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**Foreign policy**

# **Difference Between International Relations and Foreign Policy**

The world of politics – especially international politics – is broad and complicated, and it is hard to identify the boundaries between politics and [international relations](http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/politics/difference-between-international-relations-and-foreign-policy/) as such. For instance, when we talk about international relations, we are referring to a wide variety of concepts and ideas that [often](http://www.differencebetween.net/language/difference-between-usually-and-often-often-misunderstood/) overlap and that are rarely easily to distinguish. Moreover, the theoretical complexity that surrounds the realm of international affairs is further complicated by the reality on the ground, where political and economic interests mix and become impossible to disentangle.

However, it is possible to identify a theoretical difference between the concept of “international relations” and the [idea of “foreign policy”.](http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/politics/difference-between-foreign-policy-and-domestic-policy/)

# **International relations**

The term “international relations” encompasses a wide variety of concepts.

*“****International relations attempt to explain the interactions of states in the global interstate system, and it also attempts to explain the interactions of others whose behavior originates within one country and is targeted toward members of other countries. In short, the study of international relations is an attempt to explain behavior that occurs across the boundaries of states, the broader relationships of which such behavior is a part, and the institutions (private, state, nongovernmental, and intergovernmental) that oversee those interactions.******[[1]](http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/politics/difference-between-international-relations-and-foreign-policy/" \l "_ftn1)”***

From [this](http://www.differencebetween.net/language/difference-between-this-and-these/) short but accurate definition, we can understand that the goal of international relations is to explain what happens at the international level and to provide the tools needed to understand the dynamics among nation states. In other words, the term “international relations” is neutral: it does not imply that [these](http://www.differencebetween.net/language/difference-between-this-and-these/) relations are good or bad; it just explains what dynamics regulate the behavior of States at the international level and provides useful interpretations.

Furthermore, the actors analyzed by international relations include:

* Nation States;
* Non-state actors;
* International organizations (both governmental and non-governmental); and
* Non-fully-recognized States (i.e. Taiwan, Palestine etc.).

International relations analyze the behavior and the interactions among such actors, and provide a theoretical framework that explains actions and strategical choices. However, even within the realm of international relations, we can find different perspectives and theories that provide different interpretations of the world and of the relations among States:

* Realism (and neo-realism): according to the realist perspective, States (and human beings) are selfish and egoistic entities that strive for supremacy and can only live in peace if there is a superior power dictating the rules (Leviathan). Such scenario clashes with the anarchy of the international system where there is no such thing as a superior body: therefore, realists believe that the potential for conflict is always present;
* Liberalism (and neo-liberalism): according to the [liberal](http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/politics/ideology-politics/difference-between-liberal-and-progressive/) (or ideal) perspective, interactions among states can lead to peaceful cooperation. The likelihood of peace is enhanced by the increase of economic ties among countries, and the growing number of intergovernmental institutions and democratic countries.
* World System Theory: according to this view, world regions can be divided into core, periphery and semi-periphery. Core countries are the major capitalist countries that accumulate their wealth by exploiting peripheral countries – the least developed and modern areas of the world. Semi-peripheral countries are the ones that allow the existence of such system. In fact, they are both exploited by the core and exploiters of the periphery. They function as a buffer between the core and the peripheral areas – that represent the majority of world countries
* Constructivism: according to the constructivist theory, States are the main unit of analysis of the world system, and States’ interests and identities are directly shaped by social constructs rather than being exogenous.

All the just mentioned theories attempt to explain the reasons that dictate States’ behaviors at the international level: even if they start from the same assumption (the anarchy of the international system), they clearly reach different outcomes and provide diverse explanations.

# **Foreign policy**

Foreign policy is “a policy pursued by a nation in its dealings with other nations, designed to achieve national objectives.”[[2]](http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/politics/difference-between-international-relations-and-foreign-policy/" \l "_ftn2) Therefore, while “international relations” is a broad and comprehensive term, “foreign policy” has a more specific meaning, and it refers to all actions made by a country with regard to other States or international bodies. Such actions vary according to the political and economic agenda of the country of concern, and include, inter alia:

The involvement in international bodies and institutions (i.e. the United Nations, the International Labor Office, the World Health Organization etc.);

The ratification of international treaties or convention (i.e. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child etc.)

