

POLI 212

Introduction to International Politics

Session 6– Foreign Policy

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Session Overview

– Overview

This session provides a discussion on foreign policy in a manner that will enhance the understanding of students.

- Foreign policy is one of the key areas in international politics.
- Students will understand that the foreign policies of countries are the objectives or goals countries will like to achieve abroad.
- Many define foreign policy as the strategies country put in place to achieve external objectives.
- The topics to be examined in the session are what is foreign policy, the types of foreign policy, and foreign policy decision units.

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Topic One: Foreign Policy
- Topic Two: Foreign Policy Decision Units in the International System

Reading List

- Bossman E. Asare, 2016. *International Politics: The Beginner's Guide*- Updated and Expanded, Digibooks, Ghana.
- Charles W. Kegley Jr. and Shannon L. Blanton, 2010. *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*, Wadsworth: Cengage Learning.



Topic One

FOREIGN POLICY



Foreign Policy

- Almost all independent countries have two main policies. These are domestic policy and foreign policy. Both domestic policy and foreign policy are public policies of governments.
- Policies generally are the strategies and plans used by governments to accomplish certain objectives. Domestic policies are the techniques or the strategies used by countries to achieve domestic or internal goals. In the same manner, foreign policies are the techniques used by governments to accomplish international or external goals. These strategies are varied.
- Different countries may use different techniques to accomplish the same goals. And, between rich and poor countries, the strategies are likely to be completely different. For instance, rich countries can offer financial assistance to other countries to change certain domestic policies, but many poor countries cannot do that.



Foreign Policy (Contd.)

- In the history of international relations and diplomacy, rich countries and intergovernmental organizations especially have been known to offer certain financial and technical incentives to poor countries to pursue certain policies.
- Presently, many developing countries get financial assistance from the global north countries and intergovernmental organizations to promote democratic governance. In Ghana, most of the financial and technical assistance we get are usually tied to certain projects that are central to donor partners.
- Within countries, there are specific departments or ministries primarily responsible for foreign policy. In Ghana, it is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration; in Nigeria, it is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; in the United Kingdom, it is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Foreign Office); and in the United States, it is the Department of State.

Foreign Policy (Contd.)

- Nonetheless, other government departments and ministries also play a role depending on the foreign policy countries are advancing towards other countries.
- If the policy is about trade, the department or agency responsible for trade will be on board; defense matters and policies that have peacekeeping or war implications will see the department of defense active in the decision making; foreign economic policies usually have finance and treasury departments as the key actors; and foreign agricultural policies rely on the expertise of those in the ministry/department of agriculture to prosecute.
- Chief executives, either Presidents or Prime Ministers/Chancellors, are the main actors responsible for foreign policy in their countries. However, because of the volume of work, chief executives appoint individuals to be in charge of their countries' foreign policies. In countries like the United States, Russia, and the United Kingdom those appointed to be in charge of foreign policy by the chief executives are influential members of the government.

Foreign Policy (Contd.)

- In the United Kingdom, the Foreign Secretary (the person in charge of the foreign office) is one of the prestigious positions in the government.
- In the United States the Secretary of State is the fifth highest ranking official in the federal government. This perhaps explains why Hillary Clinton left the prestigious United States' Senate to become President Barack Obama's Secretary of State. Senator John Kerry also left the US Senate after several years representing the people of Massachusetts to become the Secretary of State.
- In developing countries, however, our focus on economic development has somewhat diminished the importance of those in charge of foreign policy in government. This must be understood from the context that, when countries face numerous domestic economic challenges as it pertains in Ghana and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, it becomes natural for much emphasis to be placed on domestic departments rather than foreign ones.
- Except on few cases, rarely do you hear a developing country giving financial assistance to another country.

Foreign Policy (Contd.)

