

The U.S Role in the World: Four Futures

What follows is a set of four distinct alternatives that frame the current debate on the role of the United States in the world. The four Futures provided are not intended as a menu of choices. Rather, they are framed in stark terms to highlight very different policy approaches. Each alternative includes a set of policies on specific issues, an overview of the beliefs that underlie it, some arguments in support of the position, and some criticisms of it.

It is important to understand that no one Future as it is framed here reflects the views of any one political party or organization. After you have had a chance to hear about each of the approaches presented, think about your own concerns and values and deliberate with your peers on the strengths and challenges of each of the Futures presented. Then take this opportunity to make your voice heard. Begin by filling out the Student Ballot. Then articulate your own considered judgment on this issue as a “Future 5.” As you frame your Future 5, think about the world you want to see in the 21st century.

- What do you think our long-term goals should be?
- What should we do on issues such as terrorism, Iraq, economic policy, immigration, and the environment within the context of your long-term goals?
- How do others view us?
- How would you like us to be viewed?
- What values are important to you?
- What are the strengths of the Future you are proposing?
- What are the arguments against it?

Student Ballot Make your voice heard

What do you consider the most important international challenges facing the United States in the next ten years and beyond? What are your hopes? What challenges do you see before us? What kind of world do you want? And what are you willing to work for?

Make your voice heard by participating in the online ballot on the U.S. Role in the World. The ballot is available from the Ballots & Surveys section of the Choices Program web site at www.choices.edu/resources/ballots.php.

“**The U.S. Role in the World**” is a Teaching with the News online resource published by the Choices Program at Brown University. Online resources are updated frequently. Extension activities and additional web links are available from the Resources section of the Choices Program web site—www.choices.edu/resources

This online resource is excerpted from *The U.S. Role in a Changing World*, a complete curriculum unit published by the Choices Program.

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Future 1: Lead the World to Democracy

The United States is the most powerful nation in the world. The world depends on us to maintain peace and order and to support the principles of democracy, free markets, and freedom. We must acknowledge and embrace the important role we play. Today's international system was built around American ideals and power. International security structures are primarily a result of American-led alliances. Americans created the international financial institutions in place today. International principles of human rights are actually American and Western European ideas. We must devote the necessary resources to build and maintain an international order and a vigorous international economy grounded in American political and economic principles. These American values are the standard by which all other systems should be measured. U.S. actions abroad must reflect our country's commitment to our core principles of freedom, justice, and democracy.

Many states remain in the hands of cruel and undemocratic leaders who terrorize their own people, threaten their neighbors, and breed unrest around the world. Such tyrants pose a danger to global peace and security. Neither collective security nor the United Nations can be counted on to deal with these threats. When it comes to dealing with tyrants, especially with those that are a threat to security, our policy should not be one of coexistence, but transformation. We must be prepared to attack those who threaten us before they can attack us. Acting preventively is the only way that we will be able to protect ourselves and other friendly states.

Future 1 is based on the following beliefs

- We have a special responsibility to promote and protect American values around the world, even if we have to act alone.
- Our military should not be afraid to keep troublemakers in check and spread liberal democratic principles throughout the world.
- Tyrannical regimes are the main human cause of suffering in the world. To support them or turn a blind eye to their repression and aggression is both dangerous and immoral.
- A world grounded in American economic and political principles will strengthen our economy and make us more secure.

What policies should we pursue?

- Use a policy of regime change to transform authoritarian states into democratic ones. Provide resources to developing democracies and ensure their success.
- Develop a sophisticated missile defense system.
- Persist in executing the War on Terror by leading a worldwide offensive.
- Impose trade boycotts on countries that do not adopt American political and economic principles.
- Eliminate obstructive government policies related to the environment.
- Promote American culture and values abroad.

Arguments for

1. As the events in Afghanistan and Iraq have shown, aggressive tyrants and oppressive regimes will be stopped only when the United States intervenes decisively to change these regimes.
2. If we wait until the world's bullies become so powerful that we must confront them militarily, as we did with Adolf Hitler in World War II, the cost will be enormous.
3. Since democracies are much less likely to start wars against other democracies, we will be making the world a more peaceful place in the long run by spreading democratic values.
4. As new democracies take root and their economies prosper, they will become strong trading partners for the United States.

