

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 section of the Choices Program web site at www.choices.edu/resources/ballots.php.

Reports on student views are developed and distributed to elected officials periodically.

“**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.

Copyright - Choices for the 21st Century Education Program, Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University All rights reserved. Permission is granted to photocopy for classroom use. Information on this and other resources from the Choices Program is available online at www.choices.edu.

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 chiefly a collection of American-led alliances. Americans created the international financial institutions. International principles of human rights are actually American and Western European ideas. 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.

What do we have to do?

We must devote the necessary resources to build an international order and a vigorous international economy grounded in American political and economic principles. In order to protect this international system from any threats, we must be prepared to attack others before they can attack us. Acting pre-emptively is the only way that we will be able to protect ourselves and other friendly states.

Security: American power requires greater commitment to our allies, not less. We must ensure security in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. The cost of doing this will be made up by the benefit to America's long-term interests. Relationships with tyrannical regimes should be avoided. Eventually they will threaten us because our beliefs and democratic principles threaten their very existence. We should make trouble for hostile and potentially hostile nations instead of waiting for them to make trouble for us. Our goal should be to transform authoritarian states into democratic ones through regime change. The ability to project power is the best deterrent against threats from smaller nations. A sophisticated system to defend against missile attack is necessary to protect us and our allies.

Terrorism: We must draw a clear line. On one side are freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. On the other are the forces of lawlessness and terror. The war on terrorism is a worldwide struggle and we must lead a worldwide offensive to combat it.

Iraq: Having removed Saddam Hussein from power, it is our responsibility to help the Iraqi people build the institutions of democracy. We must recognize that an American presence in this important region is likely to be needed for many years. We should provide the resources to help Iraqis restart their oil industry so that the funds can be used to rebuild their country. We should provide assistance to and cooperate with those Iraqis committed to realizing American democratic ideals by supporting constitutional reform, rule of law initiatives, institution building and civil society. Once these institutions have been established, we should support free and fair elections. In addition, we should seek to spread democratic political systems throughout the Middle East, peacefully if possible but by force if necessary just as we have done in Iraq; only then can we see a safe and stable Middle East that does not threaten the security of the U.S. and its allies.

Economic Policy: We should use the promise of trade benefits and economic aid to encourage the countries of the former Soviet bloc and the developing world to adopt American political and economic principles and impose trade boycotts and sanctions on countries that stand in the way.

Environment: While environmental policy is important, it cannot be our top priority. We need to keep our economy humming and encourage others to do the same. Obstructive government policies on environmental matters will only hamper efforts to develop a vigorous international economy.

Immigration: Hunger, disease, war, and terror are driving increasing numbers to our shores. By spreading American political and economic principles around the world and improving standards of living elsewhere, we can decrease immigration to the United States.

Future 1 is based on the following beliefs:

- As Americans, we have been given a gift—a nation founded on the principles of freedom, justice, democracy, and tolerance. We have a special responsibility to promote and protect these values around the world, even if we have to act alone.
- Tyrannical regimes are the main human cause of suffering in the world. Without the checks and balances of democracy to restrain them, dictators oppress their own people, fan the flames of aggressive nationalism, and threaten their neighbors. To support them or turn a blind eye to their repression and aggression is both dangerous and immoral.
- We have the most powerful military in the world and we should not be afraid to use it to keep troublemakers in check and spread liberal democratic principles throughout the world.
- A world grounded in American economic and political principles will strengthen our economy and make us more secure.

Supporting Arguments

- As the wars 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.
- If we wait until the world's bullies become so powerful that we must confront them, as we did with Adolf Hitler in World War II, the cost will be enormous.
- 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.
- As new democracies take root and their economies prosper, they will become strong trading partners for the United States.

Concerns and Tradeoffs

- Pressuring other governments to adopt American democratic principles will spark international criticism that the United States is trying to control the world. The pre-emptive use of force will only make this worse. We will be seen as the “rogue superpower” and others will line up against us.
- As long as we continue our support for Israel at the expense of Palestinians, and as long as we continue to suppress the rights of others such as the prisoners being held in Guantanamo, we will not be credible leaders for democracy and human rights abroad.
- 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, with which we have extensive economic ties, will be branded as enemies.
- Refusing to trade with undemocratic countries will only hurt the U.S. economy, since most of our trading partners will continue to do business with these nations. Meanwhile, the United States will cut itself off from vital sources of oil and other raw materials.
- You can't force other nations to establish democracies; they have to want it, and they have to believe that we will be there to support them. Many societies in the Middle East, the developing world, and the former Soviet bloc reject our definition of democracy and human rights. Foreign aid and goodwill can do little to alter deep-seated forces of history and culture.

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. To navigate 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 the world can cooperate to solve the world’s problems. Nor can our interests be curtailed by short-sighted isolationists. We must engage with the world selectively in order to promote U.S. interests. 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 don’t 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. In this competitive era, we cannot afford to sacrifice important trade ties or become bogged down in crusades in parts of the world where our vital interests are not at stake to advance rigid political ideals. Neither should we give up our influence in international affairs for the sake of global cooperation. 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.

