To what extent can foreign policymaking be insulated from the highly divisive nature of national politics in the United States? Politics may no longer stop “at the water’s edge,” as Senator Vandenberg, the head of Senate Foreign Relations Committee, famously put it in 1947. Vandenberg’s support for domestic political unity was motivated by the looming Cold War and the need for national cohesion. Will the challenges posed to American power and principles by China and Russia have a similar effect? Or will current political divisions between Republicans and Democrats prove too great to bridge?

U.S. Foreign Policymaking in a Politically Polarized Time

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Introduction

Following World War II, Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan famously said, “politics stops at the water's edge”. Yet the history of U.S. foreign policy shows this is not the case. Partisan division has influenced foreign policy well before World War II, and after that global conflict it became central to policy making. Of added concern is that inter-party struggles over foreign policy in the United States may become particularly uncompromising in a time of rising socio-political and cultural polarization. To what extent can foreign policymaking be insulated from the highly divisive nature of national politics in the United States today? Will the challenges posed to American power and principles by China and Russia unite policy makers? Or will current political divisions between Republicans and Democrats prove too great to bridge?

Before tackling these questions, we need to have a sound understanding of the complex environment surrounding these issues. What do we mean when we say polarization? What is considered foreign policy? And who decides and implements these policies? This essay outlines some characteristics surrounding political polarization and foreign policy in the United States – to include diplomacy, alliance building, grand strategy, and the politics of national security.

Foreign Policy

Foreign policy can be defined as actions carried out by one sovereign state towards another state as well as actions by a state designed to address any number of international problems, from climate change to international terrorism. It is important to consider the basis for making foreign policy decisions; does a country act according to principle or self-interest? Some argue foreign policy can only be based on one or the other, while others argue that a prudent policy incorporates both. Should the United States send ground troops in support of the war in Ukraine based on liberal democratic values or would that be counter to U.S. “material” and security interests? Russia’s use of brute force in 2022 to invade Ukraine, as with its earlier annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula in 2014, advances the political objective of redrawing state boundaries and threatens the international order established by the U.S. and the West following World War II.
The crisis over Ukraine requires that U.S. foreign policy makers consider the implications of a shifting and weakening world order that could enable other threats to the independence of small countries, constraining their ability to engage in self-government, to act freely without military coercion from larger states, and to pursue trade and other forms of external interaction as they see fit. But in a context of rising domestic polarization, implementing appropriate policies in these difficult international conditions will be challenging.

**Polarization in the United States**

How policy makers decide to act will be influenced by the political context that shapes their options. The United States has seen a significant increase in the intensity and extent of polarization in the past two decades. By 2020, national surveys indicated that large majorities (8 in 10 registered voters) in both the Democratic and Republican parties believed that their political differences with the other side were not primarily over policies but core values. 9 in 10 registered voters, in both parties, thought that a victory by their opponents would lead to “lasting harm” to the United States.

But what exactly is polarization? Friedrichs and Tama suggest it is “a state in which the opinions, feelings, behaviors, or interests of a group or society become more bimodal, and the two modes move further apart.” Today, there are several contexts this could be applied to. For example, people have divergent opinions about how the government should regulate guns, abortion, education, military spending, and the cost of medical care. These opinions are often shaped by cues from politicians who are often intent on identifying or labelling issues within the boundaries of clear party lines. This obviously promotes partisanship.

What are other sources of political polarization in the United States? As we have noted, polarization has been a staple of American politics since the inception of the Republic. But knowledgeable observers believe this political pathology has grown qualitatively worse in recent decades. Many point to the rise of populist ideology and the willingness of politicians to exploit feelings of mass economic and cultural discontent for political gain.

Populism condemns political and economic elites who lead international corporations and a supposed “deep state” which profits from globalization and the exploitation or neglect of the “common man.” It is an ideology or conceptual framework that is manipulated by political demagogues and conspiracy theorists who propagate mistrust of existing institutions and promise to rid the political system of its rigged qualities. Radical strands of populism pose a particular threat to rule-based democracy as was evident in the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the Capitol.