Arguments against

1. Pressuring other governments to adopt American democratic principles will spark international criticism that the United States is trying to control the world.
2. Engaging in regular efforts at regime change will ensure that we will be seen as the "rogue superpower" and others will line up against us. Using force preventively will only make this worse.
3. Stressing the division between democratic and undemocratic countries will split the world into two opposing camps, as in the Cold War. Valuable allies, such as Saudi Arabia, will be lost while emerging powers in the developing world, such as China, will be branded as enemies.
4. Refusing to trade with undemocratic countries will only hurt the U.S. economy, since by doing so the United States will cut itself off from vital sources of oil and other raw materials.
5. You can't force other nations to establish democracies. Many societies in the Middle East, the developing world, and the former Soviet bloc reject our definitions of democracy and human rights.

Future 2: Protect U.S. Global Interests

We live in a dangerously unstable world. U.S. foreign policy must strive for order and security. International terrorism, chaos in the Middle East, poverty and despair in the developing world, and global economic competition have created an international minefield for U.S. leaders. In order to navigate successfully through these unpredictable times we cannot be distracted by crusading idealists—either those who want to impose American-style democracy on the world or those who think that everyone can cooperate to solve the world’s problems. Nor can our interests be curtailed by shortsighted isolationists. We should remain actively involved in international affairs and be prepared to protect ourselves—at home and abroad—against any threats to our security and prosperity.

To promote U.S. interests, we must engage with the world selectively. We must focus our energies on protecting our own security, cultivating our key trade relationships, ensuring our access to crucial raw materials, and stopping the spread of nuclear weapons to unfriendly nations or to terrorist networks. Whenever possible, we should use our influence to engage other nations so that we do not have to shoulder the load alone. However, when this fails we must be ready and able to act—alone if necessary—to protect ourselves against any threats to our security and prosperity. Americans have no choice but to accept the world as it is and respond pragmatically and selectively with whatever actions are necessary to keep our country safe and strong.

Future 2 is based on the following beliefs

- Protecting our economic and security interests worldwide is more important than promoting lofty ideals. When our interests are threatened we have the right to defend ourselves with military force.
- International stability and security depend largely on the United States. The United States has the strength to keep power-hungry nations in check and to build coalitions to maintain stability in volatile regions.
- The United States, like most other countries, benefits from stability. Efforts to change the international system inevitably backfire, resulting in disorder and conflict.
- Unsavory as it may seem, U.S. interests often require that we maintain friendly relations with undemocratic governments such as Saudi Arabia and China.

What policies should we pursue?

- Build alliances with other countries to protect our interests and security abroad.
- Increase the flexibility of our military so that it can respond quickly to threats worldwide.
- Take the War on Terror to any nation that harbors international terrorists. Engage others in our efforts where possible but act alone when necessary,
- Use economic and military aid to advance U.S. trade and investment in the former Soviet bloc and the developing world.
- Pursue “green” technologies and products, but also require other nations to protect the environment so that we do not lose our competitive edge.

Arguments for

1. Maintaining our long-standing military alliances in western Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia will help protect U.S. interests and put today's shaky international system on firm ground.
2. U.S. involvement in unstable areas such as the Middle East and the Korean peninsula will reduce the possibility of war. In a more stable international environment, countries will be less likely to seek to acquire nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.
3. A forceful but selective U.S. presence in international affairs will discourage emerging powers, such as China, from building up their military might and expanding their influence at the expense of their neighbors.
4. By keeping human rights issues from interfering with our business interests, the United States will gain new markets for our products and enjoy access to the raw materials and inexpensive manufactured goods critical to our economic prosperity.