What do we have to do?

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 lighten the load or defuse criticism, we should engage others where possible. But, if this fails, we must be prepared to act alone.

Security: We must recognize that our country’s strength and influence present an irresistible target for hatemongers and terrorists. We must be prepared to protect U.S. security and U.S. interests—by force when necessary. We should act decisively to build alliances that can help us deal with nuclear weapons programs in countries like North Korea and Iran. We must be prepared to intervene around the globe, but only when our vital interests are at stake.

Terrorism: To protect our country’s security at home and interests abroad, we have no choice but to take on the job of rooting out terrorism wherever it exists. We should enlist as many nations as we can to help us. We should make our military forces more flexible so that they can be deployed rapidly to respond to threats abroad, increase our intelligence capacity, and freeze the assets of suspected terrorist organizations and put pressure on other governments to do the same. We must take the war on terrorism to any nation that harbors international terrorists.

Iraq: Disorder and uncertainty in post-war Iraq threaten U.S. interests in this important region. We must bring order to Iraq by exerting U.S. control over all security, intelligence, and infrastructure. We must try to engage other nations in order to lighten the load on us and lend international legitimacy to our actions, but the reconstruction effort must be led and controlled by the U.S.

Economic Policy: Our international trade relationships are almost as important as our concerns about security. Military aid and arms exports should be used as a tool of U.S. foreign policy. Economic aid should be used to advance U.S. trade and investment in the former Soviet bloc and the developing world.

Environment: We should support international efforts that help protect our environment at reasonable cost, but we should expect other countries of the world to share in those costs so that we do not lose our competitive advantage. Meanwhile, there is money to be made in “green” technology and we should act decisively to develop “green” products while the market is there.

Immigration: U.S. immigration policy should be designed first to serve our country's economic needs, not to solve the world's problems. We cannot afford to admit into our country every year hundreds of thousands of newcomers who will be a burden on our society. On the other hand, if investment in select countries can make them better trading partners and improve conditions there so that emigrants don't flood to our shores, that would be worth the cost.

Future 2 is based on the following beliefs:

- We should act in the name of peace and the rule of law, but when our interests are threatened we must be willing to defend ourselves with military force. National security must be our first priority.
- In a world in which states act primarily in their own self interest, international stability and security depend largely on the United States. More than any other country, 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 fundamentally change the international system inevitably backfire, resulting in disorder and conflict. Protecting ourselves and our interests must be our primary focus.
- We should act cautiously. Unsavory as it may seem, U.S. interests often require that we maintain friendly relations with undemocratic governments, such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and China. Stability is important.

Supporting Arguments

- 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.
- U.S. involvement in areas of tension, such as the Middle East and the Korean peninsula, will contribute to a stable balance of power and 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.
- 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.
- 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.

Concerns and Tradeoffs

- 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.
- Maintaining our alliances with cruel dictators sets back the cause of human rights and the worldwide movement toward democracy.
- 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.
- An interventionist U.S. foreign policy distracts politicians from the issues that they should focus on here at home.
- As World War I showed, balance-of-power schemes eventually collapse like a house of cards. 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 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. We must take the initiative to bring the nations of the world together. We have no choice but to play a leadership role in strengthening the UN's role in maintaining international security, and responding to environmental pollution, financial crises, refugees, AIDS, and other global problems. 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.

What do we have to do?

We should lead efforts to strengthen the hand of the UN and other regional security organizations in security matters 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.

Security: We should not send our troops to fight outside of North America without the approval of the fifteen-nation UN Security Council or other broadly representative regional institutions authorized by the UN to implement military action. We should increase cooperation with other nations' military forces as we work toward establishing a permanent UN military force ready to bring peace to troubled areas. Finally, the U.S. should lead a worldwide effort to reduce arms exports. We should resume active support for arms control and disarmament initiatives by ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, strengthening the Biological Weapons Treaty, and reducing the world's arsenal of strategic weapons, including our own nuclear arsenals.

Terrorism: We should debate any response to future terrorist acts against the U.S. before the UN Security Council and abide by the Council's decisions. We should join the International Criminal Court and prosecute international terrorists there. Finally, we should work as partners with the international community to freeze the assets of suspected terrorist organizations.

Iraq: Most Iraqis, even those who hated Saddam Hussein, do not trust U.S. motives and are resentful of a U.S. occupation force in Iraq. This resentment is shared by many others in the region and beyond. Only the UN has the international legitimacy to carry out the difficult task of rebuilding Iraq. We must take steps to turn over leadership to the UN and commit U.S. economic and security resources to a UN-led effort to rebuild Iraq.

Economic Policy: We should spearhead international efforts to improve economic and environmental conditions in the developing world, Middle East, and former Soviet bloc. We should also work with international institutions to establish regulations to protect developing economies from the ups and downs of the global financial system.