Populism is a particularly durable source of political polarization and discontent because it rests on both cultural and socio-economic foundations. Broad segments of the American electorate are alarmed by what is viewed as the accelerated decay of predominantly white, middle-class cultural values due to immigration, globalization, and other phenomena perceived as threatening. The economic decline of traditional industrial America deeply aggravates these
feeling of group vulnerability. Taken together, these cultural and economic factors fuel widespread political discontent.\textsuperscript{13}

Populism will likely be a force for polarization in the United States for years to come. But effective public policy can reduce its negative political effect by tempering polarization, and in the process, strengthen American democracy. For example, more public funding should be extended to vocational training to ease the transition of many Americans to a post-industrial economy. More effective as well as equitable policies of regulating immigration are also likely to reduce political divisions in the United States. Most important, Americans should feel that they are part of the political process and that their voices are relevant. Thoughtful observers have offered useful lists of reforms that would bolster democracy by reducing the alienation that feeds polarization.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{Implications of 2022 Midterm Elections}

As these factors continue to play out in the U.S. electorate, partisan lines continue to be drawn in today’s politics. We will see how in the 2022 U.S. congressional elections. There is a historical precedence for the election of a divided government – the party controlling the White House losing control of Congress – in the first term of a new president. The 2022 midterm elections will dictate whether the Republican Party takes control over the Senate or the House of Representatives, or perhaps both, thereby gaining the ability to stall and perhaps reverse parts of the agenda of the Democratic Party and President Biden.

Partisan politics are playing out at the state levels as well, often affecting shifts in power in state legislatures and governorships. In 2021, Republicans controlled 29 chambers of state legislatures to the Democrats’ minority of 19 chambers.\textsuperscript{15} Republicans are likely to hold most governorships following the midterm elections as well.\textsuperscript{16} Will this lead to further challenges for power between state and national levels of government? Does it have implications for how or what foreign policy will be made?

\textit{Politics of Defense}

Julian E. Zelizer’s \textit{Arsenal of Democracy} provides numerous examples of the impact of politics on U.S. foreign policy and defense.\textsuperscript{17} Zelizer analyzes the politics of defense in two lenses: partisan politics and legislative-executive disagreement. I assess two additional lenses using his literature that affect defense policy, namely, civil-military relations and intra-military disagreement.

\textit{Partisan Politics Beyond the Water’s Edge}

Partisan influence on foreign policy is nothing new. Many examples exist throughout U.S. history. President Lyndon B. Johnson’s decision to turn the Vietnam War into a ground war, drastically increasing the number of troops in the campaign, centered on conflicting ideologies between Republicans and Democrats at the time. Democrats fought for a liberal internationalist agenda, while Republicans sought conservative internationalism. President Johnson ran on an anti-war campaign in 1964, but once reelected he faced intense pressure from hawkish
Republicans to enter the Vietnam conflict. Determined to deliver his social policy agenda, Johnson reluctantly expanded U.S. military operations in Vietnam to gain Republican support for his domestic program. Had it not been for the Republican partisan pressure on the president’s administration, U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam may not have happened – at least not at the scale that occurred. Alternatively, had Barry Goldwater won the presidential election of 1964 – and not Johnson -- the U.S. might have immediately adopted an aggressive military campaign in Vietnam rather than the more phased and halting approach adopted by Johnson.18

You could argue this type of political compromise is natural and necessary to managing differing ideologies and interests in democracy. Today’s Republican and Democratic parties seem to be shifting in their policy preferences. The Republican party is divided in its preferences between hawkish, unilateral policies and nationalist, retrenchment approaches to international affairs. Meanwhile, the Democratic party continues to seek multilateral cooperation while supporting deep engagement as well intervention using military forces.

