

Why Foreign Policy Matters

A bomb goes off in a market in Dhaka. The US Embassy in Bangladesh wires Washington. Is it terrorism? Is it a coup? The president is woken up in the middle of the night. It is a coup. How does the U.S. respond? Key players are assembled in the situation room. A decision has to be made. Respond too firmly and it might endanger the U.S. lives on the ground there. Respond too weakly and it will effect our position around the globe, not to mention hurt our stance in talks with the new government.

Discussion flies back and forth around the room, but a decision has to be made quickly...

Cut off aid and impose sanctions. That's the decision. And its consequences will wash through the world.

That's foreign policy.

If the decision was the wrong one it could destabilize the region, leading to war, to new harbors for terrorists. If the decision was the right one, it could help bring order to the region, prevent further violence and lead back towards a more democratic government for the people of Bangladesh.

But why does it matter to us? Why should we care about things happening thousands of miles away? On a moral level we should care because it effects everyone's lives, but on a pragmatic level we should care because no matter how far away these events seem the world has become such an interconnected place that these events always trickle back to us. Everything from whether you're called up to serve in a war to the price of gas to fill up your car is effected by our foreign policy.

So what is foreign policy? It's basically a term for how we interact with other countries. And it effects every aspect of our lives. We live in such an interconnected world that the decisions our leaders make, the stances they take or the agreements they enter with countries on the other side of the globe, touch parts of our everyday world in ways you might not realize unless you're looking.

Like, even this video? There are all sorts of international trade agreements covering what is and isn't copyrighted and so determining what images we can use and what music we can play. How companies and governments track what you watch on the internet and how that data can be used has become contentiously tied with our foreign policy. How quickly this video streams and whether companies can restrict your bandwidth based on content is not just a matter of hot debate in the U.S.; the viewpoints of certain U.S. trade interests on the issue have started to crop up in treaties abroad. Heck, there are even countries where you simply couldn't access this video because of their current relations with the U.S.

And that coup scenario we outlined above? Well, let's take the most banal, amoral event that would roll out of it: the price of shirts would rise? Why? Because Bangladesh is a major exporter of textiles to the US. We get a lot of our clothes from them. If we were to put sanctions on Bangladesh, all of a sudden we'd have to find a new, more expensive sources for those clothes, and that cost would end up getting passed on to you, the buyer. Hence more expensive t-shirts.

And it all works like this. Foreign policy is all this complex web of goals and consequences that ranges from the far reaching to the very local.

Now let's say the U.S. wants to bring Turkey in and make them an even stronger ally in the war on

terror. What happens? What are the consequences? Well, first U.S. diplomats might have to lean on members of the E.U. to let Turkey into the European Union. But this would mean that the U.S. would have to do something for the various countries that have been blocking Turkey's acceptance into the E.U. for years. Perhaps they'd have to let Germany into the US-UK non-spying pact so there'd be no more wiretapping of the chancellor's calls. But once that's done and the Turkey enters the EU, what happens then? Well, one of the thousand possible consequences is that trade with the U.S. becomes easier and all of a sudden you're a lot more likely to see Vestel brand TVs for sale at Walmart, all because we needed another ally for a war that's mixed up in foreign policy decisions going decades back. And that's what's fascinating about foreign policy, untangling this intricate web, trying to decipher why things are happening and what's really going on. It's a mystery of the highest order, with some of the clues out in the open, some buried only for those who dig and some that only becoming clear to those astute enough to make inferences from what they observe going on in the world around them.

Looking at those mysteries, thinking critically about those mysteries, is an essential piece of being part of a democracy. With today's vastly interconnected world, where we wear clothes from China, drink coffee from Brazil, look at websites from the world over, it's more important than ever that we understand these things and hold our leaders accountable for the decisions that are being made.

In your life time, wars, disastrous economic recessions, even medical epidemics will be the result of the right or the wrong decisions being made on foreign policy. Already, in your life time, I'm sure there are foreign policy decisions that you believe should have been made differently, and maybe you're right. By understanding how these decisions are made and why they're made, even by just talking to those around you, you can help push these decisions in the right direction.

But to truly understand what's going on, we have to know more. We have to understand what tools policy makers have at hand when they want to move the world in one direction or another.

War, trade, diplomacy, spying. These are all parts of foreign policy. They're all tools that the government has to achieve its aims. But how do they work, how exactly can they be used? Who controls them, what agencies do they run through? Next time that's what we're going to discuss in depth. So join us next time as we discuss the levers that move the world.