The provision of military, structural and financial support to States and non-state actor;

The creation of political and economic alliances (both bilateral and multilateral);

The intervention in national and international conflicts; and

The support to countries affected by natural disasters.

The term [foreign policy](http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/politics/realism-vs-idealism-in-foreign-policy/) refers to the actions of a given country with a specific purpose in a specific moment. Indeed, the actions of one State inevitably affect other countries and may create imbalances and shifts within the international system.

In other words, we could say that “foreign policy” is one of the main issues analyzed by “international relations” and, at the same time, “foreign policy” shapes the international scenario and modifies “international relations” theories.

In fact, while the theories surrounding international affairs slightly change to adapt to the reality, the [foreign policy](http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/politics/difference-between-international-relations-and-foreign-policy/) of one country can drastically change as the President/Prime Minister change. For instance, the recent U.S. elections have brought about an important shift in the American foreign policies

Former President Obama condemned the proliferation of the Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) while President-elect Trump is considering the possibility to move the American embassy in East Jerusalem[[3]](http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/politics/difference-between-international-relations-and-foreign-policy/" \l "_ftn3).

Former President Obama never directly intervened in the Syrian conflict in order to prevent the escalation of the civil war into an international conflict while [President-elect Trump ordered an airstrike on Syria](http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/politics/difference-between-donald-trump-and-barack-obama/) in retaliation for the suspected chemical attack conducted by the Syrian government on April 4, 2017[[4]](http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/politics/difference-between-international-relations-and-foreign-policy/" \l "_ftn4). Such recent example also represents a shift in President Trump’s personal views: in fact, while Mr. Obama was in power, Mr. Trump had been outspoken about the need of avoiding military intervention in Syria. However, after having witnessed the appalling human suffering caused by the suspected chemical attack, Mr. Trump has taken a stronger stance against the regime and has invited the international community to take action. This case shows how foreign policy can change even without having a change in power.

Former President Obama was largely involved and promoted international multilateral agreements (both of economic and political nature) whereas President Trump seems to prefer bilateral negotiations and ties.

These are just few examples of the volatility and the unpredictability of foreign policy. Indeed, the continuous shifts and evolutions in foreign policy force those specialized in international relations to constantly adapt the existing theories to the evolving reality.

# **International relations vs foreign policy**

As we have seen, “international relations” and “foreign policy” differ on a number of substantial aspects:

* International relations is a broad and comprehensive term that refers to the explanation of the relations existing among States;
* Foreign policy determines the relations among States;
* International relations provide several theoretical framework to analyze and understand foreign policy;
* International relations are theoretical concepts that explain the reality on the ground;
* The term “international relations” is neutral (international relations are nor good nor bad, they just exist, and need to be analyzed);
* Foreign policy is never neutral; on the contrary, it is the way in which countries pursue their goals and interests; and
* Foreign policy is one of the main areas of interest of international relations.

**Summary**

Given the volatility and complexity of politics and international affairs, attempting to find the differences between “international relations” and “foreign policy” may seem an extremely complicated task. Indeed, the term “international relations” is [often](http://www.differencebetween.net/language/difference-between-usually-and-often-often-misunderstood/) used in ways that go beyond its real meaning – thus paving the way for misunderstandings and unclear explanations. In fact, we often read or hear the term being used in a politicized sense or as a synonym of “foreign policy”.

However, the word “international relations” only refers to the analysis of the interactions among states and of the ways in which international institutions oversee such interactions. In other words, international relations study foreign policy and provide a theoretical framework that may allow the average person to understand international dynamics and, in some cases, to foresee the implications and the consequences of the foreign policies of the country of concern. Indeed, according to the theoretical background and beliefs (realism, idealism, constructivism etc.) one may have different interpretations and views of the reality.