**Legislative-Executive Dynamics Beyond the Water’s Edge**

We also see opposing political stances between the legislative and executive branches at play in the build up to the war in Vietnam. President Johnson’s ability to get the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed in the legislature gave him carte blanche to send in military forces. While he was hesitant to do so, not wanting to increase American forces and risk losing popular support as well as momentum for his ambitious domestic agenda, the resolution gave him the ability to act unilaterally without further congressional consent.

Having this authority was important given that Democrats often feared another war in Korea while Republicans were concerned about the spread of communism in Vietnam and in Asia as a whole. Republicans on Capitol Hill pressured President Johnson to be strong on his position in Vietnam, while Democrats cautioned him the American people would not support the war and the action would have political ramifications in maintaining a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives. Ultimately the balance of power was shifted to the president, reducing the restrictions Congress could impose on the executive branch without a supermajority.

**Polarization, Civil-Military Relations, and Foreign Policy**

When making his point about politics not extending beyond the water’s edge, Senator Vandenberg was referring primarily to the lenses of partisan politics and the relationship between the legislature and executive branches of government. This section and the one that follows consider civil-military relations and intra-military politics. While politics in the first two lenses are representative of democracy and the principles of the U.S. constitution, the civil-military and intra-military arenas also have implications for U.S. foreign policy.

Civil-military relations are under renewed scrutiny following the controversies of the Trump presidency, the insurrection of January 6th, 2021, and the collapse of Afghanistan’s government following the U.S. withdraw. The principles enshrined in the constitution by its framers dictate the military subordination to civilian control and oversight. Military leaders are
duty bound to convey professional opinions that might oppose favored policy but are obligated to carry out any legal order consistent with the constitution.

General MacArthur failed to adhere to these values when he publicly condemned President Truman’s Korean War policy. His actions did more than weaken international perceptions of the coherence of U.S. foreign policy. More importantly, they compromised the norms governing the behavior of the military, giving rise to fears of the founders of a strong, autonomous military with the potential to launch a military coup against the civilian government. Such a threat might challenge the exclusive right of American citizens to decide if a policy is right or wrong through the exercise of democratic rights such as peaceful protest, impeachment, or voting.

**Intra-military Polarization**

Intra-military politics also had a considerable influence on the political process. The policies pursued in the second war in Iraq are a good example. While many top generals pushed for a withdrawal from Iraq, others sought a heavy expansion of U.S. ground forces. General David Petraeus, who wrote the U.S. Army doctrine for counter insurgency operations, was asked to lead the efforts in Iraq. Despite pressures from many officers who out ranked him, Petraeus was able to advocate for a massive military surge in 2007. This led to the successful reduction of violence in Iraq. Had intra-military politics resulted in the selection of a different commanding general who supported a draw down, the violence in Iraq could have spiraled ever greater, even beyond the carnage experienced with the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS).19

**Politics in Diplomacy and Alliance Building**

The Trump presidency affected U.S. credibility abroad in several ways. President Trump made significant threats to reduce spending on the NATO alliance, calling on European leaders to pay more for their own defense capabilities. These demands were part of Trump’s larger nationalist agenda which emphasized policies of “America First” and a reduction of international engagement. For many critics, this stance lacked the understanding that the complexities of international affairs can pose challenges to U.S. national interests and values that neo-isolationist approaches cannot adequately addressed.

The store of a state’s soft power helps determine the effectiveness of its foreign policy. Soft power is itself dependent on perceptions, including international assessments of the political system that crafts that foreign policy. One of the great dangers of political polarization in the United States is that America is no longer an uncontested model of democratic governance for other countries. International surveys find that majorities of respondents in advanced industrial countries feel that the United States has not been an example to emulate, in political terms, for many years. While the United States has recently recovered much of its international approval that was lost during the Trump administration, foreign respondents in surveys consistently worry that America is dangerously polarized across several divides, including ideology, race, ethnicity, and class. 20
It is certainly true that large numbers of citizens in other advanced democracies are also disgruntled and have political systems that suffer from polarization. But without the U.S. serving as a model and leader, modern democracies in the West and elsewhere may become even more divided internally and as a group, eventually left rudderless in terms of embracing coherent and cohesive values and purpose. The need to address this negative prospect is becoming more pressing with mounting evidence of backsliding in new and established democracies and of a surge of authoritarian rule across the globe. China is the beneficiary of these trends as they enable Beijing to present its system as preferable to the perceived disorder and inequality of Western democracy.

