

Pop-Up Case: U.S. Foreign Policy: Multilateralism or Unilateralism?

At the start of a new presidential term in 2021, the president needs to decide whether to prioritize a multilateral or unilateral approach to foreign policy over the next four years.

Use the following *hypothetical* case to spark discussion and help students to think through what they would do if they were decision makers. See the back of the page for some inspiration for how to structure your conversation.

The Situation:

Since the end of World War II, the United States has charted a course of increasing multilateralism, expanding its involvement and leadership in an array of international initiatives, such as the United Nations, designed to tackle global issues. The United States has also participated in specialized groups, including security organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), global health institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO), and climate treaties such as the Paris Agreement. During this period of increasing multilateralism, the United States has prospered, becoming the world's largest economy and ultimately prevailing in the Cold War. In recent years, the United States has led cooperation on a growing number of borderless challenges, such as climate change. Yet the merits of multilateralism have come up for debate in recent years. Some policymakers have argued that the United States should pursue a path of unilateralism, prioritizing its own interests and withdrawing from international involvement. Prominently, the Donald J. Trump administration has embraced unilateralism, criticizing institutions such as NATO and announcing the United States' withdrawal from others, such as the WHO and the Paris Agreement.

Many policymakers argue that multilateralism protects U.S. interests. Institutions such as the United Nations promote global stability as a forum in which countries can generate global standards of behavior and coordinate action. Moreover, these policymakers argue cooperation is essential to manage a growing number of global issues, such as infectious diseases or climate change, that cannot be confined within national borders. Multilateralism can also bolster U.S. and global security. Maintaining alliances guarantees the support of partners in a conflict, and the threat of U.S. involvement deters potential conflict. Multilateral involvement requires an investment of U.S. resources, but the costs constitute a small share of U.S. spending and can entail outside benefits. U.S. multilateral leadership allows Washington to influence the issues on an organization's agenda and how resources are used. Without U.S. multilateral leadership, some analysts predict that other countries, such as China, will take over the United States' leading role and act against U.S. interests.

Critics counter that the United States should prioritize its own interests and focus its energy and resources on domestic challenges. Some policymakers argue that multilateralism has led the United States to act against its own interests, including by unnecessarily intervening in foreign conflicts or adopting economic policies that, although beneficial to global trade, harm U.S. workers. Global standards and requirements for collective action can also limit national sovereignty. Global carbon emissions standards, for instance, increase costs for U.S. industries. Moreover, as the world's largest economy, the United States often bears the largest share of the cost of multilateral efforts, and some critics feel that the price is too high and other economies do not bear a fair share of the burden. In 2019, the United States provided nearly 15 percent of the WHO's funding. China—the world's second-largest economy—accounted for just over 1 percent. Others argue that since the compromises required to reach an international agreement can dilute the strength of multilateral action, the United States could achieve more robust results alone. Policymakers will need to carefully weigh these drawbacks against the benefits of multilateral action when considering the future of U.S. foreign policy.

Learn more:

1. [“Multilateralism vs. Unilateralism” \(Asia Society\)](#)
2. [“Isolationism Is Not a Dirty Word” \(Atlantic\)](#)
3. [“Against Washington’s ‘Great Power’ Obsession” \(Atlantic\)](#)



Decision Point: Set in January 2021

The first State of the Union address of a new presidential term is approaching. The address, given at the beginning of each year, is a way to lay out an administration's agenda to the American people and a chance to signal to U.S. allies what type of approach the administration will take to foreign policy. Accordingly, the president has called a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) to advise on this administration's approach to foreign policy. Although each foreign policy challenge the administration will face will inevitably require a combination of unilateral and multilateral policy options, the president has asked NSC members to deliberate on whether U.S. foreign policy should largely embrace multilateralism or unilateralism.

NSC members should consider the following policy options:

- *Prioritize multilateralism*, embracing cooperation with other countries and international institutions in pursuit of common goals. This option carries the cost of continuing to commit U.S. resources to international efforts and potentially sacrificing a degree of national autonomy.
- *Prioritize unilateralism*, isolating from international institutions and agreements and prioritizing bilateral international cooperation when it serves U.S. interests. This option risks increasing instability in the world and weakening U.S. influence and ability to combat global challenges.

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Pop-Up Case Guidelines

Pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies on current events that put students in the shoes of policymakers facing the most pressing issues in international relations. There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips [here](#) and [here](#)). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

Gauge reaction:

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

Think-Pair-Share:

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.

Whiparound:

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.



Simple NSC simulation:

If you would like to simulate a simplified version of a more realistic policy debate, you can appoint yourself (or a randomly chosen student) president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones) and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president.

NSC simulation with assigned opinions:

While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign opinions. For example, assign one-third of the class to be isolationist, one-third to favor a military response, and one-third to favor a diplomatic response. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or a student) as president.

Note: In our experience, simulations are often most productive if students imagine they are advising a generic president rather than a specific one.

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