Lecture Outline: Chapter 15

Foreign and Defense Policy

I. The end of the Cold War was highlighted by discussions of a new world order led by the one remaining superpower—the United States. But after the initial euphoria wore off, and following the attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans found themselves facing a renewed sense of insecurity and of vulnerability.

A. American foreign and defense policies have always been sensitive to the nation’s perceived vulnerability to attack or other forms of external threat, and a good deal of U.S. foreign and defense policies can be explained by the myth of vulnerability.

B. The first major manifestation of vulnerability was during the War of 1812, when British troops entered and burned Washington.

C. Until the events of 9/11, Americans felt much less vulnerable, especially as the Cold War ended. But the attacks on American soil rekindled the anxieties and uncertainties underpinning the myth.

II. Our foreign policy has often been a product of this myth.

A. Early in our history, many policymakers supported commercial and trade relations with other nations while avoiding political alliances and maintaining a strong defense system.

B. Until 1914, we maintained a policy of isolation and engaged in unilateral actions; that is, we acted alone in world affairs and avoided political and military alliances. Complementing this was an expansionism that extended American influence on the continent and into the Pacific and Caribbean.

C. Between 1914 and 1960, the United States began to emerge as a world power, engaging in two world wars and a major regional conflict in Korea. By the nuclear age, we began to understand that we could never return to an isolationist position.

D. After World War II, we entered a Cold War characterized by hostile (but still peaceful) relations between Western democracies, led by the United States, and the Eastern bloc nations, led by the Soviet Union—a bipolar world.

E. American foreign policy was marked by containment: long-term patience but firm and vigilant containment of Soviet influence. As part of this policy, we formed strong regional alliances with other nations, in particular, an Atlantic alliance with Western Europe through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

F. By the 1960s, international conditions were rapidly changing, including the emergence of Third World nations and policy disagreements within both the Western and Communist alliances.

G. We then moved from a policy of containment to a policy of deterrence, reflecting a more cooperative approach to dealing with the Soviet bloc nations while enhancing American security arrangements with our allies.

H. The Reagan foreign and military policy reflected more of a containment policy similar to that existing during the Cold War years, although increased nuclear risks and the changing dynamics of world affairs posed major challenges to U.S. policy.

I. As the Cold War ended in 1989, Americans began to rethink their position in the world.

1. The demise of the Soviet Union and the lessons of the Persian Gulf War led to the development of a new foreign and defense approach based on the assumption that the United States remained vulnerable despite the collapse of the Eastern bloc.
2. The four general principles articulated by the first Bush administration included a regional focus on U.S. interests and issues, the maintenance of strong alliances, reliance on joint operations where action is necessary, and retaining the ability of the United States to act alone in a crisis when necessary.

3. The Clinton administration retained the general structure of foreign and defense policies inherited from the Bush administration but placed economic concerns at the top of the list of foreign policy concerns.

4. The second Bush administration initially seemed committed to a more unilateral approach to foreign and defense policies, but the events of September 11, 2001, radically altered that trend and made international affairs a central concern of the nation.

III. Many actors play a central role in influencing U.S. foreign and defense policies.

A. The president’s role in foreign and defense policy is rooted in constitutional powers. The president can make treaties, appoint ambassadors, receive diplomatic representatives, and serve as commander in chief of the armed services. Within the White House, the National Security Council (NSC) serves as an advisory body to the president on foreign and national security affairs.

B. Bureaucratic agencies, including the State Department, the U.S. Department of Defense, and the Central Intelligence Agency, advise the president on the formulation and implementation of traditional foreign and defense policy. The growing emphasis on economic policy in foreign affairs under President Clinton was reflected in the greater roles played by the U.S. trade representative as well as the secretaries of Treasury and Commerce. After 9/11, the Justice Department was more involved in the foreign policy arena than it might otherwise have been, as were the many agencies that eventually became part of the new Department of Homeland Security.

C. Congress influences foreign and defense policy by ratifying treaties, accepting or rejecting presidential appointments to ambassadorships or high-level positions in the foreign policy bureaucracy, legislating (for example, enacting the 1973 War Powers Act), controlling the purse strings, and conducting investigations.

D. The mass media influence foreign and defense policymaking through their news coverage and their ability to raise issues and place them on the public agenda.

