

Mini Simulation

U.S. Foreign Policy: Multilateralism or Unilateralism?

Last Updated:
October 29, 2020

Overview

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.

Students will understand the pros and cons of multilateral and unilateral approaches to foreign policy.

The Situation

Since the end of World War II, the United States has charted a course of increasing multilateralism. The United States has taken a leadership position in addressing global issues, expanding its role in an array of international initiatives. The United States has also participated in a variety of specialized groups designed to promote common global interests. For example, the United States participates in 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. Since the establishment of the Liberal World Order after World War II, the United States has become the world's largest economy and prevailed 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. This foreign policy pivot would see the United States prioritize its own interests. Some unilateralists even advocate for a complete withdrawal from international involvement. Prominently, the Donald J. Trump administration has embraced unilateralism. Throughout his term in office President Trump criticized institutions such as NATO. President Trump also announced the United States' withdrawal from other [multilateral](#) organizations, 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 peace and stability. The United Nations is an important forum for countries to generate global standards of behavior and coordinate action. Moreover, these policymakers argue cooperation is essential to manage a growing number of global issues. Many potential crises, such as [infectious diseases](#) or climate change, are not confined within national borders; international problems require multilateral solutions. Multilateralism can also bolster U.S. and global security. Maintaining [alliances](#) guarantees the support of partners in a conflict. Moreover, 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 outsize 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. This potential change in global leadership could negatively impact 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. These instances include unnecessary intervention in foreign conflicts or the adoption of 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. 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 the compromises required to reach an international agreement can dilute the strength of multilateral action. These critics believe that 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.

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. For the President, the State of the Union address is a chance to signal to U.S. allies the foreign policy approach of the new administration. 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 convene. They will deliberate on whether U.S. foreign policy should largely embrace multilateralism or unilateralism.

NSC members should consider the following 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. However, such efforts potentially sacrifice 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.

[Multilateralism vs. Unilateralism](#) Asia Society

[Isolationism Is Not a Dirty Word](#) Atlantic

[Against Washington's 'Great Power' Obsession](#) Atlantic