

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY: COLD WAR AND BEYOND

Political Science 345
Portland State University | Spring 2026

Syllabus and Course Schedule

Compiled from the Canvas course export on October 5, 2026.

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Instructor & Contact Information

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY: COLD WAR AND BEYOND

Political Science 345 Portland State University, Spring 2026

INSTRUCTOR

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CONTACT INFORMATION

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Office Hours: Thursday 1:30-3:00 (starting April 9), in person or via Zoom

Course Description

Description

Governments are expected to provide for the security and well being of their citizenry, and both of these functions require governments to engage with states and other actors in international society. That engagement is the stuff of foreign policy. The United States, after World War II, broke with its own history of isolation and became a fully engaged world power. And since the cold war ended in the early 1990s, it has become the predominant and largely unchallenged power, an exceedingly rare occurrence in world history. This course is about these two eras in U.S. foreign policy. Although it is partly a course about the policy process (how policy is made), it is mostly a course about policy content—what policies have the United States adopted toward both friends and rivals, and why?

There are several dimensions to U.S. foreign policy, including diplomacy, national security, economic relations, international order, and humanitarianism. The course addresses all of these dimensions because all have been integral to the rise of American power and reflect the nation's self-image as key player on the world stage. Roughly one-half of the course will be devoted to the cold war and one-half to the period since then.

Learning Objectives

The general objective of this course is to develop the student's capacity to critically examine U.S. foreign policy issues, consider a range of perspectives on these issues, and communicate the results of this analysis to others. These objectives are to be accomplished by exposing students to the history of U.S. foreign policy, contemporary developments in American diplomacy, and concepts from the field of foreign policy analysis. By the end of the term, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate a broad, empirically grounded understanding of U.S. foreign policy by identifying and explaining major issues, episodes, and debates from the early Cold War through the post-Cold War and post-9/11 eras. Apply this knowledge to interpret contemporary developments in American diplomacy and external engagement.
- Analyze the competing worldviews and grand strategies that have shaped U.S. responses to opportunities and challenges in international affairs. Evaluate how different strategic orientations inform choices about alliances, military intervention, economic statecraft, and efforts to construct and maintain international order.
- Describe and assess the basic functioning of the principal organizations and institutions involved in the U.S. foreign policy process, including the presidency, Congress, the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and relevant bureaucratic and advisory bodies. Explain how their interactions, procedures, and incentives influence policy outcomes.
- Develop and articulate coherent, well-reasoned positions on key normative debates arising from the pursuit of American interests overseas, such as the use of force, democracy promotion, human rights, and the tension between national interests and global responsibilities. Support these positions with evidence drawn from historical cases, scholarly arguments, and contemporary policy controversies.

Assignments and Assessment

Weekly Assignments

Students are assigned, on a weekly basis, three kinds of work: (i) reading, (ii) video, and (iii) mini-lectures.

Readings . Assigned reading comes from the course textbook:

- Joyce P. Kaufman, *A Concise History of U.S. Foreign Policy* , sixth edition (Bloomsbury, 2026)

It is also available as an Ebook. In addition to the assigned chapters in the textbook, you should be reading, on a regular basis, some newspaper that provides thorough coverage of international affairs and U.S. foreign policy (e.g., the New York Times or the Washington Post). I may occasionally add an article from the news to your assigned reading for the week.

Video . All assigned videos include URLs. Where a time range is provided (e.g., 5:45- 42:30), you need not watch the entire video, but only the specified portion. For the best results, you may need to link to the site from a new window in your browser.

Mini-lectures . These are relatively brief “lectures” of the type I would normally deliver in the on-campus version of this course, but transcribed -- sometimes with screenshots from PowerPoint presentations -- for your reading. For most topics, there are three of these per week. A link will take you to a Word file, which you may then download or read online.

Assessment

Course grades are based on two midterm exams, covering weeks 1-3 (30%) and weeks 4-6 (30%), and a final exam covering weeks 7-10 (40%). Each midterm exam consist of 15 multiple choice questions and one essay question; the final exam consists of 25 multiple choice and one essay. See the Organization and Course Calendar section of the syllabus on the timing of the quizzes and exams. Do you want to know how I grade ?