E. Interest groups focusing on specific issues—we sometimes call these groups the attentive public—do not play a formal role in the policymaking process but are often highly influential in identifying key issues and setting policy agendas. American Jews and Greek-American organizations have been part of the attentive public influencing U.S. foreign policy in Israel and Greece.

F. Finally, public opinion, when highly motivated and visible to policymakers, influences foreign policy decisions. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as public opinion turned against our involvement in Vietnam, elected officials sought to extricate us from that war. The fear and anxiety that followed the events of 9/11 generated a level of support for the war on terror that was still quite high by the middle of 2003.

IV. Like all nations, the United States uses several diplomatic tools in its relationships with other nations.

A. The recognition or rejection of other nations through diplomatic relations can serve as an important foreign policy tool. In 1979, the United States broke off formal ties with Iran after the American embassy was seized and its employees were taken hostage. With this break came a halt to business ties with that nation.

B. Foreign aid is another major diplomatic tool, generally taking the form of grants or loans of money or supplies to another nation.
C. A third tool of foreign affairs is a **treaty**, a legally binding pact in which two or more nations formalize an economic, social, political, or military agreement reached through negotiation. In recent years, economic treaties and related agreements [for example, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)] have been at the center of debate regarding post-Cold War foreign policy.

D. A final tool for implementing foreign and defense policy is **covert actions**. These are secret actions kept from the public that may involve morally or legally questionable acts taken in the name of national security or legal acts that we wish to keep secret from our enemies (and sometimes even our allies). While the reliance on covert actions was cut back in the 1990s, the events of 9/11 led to more use of such tools and acceptance by policymakers and the public.

V. The ongoing debate over U.S. military and defense policies is a complicated one involving at least two major issues.

A. The first issue is how large our defense budget should be—the **guns-versus-butter debate**. It reflects disagreements between those who believe we need to spend more for defense and those who believe those funds would be better spent on nondefense programs.
   1. Money for increased defense spending can come from three sources: higher taxes, greater government debt, or funds that would otherwise be spent on nondefense programs.
   2. The guns-versus-butter debate was ongoing during the Cold War, with the president and members of Congress alternating between increasing or decreasing defense spending.
   3. The nature of the debate has changed in the post-Cold War era. Throughout the 1990s, the focus was no longer on how much more to spend on defense but how much less.
   4. After 9/11, the debate seemed to be put aside as the need to increase spending for military and domestic security was not questioned.

B. A second major issue revolves around how defense dollars should be spent. In its most extreme form during the height of the Cold War, the debate focused attention on differences between those who supported a nuclear strategy and those who thought we should concentrate on improving our conventional (nonnuclear) forces.
   1. Since the 1950s, when nuclear weapons became a reality, the United States has adopted several strategies for their use. Those strategies have evolved from **massive retaliation** (calling for a large nuclear buildup), to flexible response (emphasizing a nonnuclear, limited war capacity), to **mutual assured destruction** (with each nuclear power holding the other in check by maintaining the ability to annihilate the other).
   2. During the 1980s, the U.S. defense strategy was characterized by attempts to build up both nuclear and nonnuclear forces, with the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) proposal being the most significant policy development under the Reagan administration.
   3. The first Bush administration developed a balanced approach strategy in response to the radically altered international scene of the 1990s. This strategy included maintaining a deterrence force, keeping some U.S. forces abroad as a forward presence, sharpening the crisis response capabilities of those forces, and maintaining the ability to reconstitute units that were being reduced in size.
   4. The Clinton administration adjusted the Bush policies to stress maintaining the military’s ability to fight two major regional conflicts nearly simultaneously. In
addition, the military is increasingly expected to carry out small-scale humanitarian and peacekeeping missions at various “hot spots” in the world. At the same time, the Pentagon has undertaken efforts to modernize the U.S. armed forces.

5. Military strategy shifted significantly after 9/11, and by the middle of 2003 the Bush administration was still adapting its strategies to meet the demands of fighting the war on terror as well as the need to maintain occupation forces in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

VI. American foreign and defense policies have undergone considerable change, moving from a long period of isolationism and unilateralism to that of an active world power. The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the events of 2001 have ushered in new eras of vulnerability. Many of the myths associated with the Cold War—myths about the Soviet Union, China, and other former “enemies”—have now been abandoned, and in their place have come threats of a different kind—threats from economic competition and threats of a terrorist nature. Obviously, the myth of vulnerability remains a powerful influence and will continue to help shape U.S. foreign and defense policies in the foreseeable future.