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**Foreign policy**

**A nation apart: American perceptions of the world**

 The foreign policy of the US, like that of all nations, has always resulted from a mixture of self-interested concerns and the attempt to act according to commonly held ideals. As in other lands, self- interested concerns have frequently been clothed with the rhetoric of high ideals. Yet a number of factors particular to the US have led many Americans to view their foreign policy as unique. The nation's geographical position is the first of these.

 If one looks at the globe as Americans do with the US in the centre, two 'facts that have coloured much of US foreign policy history seem clear. First, broad oceans separate the Americas from the other continents. Second, most of the world's population and farmland, and all of the other great powers, are located in Europe and Asia.

For nearly 300 years the relative physical isolation created by the oceans encouraged those migrating to North America to believe they were leaving behind whatever they disliked in their home societies. Here was the basis for US isolationism, the belief that Americans could withdraw from involvement with the rest of the world and focus on domestic (internal) affairs. As the country expanded across the continent, its great size offered another excuse for believing the US 'was world enough' for its inhabitants. Successive transportation, communication and weaponry revolutions, as well as the internationalization of the economy, eventually made isolationism founded on geographical separation an indefensible foreign policy position. But traditional attitudes continue to influence the views of many Americans.

Paradoxically, geographical separation has also contributed to a tradition of national insecurity. Looking outward and seeing the great powers of Europe and Asia on all sides, Americans have periodically felt surrounded. That anxiety resulted in adetermination to create national security in the North American quarter of the globe. The US has sought to be the only great power on the continent, worked to drive European powers out, and has striven to control the land, sea, air and finally the space approaches to North America.

The felt need for continental security has been regularly advanced as a justification for territorial expansion through war, purchase, or negotiation. The peoples who first bore the brunt of this preoccupation with security were Native Americans. Success in driving them westward fuelled Americans ambitions and sense that they had a destiny to 'civilize the continent. Security was also the rationale for a ring of far-flung military bases and later, of radar stations beyond the country's border. The US, it should be remembered, entered both World Wars primarily because of threats to its control of the continental sea approaches. President Reagan's strategic defence initiative for 'Star Wars' plan) sought to extend this 200-year-old principle of quarter sphere security the space approaches to the US

A second factor that makes a nation's foreign policy distinct is its size and strength relative to other nations at critical times in its history. For the US, this factor has been most important in relation to the European nations most involved in the settlement of North America. Only in the twentieth century have other nations significantly challenged the Euro-centred character of American foreign relations. This situation, of course, also results from Europe's leadership in world affairs generally during much of American history and the predominance of Europeans among immigrants to the US until recently.

Its history of settlement and immigration is a third major influence on the character of US foreign policy. European colonists and later immigrants have usually had mixed feelings towards their homelands. They emigrated to escape aspects of their home societies but simultaneously harboured deep attachments to the old country. Consequently, immigration has produced both isolationism and internationalism in American foreign policy, as Americans expressed their wish to avoid or cultivate contacts with former homelands Immigrants brought with them their homelands' history of international relations and often lobbied the American government to fight the old country's enemies and help its friends. Longer-settled Americans have periodically doubted the loyalty of recent immigrants. The US has a history of perceiving threats to internal security from foreign agitators which has caused repression at home and strained its relations abroad.

Before Europeans founded lasting settlements on the East Coast, 'promotional literature' written by European explorers established the idea that 'America' would evolve a new and better phase of civilization. Uncorrupted by the past, America would offer people a chance to start over and do better. From the earliest colonists, migrants to America have wanted to prove advertisements of this promise of America' true to justify their decision to emigrate. Thus, grew up the rhetoric of American exceptionalism. This is the belief (rhetorical or sincere) that America's foreign affairs, unlike those of other nations, are not self-interested but based on a mission to offer the world a better form of society

The Puritan leader, John Winthrop, had in mind a religiously reformed community that would be a model for change in England when he spoke of a 'City on a Hill that the eyes of all people are upon'. But later American leaders from George Washington to Ronald Reagan who echoed Winthrop's words were confirming Americans' sense that they had a unique mission to set an example for the rest of the world, to export American freedom and democracy and so conduct a foreign policy unlike that of any other nation. Whether real or imagined, American exceptionalism has had palpable effects on the history of US foreign relations.