- Apart from the politicians who lead the foreign ministries, there are career civil servants or bureaucrats who work in general and specific capacities in the various government departments that matter in foreign policy. The Ambassadors/High Commissioners and other diplomatic personnel work under the ministries of foreign affairs in most instances. In fact, some of these civil servants have lots of experience because they have been in these areas for many years.
- In most democratic countries as well as emerging democratic economies like those in sub-Saharan Africa and other emerging economies, many career civil servants do not change with a change of government. Nevertheless, in these same countries alternation of power between political parties is common. Because of this power alternation, some of the people appointed as ministers of foreign policy may not have the requisite expertise and they tend to rely on the career personnel who have been working in the departments.
- If you visit the departments or ministries responsible for foreign policy in several countries, you will see various sections such as the African Bureau or Desk, the European Desk, the Latin American Desk, and the North American or the United States Desk.

Foreign Policy (Contd.)

- In Ghana, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration has several bureaus including Policy Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, Human Resource Development, Finance, Legal and Consular Affairs, Protocol, Multilateral Relations, African and Regional Integration, Americas, Europe, Middle East and Asia, and among others. In all these bureaus, there are people with expertise on the specific regions or countries or policy areas that work there to promote the agenda of the country.
- It is important to stress that, the number of bureaus and policy areas may be influenced by the level of a country's economic development. Once you are elected the president or prime minister or appointed as minister responsible for foreign policy, you will require the expertise in the various desks or bureaus to do your work. This is why politicians in the foreign policy arena do not take the bureaucrats for granted.

Foreign Policy (Contd.)

- When countries are making their foreign policies, they often take **two-level games** into consideration.
- Two-level games mean the need for countries to make foreign policies that meet both domestic and international goals. Often great powers have international obligations which require them to pursue certain policies, and at the same time, they have a discerning domestic public who also expect their countries to promote certain policies.
- As a result of this, countries try to balance the concerns of the domestic public and that of the external public. Most of the economically rich countries give financial assistance to other countries though they still have some levels of poverty in their countries. They frequently try to justify this by telling their people that it is in the national interest for them to do that, particularly for their security and international obligations.
- Primarily, leaders of countries make the effort to ensure that their foreign policies would receive broad acceptance from both the domestic and external environments.

Different types of foreign policy

Countries tend to have several objectives in their foreign policy depending on the other countries that the policies are directed:

- First, foreign policy towards other countries can be **aggressive or hostile**. With this type of foreign policy, countries are confrontational or combative, and not friendly. Specifically, they try, if they can, to punish other countries because of certain things they consider unacceptable. United States foreign policy towards Iran and vice versa for many years until recently, and Israel towards Iran and vice versa, are frequently targeted at punishing the other states.
- During the Cold War, United States foreign policy towards the Soviet Union and her allies was aggressive and at times military force was used by the United States in her endeavor to contain communism. The Soviet Union was equally belligerent in her foreign policy towards western-leaning countries. The Israelis and some Arab States have been inclined to this type of foreign policy due in part to historical and religious reasons. Until recently, India and Pakistan were confrontational towards each other. Broadly, with this type of foreign policy, countries use threats and sometimes force to accomplish their objectives. If they have to intervene militarily they will do that, and if they have to shoot down an airplane, they will do just that.

Different types of foreign policy (Contd.)

- Secondly, foreign policy can be **friendly or pacific** towards other countries or regions of the world. Friendly and pacific foreign policies have the ultimate objective of promoting friendly relations among countries. This type of foreign policy is common among countries that are in the same region of the world or belong to a regional group. Countries that are members of ECOWAS, for example, pursue friendly foreign policies towards one another. Ghana and Nigeria see themselves as one people and consequently they try to maintain harmony at all times in their foreign policies.
- Similarly, in North America, Canada, Mexico and the United States have for many years maintained pacific relations towards one another. Countries that share common historical ties or the same language also promote friendly foreign policies among themselves. For instance, we do not expect the British to be aggressive and hostile in their foreign policies directed at countries such as Canada, Australia, United States, and New Zealand.
- The reason is that these countries see themselves as English at home (United Kingdom) and English abroad (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and United States).

