

Tools of the Trade: War and Peace

Last time we covered economic options in foreign policy. Now, let's talk about military options. War has been called both “the continuation of politics by other means” and “the ultimate failure of diplomacy”. But however you view it, it is the last resort of nations. Of all the foreign policy options we're going to talk about today, war is the most costly and the most extreme.

We're not going to dwell too long on war here, because it's a path that nations turn to only when they can't find a more efficient option. Even the most famous warmongers in history preferred to cow their opponents into surrender or annex territory through crafty diplomacy than to actually send men into battle. The only thing to know here is that the threat of war can be a powerful thing diplomatically, but it is also the riskiest gambit available as there's little backing down from such a threat after you've made it.

But war isn't the only military option. In the 20th century, covert military options started to become a common tool of state. So what is a covert military action? It can range from intelligence operations, to supporting insurgent groups trying to overthrow the current government of a nation, to, in the most extreme cases, assassinations.

These efforts can result in the very direct and very rapid achievement of foreign policy goals, but they're basically always illegal. Getting caught in these things looks terrible internationally, does irreparable damage to any negotiations taking place, and, as they often involve working with less than reputable groups within the country you're trying to change, even short term success in covert actions can lead to long term trouble. For example, the US arming of the mujahedeen in Afghanistan, which later formed the core of Al Qaeda, or our overthrow of the Mohammed Mosaddeq in Iran.

Finally, there are alliances. Formal military alliances serve both to tie nations together with a bond of good will and to act as a deterrent for other nations who wish to act against them. Sometimes admittance into an alliance structure is simply meant to strengthen the alliance and all nations in it, but at other times, it's simply to declare formal protection of a nation seen as being part of the sphere of influence or within the national interests of the members of the alliance, and to tell other countries to back off. For example, after the cold war, the US and Europe brought many of the Eastern European countries into NATO, even though they weren't major powers at the time, to prevent them from being

dominated by a resurgent Russia in the future.

Lastly, we have the humanitarian options. While we'd love to think of ourselves as simply altruists, giving aid to other nations out of pure goodwill, very often there are foreign policy goals behind how we give. Now, much of what the US gives in aid is actually military aid to help strengthen regimes that share our strategic goals or to serve as a bribe to get regimes on our side, but we also provide a sizable amount of resources to other countries to help with economic development and to provide poverty and disaster relief.

So first let's talk about economic development. The poorer a country is, the more likely it is to be unstable. Conversely, the more people feel content with their lives and the more their material needs are met, the less likely they are to radicalize or to revolt, so providing economic aid actually helps secure our strategic interests. But more than that, if the US can help countries rise from poverty, it can not only foster goodwill within those countries but also help shape the way those countries grow, ensuring that they follow the "American" model, becoming capitalist democracies much in the mode of the United States. Which, in turn, makes all future interactions easier and makes us more likely to be aligned in the future. Thus, the US offers financial support to other countries to help them build up roads, power plants and infrastructure as well, as provide training on business and governmental practice that will help move a nation out of poverty.

But this sort of development doesn't just happen by the US shipping money over to a country and hoping that it will go toward development. Rather, it involves US personnel working closely with members of the government in the developing country, and thus building strong ties and opening up channels of communication with them for the years to come.

Beyond economic development aid though, there's also disaster and poverty relief. These are some of the most visible things a nation can do to inspire goodwill. Disaster relief comes in times of crisis, helping feed and house those who have been displaced by the crisis...and eventually helping them rebuild. But disaster aid doesn't only come in the wake of a natural disaster, more often it comes after human disasters such as war.

Poverty aid, on the other hand, is more ongoing. To the very poorest nations, the US not only provides help with economic developments but also assists with basic necessities such as food,

healthcare and even schooling, hopefully ensuring a modicum of stability within the region.

Unfortunately, aid is one of the hardest things to get passed domestically, as convincing people we should be giving away money to groups overseas when there's so much that needs to be done here is always a controversial proposition and one which a person's political opponents can always make hay out of.

But there you go: the three basic foreign policy tools and what they do. I know that was a lot to process, but hopefully you'll get to put it into practice next time you switch on the news. There's just one more thing to go over: who actually is in charge of making all this happen? I mean, when you want to embargo a country, how exactly do you get that done? Join us next time to find out!