 In reality, the basic concerns that greatly influence the foreign relations of other nations have also played major roles in the formulation of American policy. Of necessity, the US too has protected what it saw as its vital interests: economic success at home and abroad, access to important natural resources, support for its ideological views, respect for its military power, and assistance in times of crisis. In practice, the US has often seemed as concerned with realpolitik as other nations.

**Major periods and trends in US foreign policy**

The first period in the history of American foreign affairs covers the years from 1776 until around 1830. During this time, it can be argued, US policy towards other countries (especially the European powers) resembled that of the newly established Third World nations in the twentieth century. Like those nations, the US tried to steer clear of alliances with great powers and instead strove to keep its neutrality in foreign affairs and to act unilaterally. Fear of becoming a pawn of British or French schemes for expanded international power was the mainspring of American policy in this period.

 Around 1800, the US was a political and economic midget. It was hemmed in by British colonies to the North, French Louisiana in the west, and in the south by the rich and powerful Spanish Empire that included Florida and today's Southwest During the colonial period, every war between the European powers had its American phase, and the new nation could not afford to have that pattern continue if it was to stabilize its political institutions and economy. Thus, the US for many years stayed aloof from the Napoleonic Wars and refused to become involved in the French Revolution, even though the French had been an indispensable ally in the War for Independence from Britain.

After serving as the nation's first President, George Washington stated the existing policy in general terms in his so- called Farewell Address (1796). Its main principle consisted of avoiding political and military alliances while cultivating trading relations with other countries. President Washington also advised the nation to remember its uniqueness and resulting need for unilateral action. When the US strayed from these principles by entering the Napoleonic Wars on the side of France in 1812, the results were disastrous. British forces burned Washington, DC; the US won not a single important victory; and the cost was enormous. After that object lesson, the core ideas of the Address remained a pillar of American foreign policy until after the Second World War.

The Alien and Sedition Acts (1798) were more evidence of the American fear of becoming a pawn of European powers. These laws, however, were directed against foreign subversives who might undermine the nation from within. Fear of French sympathizers inspired the Acts, but they allowed the President and courts to fine, imprison, or deport any foreigner who seemed a danger to national security. The Acts were an early sign of deep insecurities about the loyalties of newcomers in a nation of immigrants.

The foreign policy statement from the early period that contributed most to the development of later policy was the Monroe Doctrine. Between 1800 and the 1820s, many Spanish colonies in Central and South America rebelled and declared their independence. The US wanted to recognize these new nations but feared conflict with Spain and the possibility that Britain or France would intervene and return them to Spanish control. America was too weak to prevent European interference in Latin America, but it formally expressed its opposition to outside meddling in their affairs through the Monroe Doctrine.

The Doctrine can be reduced to three basic principles. The first (called non-colonization) is that the US opposed any new colonies in the Americas. The second (non-intervention) demanded that the European powers remain uninvolved in the affairs of New World nations. In return for Europe's compliance with these rules, the US would observe a third principle (non-interference) that amounted to accepting the presence of the remaining European colonies in the Americas and keeping aloof from European affairs. The US could not enforce any of these principles until around 1900, when it had constructed a powerful navy. Until then, the British navy prevented other European nations from violating the Doctrine, and opened Latin America for British economic influence.

The Monroe Doctrine transformed American neutrality into isolationism and combined it with the country's sense of having a special mission in the world. The Americas were declared the US's exclusive sphere of interest. European-style kingdoms and Old-World politics were to have no place in the hemisphere, so that only the US's brand of republican government would influence Latin America. In short, the Doctrine expressed the mixture of idealism and ideological domination that was to become typical of US relations with Latin America.