

Force in US Foreign Policy

What do we mean by force?

Force covers a wide range of actions

- It is the application of military means to the resolution of conflict
- This can vary widely in practice
- At the smallest level it can be the threat of violence against another state
- At the other end, it can be the use of total war to destroy an enemy nation
- In general the use of force is taken to mean the application of military means to implement a policy.

The role of force in foreign policy

Force is threatened much more often than it is actually used

This is a form of deterrence

Force is often threatened to make an opponent understand the seriousness of a matter

When force is used, the level of force is highly variable

The use of force is just one box of tools in the policy tool shed

Who decides on the use of military force?

The constitution provides specific powers to each branch, but the terms were set out as things mattered in the 1790's

Congress

- Declares War
- Ratifies Treaties
- Funds the military

The President

- Commander in Chief
- Broad foreign policy flexibility

In practice, this has meant that the President has had a fairly open hand in military matters

The President makes the decisions and Congress tends to go along, at least for a while

Civil-Military Relations in the United States

The military is fully subservient to civilian rule

The civilian government sets policy

The military is a tool of that policy

The military does act as an interest group, but does not dictate policy

- Budget battles
- Lobbying for policy decisions

Military expertise is important, but can be trumped by the civilian command structure

A brief history of the use of force:

From founding to empire:

The US has a long history of the use of force to protect its interests

- The US fights three major wars (not counting the Civil War) in the 1800's
- The US uses force to subdue the Native American population

The US deploys force to far off lands to protect American interests

- The Barbary Pirates (1801-1815)
- The "Black Ships" in Japan (1854)

All of this was done with a very small professional military and large volunteer mobilization when war begins (the Civil War is the major exception)

By 1900, the US has a large overseas empire (Pacific and Caribbean possessions from Spain)

- There is a need for a much larger military (especially a two ocean Navy)
- There is a deep concern that volunteer armies would not be effective
- The navy gets a major boost, but the army remains small (there is no Air Force yet)

WWI

- The US increases the size of the military, but returns to a small force after the war
- Chemical Weapons arrive

WWII

- The US fully mobilizes for war for the first time: Total War arrives in the US
- The whole US economy is mobilized to fight the war
- Nuclear Weapons arrive

The Cold War

- The US begins to shrink its military as soon as WWII ends
- The Soviet threat halts this process
- The Cold War sees the retention of large military forces by the US and the Soviet Union

The Post Cold War Era

- The US begins a program of drastic shrinkage of its military
- This is more a shrinkage of the numbers of forces, overall spending falls less drastically
- The shift to dependence on reserves for large-scale mobilization

9/11 and after

- The US raises spending on the military
- A return to large-scale overseas missions
- Problem of "boots on the ground" being over-stretched
- No mandate for massive increase in size of military
- Result is major increase in commitments, with no matching increase in troops
- Problem of reserves acting as de facto regular forces

Large scale military conflicts since 1945

The major strategic use of force has been as a deterrent

- The US maintained large numbers of troops to deter the Soviets
- The US built and maintained a large nuclear stockpile to deter Soviet use of nuclear weapons
- The Soviets did the same

The strategy of containment changed us strategic thinking in the US

- Wars were fought to protect the status quo, not to achieve decisive victory

- Decisive victory would alter the status quo and potentially invite a Soviet strategic response

The Korean War

The US political leadership limited the types of weapons and the strategic options of the military commanders:

- No nuclear weapons (McArthur had asked for them, Truman refused)
- No bombing of targets that might potentially widen the war (the bridges on the Yalu river)
- No attacks on North Korean bases in China (and later of Chinese targets in China)

This was the first war fought to hold the status quo rather than to win

The Vietnam War

- This is the height of political constraint
- The political leadership micro-managed the war from Washington D.C.

The lessons of Vietnam

- The US realized that fighting to not lose would likely mean defeat against a determined enemy
- There is a fundamental rethinking of US military and strategic doctrine post-Vietnam
- This largely takes place within the small US military policy community and is largely unnoticed

The Gulf War

The first post-Vietnam war against a serious opponent

- This war has a clear objective: Expel Iraq from Kuwait and destroy as much of the Iraqi military as possible
- The political leadership left the military to find a way to accomplish this if diplomacy failed

This is a limited and achievable objective – and it was successfully achieved

Throughout this period, the basic structure of the US military policy remained the same:

Our enemies were defined as states – powerful or not so powerful, states were the sole focus

During the 1990's more emphasis is placed on looking at actors other than states, but this is mostly lost in the larger debates over budgets and planning.

A handful of people begin speaking loudly about “emerging threats”

Terrorism is the big one