**Maintaining Norms and World Order**

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States led the world as the sole superpower. As an economic powerhouse with the only military capable of strategic deployment around the world, the United States in partnership with other developed countries established a new world order with the United Nations and other transnational institutions at its center. One of the norms in this world order, which extended a core principle of the Westphalian system, was that a country could not change the borders of another country by using brute force.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February of 2023 was a norm-shattering maneuver. President Vladimir Putin’s use of military force to seize terrain in Ukraine has largely been a failure up to this point but illustrates the dangers an autocracy such as Russia presents to regional and global order and stability.

However, following a period of attempted U.S. retrenchment under a Trump presidency, the world has united to reaffirm the norms that had been established and practiced in modern history. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), led by the United States, has rallied to bolster its defenses through massive funding increases and contributions to the Ukrainian war efforts. Whether this trend will continue with the U.S. continuing to lead is yet to be seen.

Looking east, U.S. policy towards China and the question of Taiwanese independence has proven increasingly contentious. The United States has supported the growth of the Chinese economy over the last 30 years through open trade. During this time, there has been an increase in Chinese corporate espionage and idea theft, massive investments in Chinese military modernization, the strengthening of autocratic communist rule, and accusations that the Chinese government has committed genocide against China’s Uighur population. These issues have inevitably heightened tensions between China and the U.S. over Beijing’s demands for sovereign rule over Taiwan. Tensions have grown even worse by President Biden’s remarks that he will support Taiwan independence with U.S. troops if China threatens Taiwan with force.

It is a truism of politics that external threats often promote domestic political cohesion through “rally ‘round the flag” phenomena. Although this appears to be the case in the United States regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, already cracks are appearing in the willingness of the two-party system to sustain its support of that beleaguered state. Nevertheless, could (and should) politicians and other actors invoke foreign threats, such as China, to reduce political polarization in the United States? Would stressing external threats for the sake of domestic
political cohesion run the risk of creating new political dangers, e.g., tightening political rules of behavior, discrimination against dissenting minorities, the strengthening of the “military-industrial complex”, and so on?

**Conclusion**

The history of the United States provides countless examples of political influence on foreign policy outcomes. As political parties in the United States redefine their policy preferences and polarization continue to push zero sum politics, the U.S. is likely to have difficulty maintaining a consistent foreign policy program. However, the war in Ukraine demonstrated that belligerent violations of liberal democracy are widely unacceptable and have the potential to unify alliances. The question is whether U.S. foreign policy initiatives will remain focused and resolute in today’s geopolitical landscape of bold autocratic actors, or will increased domestic polarization derail attempts at unified foreign policy. 24

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How does polarization impact the development and execution of U.S. foreign policy?
2. In what ways has polarization affected the reputation of the U.S. abroad?
3. How does the perception of domestic U.S. polarization influence the behavior of America’s foreign adversaries?
4. How does polarization complicate the U.S. mission of building and sustaining alliances?
5. Who are the key actors in the development of U.S. foreign policy? What is the political process through which the policy preferences of these actors are legitimated?
6. How does the separation of power between the legislative and executive branches affect foreign policy-making during times of increased polarization?
7. Identify political reforms and changes in political culture that are likely to reduce the negative effects of polarization on policy making.

**Recommended Further Reading:**


ENDNOTES:

2 Ibid, 1-503.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
19 Ibid.