish foreign policy goals, either through unilateralism or multilateralism. Unilateralists prefer to go it alone, taking independent action. This often allows them to act fast, without having to compromise with other countries. Whereas with a multilateral approach, a country works together with other countries. It might take more time to coordinate their actions, and it might require compromise on certain means or ends, but multilateral efforts are often better at addressing global

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challenges where the solutions require collective action.

The world isn't black and white, and neither is foreign policy. Leaders face complex issues, so their policy approach may be complex as well. It might not fit neatly into one category or another and instead lie somewhere in between. And, as with people's ordinary interactions, different situations require different approaches. And which ones leaders choose can make a world of difference.