Discussion

The course includes a General Discussion Forum , which is open for comments and debate on any topic related to U.S. foreign policy that might arise during the term, whether or not it is explicitly covered in the course material. Items appearing in the news may be especially pertinent topics for discussion. As your instructor, I may occasionally weigh in on the discussion, but my preference is for this to remain primarily a forum for students.

Participation in this discussion forum is not a requirement, but students who are especially active and insightful with their posts may receive a small bump in their course grades.

Students are always welcome to discuss matters with me (in person or by telephone) during my office hours. See Instructor and Contact Information . This is the best way to engage in lengthier substantive discussions about topics in U.S. foreign policy. I am also happy to field briefer questions by email, as well as anything having to do with the logistics of the course itself.

Courtesy, Conduct, and Resources

Academic dishonesty . Students are responsible for being familiar with the PSU Code of Student Conduct and Responsibility , especially the section concerning academic misconduct -- that is, plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty. If you are unsure of the definition or consequences of academic misconduct, please consult with me.

Use of Generative AI tools . Using tools to check and correct your own writing (built-in spelling and grammar checkers or third-party tools like Grammarly) is different from using generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools to create content or structure in response to your prompts (like ChatGPT). In your work for this course, use of the first sort of tool is encouraged, while use of the second sort of tool is subject to the following limitations: Using generative AI to complete written assignments, including examinations, is not permitted. However, you may use these tools to study, help conduct research, or brainstorm ideas and arguments. The use generative AI tools outside these parameters qualifies as academic misconduct . If you are uncertain about the allowable use of generative AI in the course, please consult with me in advance.

Discrimination . PSU's policies require faculty members to report any instance of sexual harassment, sexual violence, or other forms of prohibited discrimination. If you would rather share information about these experiences with an employee who does not have these reporting responsibilities and can keep the information confidential, please contact a confidential advocate (503.725.5672 or online) or another confidential employee listed on the sexual misconduct resource webpage .

Disabilities. If you have, or think you may have, a disability that may affect your work in this class and feel you need accommodations, contact the Disability Resource Center to schedule an appointment and initiate a conversation about reasonable accommodations. The PSU CARES Team, hosted by the Dean of Student Life, is available to consult with you regarding any issues of students in distress, including sexual misconduct.

Organization & Course Calendar

Course Content

The content of the course is organized into ten modules corresponding to the ten weeks of class during winter term. Each module addresses a broad topic in U.S. foreign policy during and after the cold war. Modules become available to students on the Friday before the week they are scheduled, and remain available until the end of the term.

As described in Assignments and Assessment , course content is conveyed through readings, videos, and mini-lectures. For each week/module, separate files list the specific assignments for each of these categories. In addition, you are required to take two timed midterm exams, at the end of weeks/modules 3 and 6, and a final exam at the end of the term.

Course Calendar

The topics covered by each module are listed below, along with the latest date that the full module will become available:

- Week 1: America in the World: Concepts and Actors (29 Mar)
- Week 2: Prelude to the Cold War: From Isolationism to Engagement (29 Mar)
- Week 3: Containment and the Periphery (29 Mar)
- Week 4: Détente and Renewed Confrontation (13 Apr)
- Week 5: End of the Cold War (13 Apr)
- Week 6: The Post-Cold War "New World Order" (13 Apr)
- Week 7: Global War on Terror and Power Recalibration (4 May)
- Week 8: Retrenchment, Multilateralism, and New Challenges (4 May)
- Week 9: Resurgent Populism and Great-Power Rivalry (4 May)
- Week 10: Evolving Threats: States, Climate, Pandemics, AI (4 May)

Quizzes and Exams

Each midterm covers three weeks/modules of course material. The midterms are to be started after 8:00 am on Friday and before 5:00 pm on Monday. They are timed -- 75 minutes -- and Canvas will enforce the time limit. The final exam covers the last four weeks/modules of course material. It is a timed 2-hour exam and is also to be started after 8:00 am on Friday of week 10 and before 5:00 pm on Wednesday of finals week.

The exams may not be repeated; you get one shot. My advice is to complete the assignments and study prior to commencing a quiz or exam. Although you will obviously have access to the course materials while answering the questions, the imposed time limits will limit your ability to consult the assigned readings, videos, and lectures for assistance. This is especially true when it comes to the essay portions.

