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On Foreign Policy, Americans See Chaos and Want Engagement that Serves US Interests

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Takeaways

1. Focus group participants across five groups believe that US foreign policy is on the wrong track, and the Trump Administration's approach is unpredictable, incoherent, and at times, embarrassing.
2. Global alliances and American world leadership are essential, but must be firmly rooted in American self-interest. Voters think that allies need to pull their weight, and that America has been too eager to solve other nations' problems instead of tending to our own.
3. Voters think Republicans are decisive while Democrats are overly cautious, even as they credit Democrats' efforts at diplomacy and alliances and disapprove of Trump's handling of foreign policy.
4. China is a competitor, not an enemy.
5. America's recent wars are seen as a failure of judgment by American leaders.
6. While these focus groups did not probe participants about specific conflicts, Israel and Gaza came up infrequently throughout, and when it did, it was cited as evidence that Democrats and Republicans operate similarly on foreign policy. These focus groups were conducted before the military strikes in Iran.

Right now, Americans are living through a remarkably dense foreign policy news cycle. Even before the war in Iran, in the span of a year, Americans have seen fluctuating tariff policies, military action in places like Venezuela and the Middle East, fluid relationships with both allies and adversaries, and ongoing public conversations about acquiring sovereign nations. These events are not unfolding in isolation. For Americans they accumulate and create a sense that US foreign policy is active on many fronts at once, but without a clear through-line.

To better understand how Americans are processing this moment, we partnered with Impact Research to conduct a series of focus groups. Fielded February 3-4, 2026, before the outbreak of hostilities in Iran, these groups included a total of 34 swing voters nationwide

from non-college white men (ages 25-55), college-educated white women (55-75), black men (25-55), non-college white women (35-65), and college-educated white men (25-55).

Our goal was to hear directly from voters about how they're interpreting the current direction of US foreign policy. Below, we outline key insights from these conversations.

Voters See Chaos on the World Stage

Across all five groups, participants described American foreign policy as fundamentally headed in the wrong direction. Their concern was not limited to any single decision or controversy, but rather reflected a broader unease about how the US is conducting itself internationally, and what that conduct signals about the steadiness and credibility of American leadership. Many described a country that appears poorly managed on the world stage: reactive rather than strategic, inconsistent in its commitments, and drifting away from our long-standing allies.

There is a persistent assumption in Washington that foreign policy is too distant or too complex for most Americans to follow closely. Our focus groups suggest that while Americans are more focused on issues at home, many foreign policy issues do break through. Participants across all five groups were aware and had opinions on what was happening around the world. Beyond widely reported events—such as military action in Venezuela or discussions about acquiring Greenland—college-educated participants voluntarily referenced NATO, the BRICS nations, and the World Economic Forum in Davos. They discussed topics like Ukraine, Taiwan, and competition with China with baseline familiarity and an intuitive grasp of the stakes in each.

While topics like Israel and Gaza occupy an outsized role in Democratic debates, they did not emerge organically in most of the conversations. These focus groups did not probe participants about specific conflicts. When Israel and Gaza was mentioned, participants were not debating the details of the conflict, but rather, citing it as evidence that Democrats and Republicans tend to approach foreign policy in similar ways.

What stood out, however, was not participants' awareness of international events but rather the conclusions they drew from them. Instead of thinking about these as isolated incidents, participants interpreted them as evidence of broader instability in US leadership. To them, such unpredictability is a sign of weakness, not strength.

Strength At Home Before Strength Abroad

Participants across each group agreed the United States should focus on its own problems before taking on new responsibilities abroad, with issues such as inflation, homelessness, healthcare, education, and job security coming up repeatedly. To many, foreign aid and international commitments feel harder to justify when communities at home are struggling.

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“It’s time to look inward. Not to say that we shouldn’t have a presence in the world, but it shouldn’t be our dominant focus. Our focus should be on us. It should be our own physical and mental health as a nation.”

- **White, non-college-educated man, aged 25-55.**

Importantly, this emphasis on domestic priorities did not translate into isolationism. Participants supported the US continuing to play a role in shaping global outcomes, particularly when it comes to responding to apparent human rights abuses and promoting democratic values abroad. They largely supported our relationships with traditional allies, viewing them as force multipliers that strengthen American security and help stabilize the world, ultimately making it easier for us to focus on challenges at home.

At the same time, many participants were explicit that US foreign policy should be more clearly rooted in American self-interest. They want the US to prioritize tangible benefits for Americans, ensure our allies contribute their fair share, and avoid entering conflicts that offer no visible gains for Americans.

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“Securing relations that will allow us to focus on us. We’ve taken care of the world for two hundred and fifty years. It’s time for us to be a little selfish about us.”