Different types of foreign policy (Contd.)

- Foreign policy can also take the form of **originality and reactionary**. Original foreign policy entails countries trying to accomplish something unique, or making certain fundamental changes, in other countries. Countries that pursue original foreign policies are usually rich and they are ready to commit financial and other resources to make those changes they desire. Some few years ago, the United States committed 15 billion US dollars over five years to fight HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention in Africa.
- This is unique or original because no country has done it before and it was not influenced by any other country. The United States government took a decision that this was the right thing to do. China is investing in several areas in Africa because the resources are there to support such investments.
- Original foreign policies require financial obligations and the implication is that Ghana and several developing countries will be handicapped in this area. Originality further suggests that countries do not depend on other countries before they determine the objectives of their foreign policies.

Different types of foreign policy (Contd.)

- Reactionary foreign policy, on the other hand, means that countries only react to the international system. In other words, there is nothing original about their foreign policies and they mostly depend on what others have said or done before they come up with something. Many developing countries depend on the positions taking by global north countries before they act on several issues.

Sample questions

- Explain the different types of foreign policies in international politics.
- What is two-level games?
- How is foreign policy different from domestic policy?
- Identify the government ministries in Ghana that play a role in foreign policy.

Topic Two

FOREIGN POLICY DECISION UNITS IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM



Foreign policy decision units

- Foreign policy decision units are the actors who make foreign policy decisions for countries. These actors have the authority based on their countries' constitution and other laws to decide on the course of action that should be pursued by their countries. There are three main foreign policy decision units. These are foreign policy decision by a predominant leader, single group, and coalition of autonomous political actors.
- Foreign policy decision making by a **predominant leader or individual** means that in the country there is one person who is that influential and can decide that this is the choice the country will make and consequently the country will go in that direction. This type of decision unit can occur in both democracies and non-democracies.
- In majoritarian democracies, such as Ghana, United States, and Britain where the political system makes it likely that one political party will control both the executive and the legislative branches of government, you can have a predominant leader as president or prime minister who will make foreign policy decisions on behalf of their countries.

Foreign policy decision units (contd.)

- Here, the key issue is that, once the leader says that the country should support this course of action the country will do just that. However, this is much more applicable to autocratic political systems where leaders only have to decree and the institutions will ensure that they comply with the directives of the political head.
- Majoritarian democracy is the type of democracy where losing parties are sidelined in the governance of the country. It is a winner-takes-all system and that the party and candidate that win the majority of the votes will be governing the country.
- Similarly, in the legislature the party that has the majority largely sets the agenda in the house. The predominant leader in a dictatorship or non-democracy is where the leaders in such political systems are the most powerful actors in foreign policy to the extent that they determine what their countries should do or support abroad. In 1991, as a case in point, Saddam Hussein took a personal foreign policy decision to annex Kuwait.

Foreign policy decision units (contd.)

- Hitler personally precipitated World War II with his vision of German global dominance. Contemporarily, leaders like Raul Castro (Cuba) and Kim Jong-Il (North Korea) are widely believed to be the main actors in their countries' foreign policies. The main advantage with this type of decision unit is that decisions can be taken swiftly since the predominant leaders do not have to consult other political actors or go through extensive consultations before they choose a particular course of action. However, the problem is that decisions made by only one person are often prone to a lot of mistakes. This will eventually affect the international standing of their countries.
- Foreign policy decision making by a **single group** occurs when a particular group is responsible for the international decision making of countries. This is called a single group because the individuals who make the decisions for countries have a similar worldview. Put differently, those who make foreign policy decisions see the world in particular way and based on that worldview they make foreign policies for their countries.

Foreign policy decision units (contd.)