The exam schedule is as follows:

- Midterm Exam 1 : Weeks 1-3 (29 Mar to 18 Apr)
- Midterm Exam 2 : Weeks 4-6 (19 Apr to 9 May)
- Final Exam : Weeks 7-10 (10 May to 6 Jun)

Detailed Weekly Course Schedule

The following schedule summarizes the ten weekly Canvas modules and the major examinations. Multiple readings and mini-lectures are shown as separate bullet points for ease of reference.

Week 1 - America in the World: Concepts and Actors

We introduce core concepts in U.S. foreign policy, including national interests, instruments of power, and the distinction between policy content and process. We also examine America's national style, shaped by history, political culture, geography, and competing impulses toward restraint and moral mission.

Readings

- Kaufman ch. 1: "Setting the Stage for Understanding U.S. Foreign Policy."

Video/Documentary

Crucible of Empire: The Spanish-American War . PBS, 1999.

Mini-lectures

- Topic 1A: Foreign Policy Concepts
- Topic 1B: America's "National Style"

Week 2 - Prelude to the Cold War: From Isolationism to Engagement

We trace U.S. foreign policy from the late 19th century through World War II, focusing on expansion, wars with Spain and Mexico, and shifting attitudes toward international engagement. We examine how economic and security interests propelled the United States from relative isolation to emerging superpower.

Readings

- Kaufman, ch. 3 : "From Isolationism to Superpower: The Interwar Years through World War II, 1920-1945."
Optional background reading -- ch. 2: "Unilateralism to Engagement: The Founding to the End of World War I, 1777-1920"
- Optional background reading -- ch. 2: "Unilateralism to Engagement: The Founding to the End of World War I, 1777-1920"

Video/Documentary

A World Without War . Episode 7 of The War , by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, PBS, 2006. Access via PSU Library.

Mini-lectures

- Topic 2A: Economic Institution Building
- Topic 2B: U.S.-Soviet Relations before the Cold War
- Topic 2C: How to Contain Soviet Influence?

Week 3 - Containment and the Periphery

We explore competing explanations for the Cold War's origins and the emergence of containment as the central U.S. strategy. Using early crises, including the Berlin and Cuban Missile episodes, we consider how policymakers defined threats, weighed risks, and navigated superpower rivalry.

Readings

- Kaufman, ch. 4: "The Making of a Superpower: The Evolution of U.S. Cold War Policy, 1945-1968."

Video/Documentary

- Iron Curtain 1945-1947. Episode 2 of Cold War , CNN, 1998.
- Cold War Roadshow. American Experience, PBS, 2014.

Mini-lectures

- Topic 3A: Nuclear Strategy during the Cold War
- Topic 3B: Cuban Missile Crisis and Decision Making
- Topic 3C: Superpower Competition in the Third World

Assessment: Midterm Exam 1 - covers weeks 1-3. Canvas course calendar: March 29-April 18.

Week 4 - Détente and Renewed Confrontation

We examine how the Cold War spread beyond Europe into Asia, Latin America, and the developing world. Focusing on Vietnam, détente, and U.S.-China rapprochement, we analyze debates over overextension, linkage, and the costs of pursuing ideological and strategic goals on the periphery.

Readings

- Kaufman, ch. 5: "The Cold War Continued: Nixon through Reagan, 1969-1989."

Video/Documentary

Hearts and Minds , by Peter Davis, The Criterion Collection, 1974. Accessible via PSU Library. Film is captioned; no transcript is available.

Mini-lectures

- Topic 4A: Détente and Linkage
- Topic 4B: Human Rights Front and Center
- Topic 4C: The Second Cold War

Week 5 - End of the Cold War

We assess the limits and decline of détente, the "second Cold War" of the Reagan era, and the forces that contributed to the Soviet collapse. Attention is given to arms control, nuclear strategy, human rights, and the role of ideas, leadership, and domestic politics in ending the conflict.