Arguments against

1. Acting only in our own interest and without regard for other nations' interests and cultures breeds resentment against the United States. This will lead to an angry backlash against us, risking international violence and undermining international cooperation on critical global issues such as stopping terrorism, controlling nuclear weapons, and cleaning up pollution.
2. Maintaining our alliances with cruel dictators sets back the cause of human rights and the worldwide movement toward democracy.
3. Intervening only where our immediate self interests are at stake will mean turning our back on future incidents of genocide and "ethnic cleansing," as was the case in Bosnia and Rwanda.
4. An interventionist U.S. foreign policy distracts politicians from the issues that they should focus on here at home.
5. As World War I showed, balance-of-power schemes eventually collapse. Similarly, if we had not armed Iraq in the 1980s to keep Iran in check, Saddam Hussein would not have emerged as an international menace.

Future 3: Build a More Cooperative World

Today's world is interdependent and interconnected. We cannot stand alone. National boundaries can no longer halt the spread of HIV/AIDS, international drug trafficking, terrorism, and other global scourges. Environmental problems threaten the ecology of the entire planet. Financial panic spreads like wildfire with the speed of the internet. Political upheaval anywhere in the world can send waves of refugees to U.S. shores.

To live securely and peacefully in this interdependent world, we must take the initiative to bring the nations of the world together. We should lead efforts to strengthen the UN and other regional security organizations by contributing to their efforts to maintain global peace, fight terrorism, address humanitarian crises, and enforce sanctions against countries that violate the standards of the international community. We must be willing to give up a portion of our independent authority, or sovereignty, to the UN and offer our military, intelligence, and economic support to UN-led initiatives. We should use military force outside of North America only under the leadership of the UN or other regional security institutions in which we participate. In addition, we should join with Japan, western Europe, and other wealthy allies to help the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America lift themselves out of poverty. Building a more cooperative world will not be easy. In the end, however, we must recognize that our fate as Americans is bound together with the fate of all of humanity.

Future 3 is based on the following beliefs

- We live in an interdependent world. We must work cooperatively to address global problems that affect us all, such as international terrorism, the destruction of tropical rain forests, refugee crises, deadly epidemics, and nuclear proliferation.
- A unilateralist U.S. foreign policy will only fuel anti-American sentiment around the world. We must share decisionmaking and leadership with the community of nations.
- It is the responsibility of wealthier nations to assist impoverished ones. Good global citizenship will bear positive returns for us economically, politically, and for our security.
- The earth does not belong to us. Americans comprise less than 5 percent of the world's population, and the United States is but one of nearly two hundred countries in the world. Our country does not have the right to dominate the rest of the world.

What policies should we pursue?

- Engage in military action abroad only with the cooperation or approval of the UN or another regional institution.
- Increase support for international agreements such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the International Criminal Court.
- Pursue the War on Terror through the UN. Work with allies to freeze the assets of suspected terrorist organizations.
- Spearhead international efforts to establish regulations to protect developing economies from the ups and downs of the global financial system.
- Work with others to achieve a globally sustainable balance of development and environmental preservation. In exchange for cooperation on environmental issues, forgive the debt poor countries owe us.

Arguments for

1. Giving more power and authority to international organizations does not make us powerless. On the contrary, by bringing nations together to solve common problems, we will gain the strength to deal with the world's challenges.
2. By working through international organizations, the United States will change the nature of the international system. Cooperation, not conflict, will come to be accepted as the basis for international relations.
3. The economic assistance we gave Western Europe and Japan after World War II helped boost international trade and strengthen the U.S. economy. Aiding the countries of the developing world and the former Soviet bloc will likewise benefit the United States in the long run.
4. Strengthening the UN and other international institutions will help firmly anchor Russia, China, and other unpredictable powers in a setting of cooperation and responsible behavior.

Arguments against

1. By handing over power to international organizations, we will lose much of our international influence. China, Japan, Russia, and other leading powers will take advantage of our cooperative spirit to make themselves stronger at our expense.
2. Our fundamental values are in conflict with those of large parts of the world. Cooperation not only won't work, it could be dangerous.
3. Constraining our ability to use military force unilaterally outside of North America will limit our ability to defend ourselves and respond to international events and will encourage our enemies. International organizations are too slow, too ineffective, and cannot be counted on to act when vital U.S. interests are at stake.
4. Many countries are run by corrupt and cruel governments. Strengthening international organizations in which thieves and tyrants have a voice and giving them more foreign aid will only make such regimes stronger.
5. Spending billions of dollars trying to solve the world's ills will deprive us of the resources we need to address the many problems we face at home.