- This single group can be in both democracies and autocracies. In majoritarian democracies, an influential president or prime minister can appoint like-minded people into certain key positions, such as defense and foreign affairs (and foreign policy advisors).
- When the leadership of the legislature shares the worldview of the chief executive or the chief executive's party controls the legislature in systems that have strong party discipline, it is easier to have this kind of decision making. Any person who does not share the worldview of the group is sidelined in decision making.
- The United States' decision to go to war in Iraq comes close to a single group decision making. The main actors who made the case for war-George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and Condoleezza Rice were alleged to be in agreement on a number of international issues. Colin Powell, who appeared to disagree on key issues, was alleged to have been sidelined (he was the Secretary of State in the first term of the George W. Bush government).

Foreign policy decision units (contd.)

- In the same manner, in an autocratic or military regime, it is possible that no single individual will be the predominant actor in the political system. You can have about three or four people who will be the key actors for the country. The past military regimes in many sub-Saharan African countries were characterized by this system. Outsiders might think that the military dictator is the one in charge of the foreign policy decision making, but behind the scenes you would have key individuals who must all agree before something could be done.
- The main advantage of this type of foreign policy decision making is that decision making is swift, just like the predominant leader, because the decision makers are like-minded actors and they consult each other to be on the same page before they act. However, the major impediment to this is groupthink.
- Groupthink is the tendency for members of a group to agree with the perspectives of others rather than stating what they believe as the right policies to be pursued. Here, people do not think outside the box. They accept the views of others without subjecting those views to critical analysis. Basically, with groupthink there is no room for dissenting views, as there is always a sense of oneness among members of the group.

Foreign policy decision units (contd.)

- The final type of foreign policy decision making is the **coalition of autonomous political actors**. This coalition is mostly found in consensus democracies in many western European countries and Israel.
- They are autonomous actors because none of them is dependent on the other for her/his political survival. Unlike majoritarian democracies, consensus democracies usually have proportional representation electoral system and several political parties which make it very difficult for any one party to win the majority of the seats in the legislature.
- Proportional representation or what is often called the PR allocates seats to political parties in the legislature based on the percentage of their votes in the elections. After elections, the party that wins the plurality of the votes will form the government, but that party will need the support of other parties to be able to reach the 50% plus one requirement to form government.

Foreign policy decision units (contd.)

- Once other parties join to form government, it becomes a coalition government. These parties join the coalition with their ideologies and other requirements.
- So what you see in consensus democracies is that the cabinet is made up politicians from different political parties.
- For example, the cabinets in Germany, the Netherlands, and Israel have members from different political parties.
- In Germany, the Chancellor (Angela Merkel) is a member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU); there are also ministers from the Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD).
- Because of the diversity in the composition of the cabinet, foreign policy decision making largely reflects consensus.

Foreign policy decision units (contd.)

- The foremost advantage with coalition decision making is that the choice countries make in their foreign policies reflect diverse viewpoints because of the coalition making the decisions.
- This diversity, apart from enriching decision making, ensures that the decision or choice is acceptable to as many people as possible. On the other hand, the major problem is deadlock.
- Deadlock is the difficulty in reaching agreements because there are actors with divergent opinions on the same issues. In times when you expect countries to act swiftly to avert a catastrophe, this type of international decision making can bring untold hardships on countries.

Sample questions

- What is the meaning of foreign policy decision-making by a single group?
- Why is the Coalition of Autonomous political actors decision unit prone to deadlock?
- What is groupthink?

Conclusion of Session Six

- In this session, you have been introduced to foreign policy and foreign policy decision units.
- The session has also discussed the different types of foreign policy countries advance in the international system.
- The next session will look at rational choice and foreign policy and the factors that determine the foreign policy of countries.



References

- Bossman E. Asare, 2016. *International Politics: The Beginner's Guide*- Updated and Expanded, Digibooks, Ghana.
- Charles W. Kegley Jr. and Shannon L. Blanton, 2010. *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*, Wadsworth: Cengage Learning.
- Herman, Margaret (2001) How Decision Units Shape Foreign Policy: A Theoretical Framework, *International Studies Review*, [3 \(2\)](#): 47–81.