Readings

- Jeremi Suri, "Explaining the End of the Cold War: A New Historical Consensus?" Journal of Cold War Studies 2002 (Fall): 60-92. Optional

Video/Documentary

- Détente 1969-1975. Episode 16 of Cold War , CNN, 1998.
- Star Wars 1981-1988. Episode 22 of Cold War , CNN, 1998.

Mini-lectures

- Topic 5A: Soviet Conciliation
- Topic 5B: Revolutions of 1989
- Topic 5C: Cold War Ends (Soviet Union, too)

Week 6 - The Post-Cold War "New World Order"

We analyze U.S. foreign policy in the immediate post-Cold War era, from the Gulf War to humanitarian interventions and NATO expansion. We consider debates over a "new world order," American primacy, and the challenges of managing ethnic conflict, globalization, and institution-building in a unipolar system.

Readings

- Kaufman, ch. 6: "The Period of American Hegemony: Bush-Clinton-Bush-Obama, 1989-2017."

Video/Documentary

- After the Wall: A World United . PBS, 2011.
- NATO: Old Friends, New Fronts . DW, 2024. Program is captioned; no transcript is available.

Mini-lectures

- Topic 6A: American Primacy
- Topic 6B: Reorienting American Policy
- Topic 6C: American Unilateralism

Assessment: Midterm Exam 2 - covers weeks 4-6. Canvas course calendar: April 19-May 9.

Week 7 - Global War on Terror and Power Recalibration

We study the foreign policy consequences of 9/11, including the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the Bush Doctrine, and counterterrorism at home and abroad. We then examine efforts to recalibrate U.S. commitments, highlighting the dilemmas of withdrawal, burden-sharing, and managing regional turbulence.

Readings

- Jonny Hall, "The War on Terror and the Victory Trap." Foreign Policy Analysis 20 (July 2024).

Video/Documentary

America After 9/11 . Frontline, PBS, 2021.

Mini-lectures

- Topic 7A: Neoconservatism and Foreign Policy
- Topic 7B: Post-9/11 American Strategy
- Topic 7C: Justifying the Iraq War -- and Losing the Peace

Week 8 - Retrenchment, Multilateralism, and New Challenges

We investigate how rising nationalism and skepticism of multilateralism reshaped U.S. foreign policy. Trade conflicts, alliance tensions, and changing approaches to international institutions illustrate broader strains on the liberal order and raise questions about economic security and global leadership.

Readings

- Kaufman, ch. 7: "Trump to Biden to Trump: 2017 to the Present," pp. 271-314.

Video/Documentary

Clash of the Superpowers: America vs China. Part 1 and Part 2 . BBC, 2026. Transcript for Part 1. Transcript for Part 2.

Mini-lectures

- Topic 8A: Donald Trump's "America First" Policy
- Topic 8B: Trump's Trade Wars
- Topic 8C: From "America First" to America's Back"

Week 9 - Resurgent Populism and Great-Power Rivalry

We explore how contemporary populism and renewed great-power competition intersect in U.S. policy toward Europe, Russia, and China. Topics include sanctions, tariffs, security commitments, and the politics of democracy promotion, highlighting tensions between strategic pragmatism and ideological agendas.

Readings

- Kaufman, ch. 7: "Trump to Biden to Trump: 2017 to the Present," pp. 314-334.

Video/Documentary

Remaking the Middle East . Frontline, PBS, 2026.

Mini-lectures

- Topic 9A: U.S. Leadership, NATO, and the War in Ukraine
- Topic 9B: Populism and the Trump 2 National Security Strategy
- Topic 9C: Populism, Sovereignty, and the Liberal Order

Week 10 - Evolving Threats: States, Climate, Pandemics, and AI

We shift from regions and eras to cross-cutting threats: rival states, global health crises, climate change, and artificial intelligence. We evaluate how these challenges test U.S. institutions, alliances, and ideas about security, and consider alternative strategies for managing risk in a changing world.

Readings

- Kaufman, ch. 8: "Dealing with Threats."

Video/Documentary

China's COVID Secrets . Frontline, PBS, 2121.

Mini-lectures

- Topic 10A: War with Iran as a Systemic Shock
- Topic 10B: Climate and Pandemics as Threat Multipliers
- Topic 10C: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of National Power

Assessment: Final Exam - covers weeks 7-10. Canvas course calendar: May 10-June 6.