Future 4: Protect the U.S. Homeland

The attacks of September 11, 2001 brought a new message to Americans. We were attacked on our own homeland and we feel a vulnerability not felt in more than fifty years. Since the late 1940s, the United States has spent hundreds of billions of dollars a year defending our allies in western Europe and East Asia, and distributed tens of billions more in foreign aid to countries throughout the developing world. And what do we have to show for our efforts? Our high-profile foreign policy programs have only bred resentment against us and made us enemies. Our recent military involvement overseas—most notably in Iraq—makes this situation even worse. When we took the initiative to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq, even our traditional allies turned against us.

Enough is enough. We must make it clear that the United States can no longer be counted on to solve the world's problems. It is time to turn our national attention to the real threats facing Americans: a sagging economy, loss of jobs, decaying schools, a shaky health care system, and inadequate resources to protect against terrorism. We must sharply scale back our foreign involvement. U.S. troops overseas should be brought home and strict limits put on military spending. We have to put our own needs first.

Future 4 is based on the following beliefs

- A nation's first responsibility is to defend its citizens from harm. Focusing on other countries' problems is a waste of precious resources at a time when those resources are needed at home.
- Most of the problems afflicting the world beyond U.S. borders cannot be solved by the United States, and meddling overseas will make us more enemies than friends.
- International power and influence in today's world are measured in terms of economic strength, not military might. The military and foreign entanglements that the United States built up during the Cold War are now a burden on our country.

What policies should we pursue?

- Phase out our alliances outside of North America and make it clear that we will join other countries militarily only when our security is directly threatened.
- Redesign our armed forces to focus on defending North America and build up our intelligence capacity with a focus on understanding the threats that face us here at home. Stay out of conflicts that do not concern us directly.
- Develop defenses to be used at home against potential biological, chemical, or nuclear attacks by terrorists.
- Protect American industries from unfair foreign competition and American jobs from cheap foreign labor. Reduce our dependence on foreign oil by encouraging American oil companies to invest at home and by promoting alternative sources of energy and energy conservation.
- Do not hamstring our economy with environmental restrictions while allowing the emerging powers of the developing world a free ride.

Arguments for

1. By not interfering in other parts of the world where our presence may not be welcome, we will avoid unnecessary conflicts or making ourselves the target of resentment.
2. Eliminating costly and ill-conceived foreign policy ventures—such as building democracy in Iraq or lifting sub-Saharan Africa out of poverty—will free up resources needed within our own borders.
3. By giving top priority to our domestic problems, we will be in a much better position to serve as a model for other countries.
4. Sharply cutting U.S. military spending will encourage other leading powers to reduce their spending on defense and will lower tensions worldwide.

Arguments against

1. We cannot afford to abandon our commitments around the world. Regions of the world where we had a strong presence will become unstable, and as our strength abroad declines, those who oppose us will see an opportunity to increase anti-American terrorist activity.
2. Pulling our troops out of western Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia will upset the worldwide balance of power and spark wars. In response, countries such as South Korea will seek to acquire WMD in order to provide for their own defense.
3. Deeply cutting our military power will leave the United States incapable of standing up for democracy or protecting our security and economic interests. As in World War II, the United States will eventually be forced to undertake a costly military build-up to combat threats from overseas.
4. The Persian Gulf War showed us that economic sanctions have their limits, and that military strength is still a decisive factor in shaping the world. If we sharply cut our military spending, we will be unable to defeat the next evil tyrant that crosses us.
5. Pretending that the fate of the rest of the world matters little is foolish and dangerous. International terrorism can threaten any country at any time. And if a country such as Russia, with its huge arsenal of nuclear weapons and vast reserves of raw materials, tilts in the wrong direction, the United States will pay a terrible price.