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THE INTERPLAY OF FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

The relationship between domestic and foreign policies is complex and fluid, and domestic politics will have an impact on how the United States interacts with the world and vice-versa. The research draws on the realist and liberal theoretical perspectives, and examines domestic factors such as the influence of voters on foreign policy through public opinion and the role of lobbyists and economic interests. One of the areas of importance is how Trump's "America First" policy, including trade protectionism, controlling immigration, and competing with China, will be impacted by these domestic factors. The research will also examine how U.S. foreign policy can also have an impact on domestic policy, such as in the areas of economic growth, political legitimacy of elected officials, national security, and social cohesion. Overall, this study shows that there is a two-way dynamic between domestic politics and international relations, and it will be important for policymakers to strike a balance between domestic and global responsibilities in an ever-multipolar world. The success of U.S. global leadership will depend on the ability to restore the United States domestically and accomplish foreign policy goals.

Keywords: United States; foreign policy; domestic policy; America First; Donald Trump; international relations; trade policy; national security; globalization, multipolarity.

Introduction

Leading global powers show that foreign policy and domestic policy are interrelated and affect each other, where priority objectives in one's own country drive ambitions to project power globally, and pressures acting upon countries from outside reinforce the objectives that countries have set for themselves at home. The example of the United States demonstrates this illustration significantly because it is the most important superpower in the world, and particularly during the presidency of President Donald Trump (who was re-elected as president in November 2024, and assuming that he is inaugurated as president again in late January 2025) with his "America First" doctrine that exemplifies the interrelationship between these areas.

Theoretical Foundations of Policy Interplay

The United States has a unique connection between domestic and foreign policy through degrees of realism and liberalism in foreign relations. Realists like Hans Morgenthau say that the national interest is the driving force of US foreign policy. However, domestic factors such as economic conditions and public opinion can distort what those interests are when they influence the development of U.S. foreign policy.[1] Once US domestic policy is enacted (e.g., resource allocation and a consensus on how to engage internationally), it becomes the framework and legal basis for developing the US's international relationships in order to achieve a common goal of national security and economic well-being.

Liberalists emphasize that globalization's "interdependence" causes the domestic economy to shape and guide trade agreements with other countries, whereas trade agreements with other countries will shape and guide the domestic economy.[2] An example of this phenomenon is the concept of American exceptionalism, which describes the US's exceptionalism as a country that exists as a model of democracy for other nations. This concept provides both ethical justification and moral justification for intervention in the internal affairs of other countries when those interventions may strengthen the morale

[1] Caddel, J. (2013). "Domestic Political Institutions in U.S. Foreign Policy Decision Making." Washington University Open Scholarship.

[2] *Rickard, S. "International Influences on United States Domestic Policy." WPSA.*

of the US population and provide the moral justification needed to spend large amounts of money on defence and security. Henry Kissinger expressed his concerns about allowing domestic issues to dictate the conduct of US foreign policy.[3] However, in practice, the influence of domestic forces through Congress, media and lobbying groups, creates close linkage between US domestic and foreign policy.

As noted previously, external threats lead to unification of US domestic political views through the rally' round the flag effect. At the same time, internal political divisions create constraints on US foreign policy initiatives, such as the War Powers Resolution which established Congress's authority to limit the US president's ability to conduct foreign affairs without congressional approval. Ultimately, the interdependence of these two areas is what leads to a feedback loop.

Domestic Policy's Influence on Foreign Affairs

U.S. foreign relations are primarily determined by internal factors, such as electoral cycles, party affiliation, and lobbying groups. Different approaches to China and Russia illustrate a clear partisan divide between the Republican Party (unilateralism) and the Democratic Party (multilateralism). Trump's administration would have had to deal with economic issues faced by the Rust Belt, and therefore relied heavily on tariffs against Chinese goods to create jobs in manufacturing; in essence, Trump's policies set a direct link between domestic economic populism and the trade wars.[4]

In response to economic issues faced by deindustrialised working-class areas, the Trump administration enacted tariffs on Chinese products as part of an economic populism strategy aimed at addressing America's internal political pressures by engaging in international trade conflict with China through tariffs. Tariffs imposed under Section 232 and Section 301 of U.S. trade laws marked a radical departure from the post-World War II liberal trading system created by the United States, a departure based upon electoral calculations rather than an articulated or coherent understanding of how the international political economy functions. The emergence of trade nationalism had domestic roots, as Trump often framed tariffs not as tools for competing with China strategically, but as a means of restoring dignity and economic security to U.S. workers.

