

Why is Foreign Policy So Complex?  
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Diplomacy is a very old tradition in the world. The world's first kings 7,000 years ago (Sumeria in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Harappa in today's Punjab) exchanged letters and sent gifts to each other. Warfare then was only local, not international. In 300 AD, the Chinese and Persian emperors exchanged gifts, sponsored a trade route across Asia (Silk Route), and never went to war. Diplomacy in those days was peaceful communications between two great empires.

The rules governing modern diplomacy grew slowly over the centuries. Once, if a king did not like a visiting diplomat's message or gift, the envoy could be executed on the spot. But over time, countries found that giving certain protections to diplomats was to everyone's benefit.

The diplomacy that worked best, of course, was that between countries with a common culture and at least two languages that could be learned. The major job of diplomats was to gather (spy) economic and military information, but also to promote trade and make military alliances that benefitted both countries.

The early American diplomats were a distinguished lot: Thomas Jefferson was sent to France, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams to England and France, and Adams's son, John Quincy, was Jefferson's secretary and later, before his presidency, Ambassador to Russia. Even before we became a nation, the colonies had ambassadors who negotiated with Native American tribes and with some European countries. Diplomats were the eyes and ears of America, and the best among them were also promoters of our system and culture.

As our country grew and international relations became ever more complex, our Department of State and its diplomats had to balance sometimes conflicting goals. Since the end of World War II, those conflicting goals have increased, preventing us from having uniform, comprehensible policies.

I remember talking to a US diplomat serving in Iran whose job was to assist in modernizing Iran's agriculture. He was very frustrated because a US senator from a cotton-growing state secured legislation forbidding the Ag specialist to help Iran's cotton growers. To the Iranians, it appeared hypocritical that we were really there to help them. And they were right.

America's primary diplomatic initiatives have long been in conflict. We have two major goals: the first pragmatic: dealing with the world as it is and negotiating the best arrangements with other countries that we can; or idealistic: the goal of promoting democracy everywhere. This second goal has given us no end to difficulty, although few of us would think it a bad idea. However, we cannot practice it even-handedly in our dangerous world.

World War II was a conflict between two sets of allies: the democratic ones (US and British) and the dictatorships (Germany, Italy, Japan). However, the Western alliance included the USSR, certainly not a democracy but an enemy of Germany. We had to hold our noses and ally with the USSR until the Nazis were defeated. Immediately after that defeat, the USSR became the next enemy, and for very good reasons.

The Cold War was a conflict between Capitalism and Communism. However, we both had client states that were obnoxious: dictatorships, religious fanatics, and kleptocrats who robbed their own people. We needed make pragmatic choices to win this conflict or to at least keep the other side from growing. Our democratic values were often put on the back burner. Dictators are thugs, but ideologues, who brainwash (Communists), do more permanent damage.

We supported religious fanatics (Saudi Arabia), thinking them a bulwark against Communism, rather than pragmatically supporting a modernizing dictatorship such as Iran. Unfortunately, unseating modernizing dictators in Muslim countries (Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Libya) has not resulted in participatory governance. Modernization and pious religion are conflicting systems. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a far worse place than was the Iranian monarchy.

The US and Russia have conflicting views of national development. The Russians believe that modernization comes from the top, and that stability is more important than democracy. They note that when dictators fall, anarchy replaces them. That is usually true, exceptions being our success with South Korea and Taiwan.

Foreign policy has no simple solutions.

683 words

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