Environment: We must join with the other countries of the world—developed and developing—and work with people at the local level, under the auspices of the UN, to achieve a globally sustainable balance of development and environmental preservation. In exchange for cooperation on environmental issues, we should forgive the billions of dollars in debt that are owed us by poor countries.

Immigration: Hunger, disease, and war are driving increasing numbers to our shores. We should join with the international community to provide the development assistance necessary to improve life among the world's poor and disadvantaged. Ultimately, we will all be better off.

Future 3 is based on the following beliefs:

- We live in an interdependent world. If humanity is to have a hopeful future, 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 the spread of anti-American sentiment around the world and make us less secure. If we are to regain a sense of security in today's troubled world, we must share decisionmaking and leadership with the community of nations.
- The biggest problems we face today are global problems, and they can only be solved through global cooperation. Trying to deal with terrorism, AIDS, and other international challenges without the involvement of all nations will be impossible.
- Cooperating globally is only fair. 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 200 countries in the world. As such, our country does not have the right to dominate the rest of the world.

Supporting Arguments

- Giving more power and authority to international organizations does not make us powerless. On the contrary, individual nations are already powerless to cope with a growing range of global problems. By bringing nations together to solve common problems, we will gain the strength to deal with the world's challenges.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

Concerns and Tradeoffs

- 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.
- Our fundamental values are in conflict with those of large parts of the world. Cooperation not only won't work, it could be dangerous.
- Constraining our ability to use military force unilaterally outside of North America will severely limit our flexibility in defending ourselves and responding to international events and will encourage our enemies to defy us. International organizations are too slow to respond, too ineffective in their actions, and cannot be counted on to act when vital U.S. interests are at stake.
- 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.
- 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 have been 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. 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. As Americans, we have to put our own needs first.

What do we have to do?

We should cut our military and political ties overseas and refocus our attention on issues here at home such as homeland defense, crime, and education. We must make it clear that the United States can no longer be counted on to solve the world's problems.

Security: We should gradually 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. We should 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. In addition, a specialized force should be trained to respond around the world when American lives are at stake.

Terrorism: We must lower our foreign policy profile, get ourselves out of the sights of terrorists, and build up our national defenses. With the funds saved as a result of our sharply reduced international involvement, we can devote significant national resources to the protection of the American homeland. This includes developing defenses against potential biological, chemical, or nuclear attacks by terrorists. Finally, while civil liberties are important to Americans, we must recognize that we are in a new world. The government must be allowed to take new steps to protect our security.

Iraq: We should encourage others in the international community to take over the leadership role in Iraq while we bring our troops home safely and refocus our attention on our faltering economy and our own security at home. We should stay out of conflicts that do not concern us directly. Conflicts such as those between Israel and the Palestinians need to be solved by the parties themselves and our involvement often makes us a target for resentment or even for terrorist attacks.

Economic Policy: We should take a firmer stance in negotiations with our trading partners in order to protect American industries from unfair foreign competition and American jobs from cheap foreign labor. We should also reduce our dependence on foreign oil by encouraging American oil companies to invest elsewhere and by promoting alternative sources of energy and energy conservation.

Environment: For two decades, American companies have worked hard to regain their leadership position internationally. Their continuing success is important to our economy. We would be foolish to hamstring our economy with environmental restrictions while allowing the emerging powers of the developing world a free ride.

Immigration: We cannot afford to keep the door open every year to roughly one million newcomers from poor nations. We should drastically reduce the number of immigrants we accept. We should also commit the resources necessary to take control of our borders and allow broader monitoring of communications in order to keep tabs on potential terrorists.

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. The establishment of a Department of Homeland Security was an important first step in addressing our vulnerability here at home, but it is only a beginning.
- 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. Rather, U.S. leaders should strive to ensure that the misery and poverty common to most of the planet do not overtake the United States.
- International power and influence in today's world are measured in terms of economic strength, not military might. In the global struggle for economic security, we cannot afford to be hampered by outmoded foreign policy priorities. The military and foreign entanglements that the United States built up during the Cold War are now a burden on our country.

Supporting Arguments

- By not interfering in other parts of the world where our presence may not be welcome, we will avoid getting ourselves into unnecessary conflicts or making ourselves the target of resentment.
- 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.
- By giving top priority to our domestic problems, we will be in a much better position to serve as a model for other countries.
- Sharply cutting U.S. military spending will encourage other leading powers to reduce their spending on defense and will lower tensions worldwide.

Concerns and Tradeoffs

- Having invaded Iraq and ousted Saddam Hussein from power, we cannot afford to abandon the effort to rebuild the country and establish a model democracy in the region. We will be viewed as a rogue state, the region will be unstable, and there will be greater justification for those who oppose our intervention to increase anti-American terrorist activity.
- 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 nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons in order to provide for their own defense.
- Deeply cutting our military power will leave the United States incapable of standing up for democracy or protecting our security and economic interests around the world. As in World War II, the United States will eventually be forced to undertake a costly military build-up to combat threats from overseas.
- 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.
- 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.