The broader implications of domestically driven trade policies had significant consequences for U.S. allies in both Europe and Asia; they had relied on U.S. leadership in fostering an open multilateral trading system, but now risked the United States viewing its trade agreements as tools to manage domestic politics rather than as reliable sources of long-term international commitment.

American public opinion as shown by Gallup and Pew surveys has a direct impact on U.S. foreign relations; as Americans' support for the Ukraine conflict continues to decline due to inflationary pressures, the issue is shifting U.S. aid to Ukraine. American lobbying groups have successfully lobbied Congress for continued American support for Middle Eastern ally based chiefly upon the interest of evangelical Christians, whereas the military-industrial complex has successfully lobbied Congress for large defence budgets (over 4% of GDP) so that defence industries remain competitive and create jobs across the United States.[5] The tax cuts introduced during the Trump administration and extended in 2025 were in many ways a means for the government to fund all of the above.

Debates regarding immigration encapsulate these same domestic pressures and their influence on foreign relations; securing America's borders with Mexico will invariably affect U.S. policy towards Latin America. Trump's border wall helped create a perception of U.S. strength in relation to Latin America. Additionally, Trump's approach to trade was one of economic protectionism that prioritised American workers over the global economy, which is indicative of Trump's rejection of the free trade idealism.

Foreign Policy's Reciprocal Impact on Domestic Affairs

The domestic side of politics is supported by foreign policy. Foreign policy not only strengthens domestic stability but also promotes and legitimizes domestic policy reform by garnering presidential approval through foreign policy accomplishments (signing the Abraham Accords) and the lack of

[3] Aidt, T.S. et al. (2021). "Foreign Influence and Domestic Policy." Journal of Economic Literature.
[4] Horizons Project. (2025). "How Domestic Civic Movements Could Reshape US Foreign Policy."
[5] JSTOR. (n.d.). "US Domestic and Foreign Policy After the Cold War."

formalized success or failure from a foreign policy perspective (U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021), which resulted in losses for the party in the majority during midterm elections.[6] By 2025, Trump's approach to Taiwan and his Middle East realignment will divert attention from criticisms over inflation and will unite many voters behind his anti-China rhetoric.

Geopolitical obligations are also economically beneficial for the U.S.--the military industrial complex employs millions of U.S. citizens; bases around the world generate revenues and funnel them back to the U.S.[7] The policy of sanctioning Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine has raised energy prices globally, thereby facilitating the increase in the production of fossil fuels in Texas, and bringing together those who favor doing so from a foreign policy perspective and those who are in favor from a domestic standpoint. Additionally, exporting "ideals" (promoting democracy) also provides domestic societal stability by invoking patriotism and helping to undermine the legitimacy of domestic movements that may be viewed as contrary to U.S. values Black Lives Matter.

Crises can create an additional layer within this environment. For example, in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, foreign terrorist activity enabled the establishment of a domestic surveillance program via the USA Patriot Act.[8] Additionally, Trump's proposed plan for crackdowns on Venezuelan migrants in 2025 comments on the failure of foreign policy in addressing those inflows, which allows for greater use of executive authority than would be the case without the stated foreign failures pertaining to those inflows. Unfortunately, the relationship between domestic and foreign policies presents an inherent danger of overextension, particularly in that the costs associated with the war in Iraq and Afghanistan have created additional financial burden on the U.S. domestic economy.

Conclusion

The imbalances between countries produce another source of conflict. Militarized foreign policy drains the economy domestically, creating greater inequality between rich countries and less developed countries. This creates an increase in isolationism. By withdrawing from the World Health Organisation, Trump has overlooked the fact that pandemics do not have borders and therefore forces a further polarization of political views on the international stage.[9]

Checks on Congress, such as the need for Congressional approval of the use of military force contained within the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) should be modified, as this will allow Congress to impose limitations on the executive branch and enable Congress to provide checks on the executive branch while also maintaining checks and balances.

A rising multipolar world order, in which the United States will have to compete with China and Russia, will require the United States to renew its infrastructure and education sectors in order to maintain global economic power. In order to achieve sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships between the United States and its allies, both will need to be adaptable.

The future of the United States will depend on how Trump navigates this process. A commitment to re-establishing domestic manufacturing will allow the United States to return to global hegemony, however the potential for trade conflicts will simply create a global recession.

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