- **White, non-college-educated man, aged 25-55.**

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“We spent a lot of time investing in other countries, and we stopped watering our own grass at this point. We really need to start watering our own grass and investing in our people if we want to see the benefits of this cut we’re growing. I think we lost sight of that.”

- **Black man, aged 25-55.**



“Monetarily wise, each country does need to pull its weight”

- **White, college-educated woman, 55-75.**

Pro-Military, Not Pro-War

After two decades defined by war in the Middle East, Americans have little appetite for another military conflict. Participants respect and support the US military. But most see military escalation as a failure of judgment, not a sign of strength. Diplomacy should always be the first tool of American power, and military action was consistently described as a last resort, justified only in the case of a direct threat to the US.



“It should be diplomacy first. And if things turn violent, then military.”

- **White, non-college-educated woman, 35-65.**

That wariness extended to the idea of a draft, with participants across every demographic rejecting the idea outright. Many, however, argued that the nature of modern conflict has fundamentally changed, with drones and other advanced technologies defining future conflicts more than large-scale troop deployments. The idea of sending a generation of Americans into prolonged wars felt unnecessary and deeply unpopular.





“There’s a pretty large consensus amongst people that we spent a lot of time in the last twenty years just going into wars, wasting a lot of money that we really didn’t need to waste, and deploying soldiers for far too long. Specifically in Iraq, Afghanistan.”

- **Black man, 25-55**



“I don’t want war. I have grandchildren. I don’t want to think about that.”

- **White, college-educated woman, 55-76.**

China is a Competitor, Not an Enemy

Participants were uniformly wary of China, but most described it as a competitor that acts aggressively in pursuit of its own interests rather than an outright enemy. They were less concerned with a military confrontation with China and more with China gradually eroding America’s economic and strategic advantages on the world stage. (This posture aligns with [previous Third Way polling](#).)

Participants repeatedly pointed to China’s ability to produce goods at dramatically reduced cost, leaving the US and the broader global economy dependent on Chinese manufacturing. But they recognized the US cannot disengage entirely. Some described collaboration with China as a “necessary evil.”



“I’m all for manufacturing moving back to America. But for the time being, I think it’s better to be frenemies rather than complete enemies.”

- **Black man, 25-55**

Technological collaboration, however, was a clear red line for many participants. Concerns about intellectual property theft and cybersecurity threats surfaced repeatedly, with

participants articulating a clear understanding of how deeply embedded digital systems are in daily life and US infrastructure.

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"There is absolutely nothing you can't do without the Internet, without cybersecurity. There's nothing you can do without it. Nothing. Traffic lights are computerized. It would completely blow this country up."

- **White, non-college-educated woman, 35-65.**

While some participants acknowledged that a military conflict with China *could be* conceivable over the next few decades, few saw it as likely. Most anticipated a proxy-style conflict or cyberwar rather than a large-scale troop deployment.

Many participants understood that Taiwan could become a flashpoint in US-China relations –and were aware of Taiwan's central role in semiconductor manufacturing and global supply chains broadly. Although they recognized the risks of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, that concern did not translate into support for the US directly intervening.

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"I stand on it. They attack us? That's when we attack back. Regardless of who they're fighting or why they're fighting them, if it doesn't affect us, we need to stay out of it."

- **White, non-college-educated woman, aged 35-65.**

The Party Paradox

Participants across all five groups were clear that they were unhappy with the current direction of US foreign policy and viewed the Trump Administration's approach as reckless. And yet, when asked which party they trust more to handle foreign policy and national security issues, Republicans still held an edge over Democrats.

Participants did not consistently separate the Republican Party from the Trump Administration. While some criticized Trump's brash tone and ego, many also saw the

Party as largely aligned his approach. Others insisted that his approach did not fully represent the broader priorities of the Republican Party.

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“Trump has a style issue. It’s the way he comes off. It’s very different than some other Republicans who don’t come off that way.”

- **White, college-educated woman, 55-75**

Participants viewed Republicans as more decisive and more willing to act overall, particularly when it came to pressing our allies to shoulder more of the burden. Even those who disliked Trump’s harsh diplomatic approach liked his insistence that Europe contribute more financially to its collective defense. Democrats, by contrast, were seen as more diplomatic, more measured, and less impulsive. Participants credited Democrats with maintaining strategic alliances and supporting democratic values, like human rights, abroad.

Such diplomatic posturing was viewed as stabilizing, but participants also felt it to be overly cautious. They described Democrats as too comfortable funding international aid and other foreign engagements without sufficient scrutiny, clear conditions, or visible benefits for Americans.

Underlying this divide is an instinct around self-interest. Americans want a foreign policy that puts American economic and security interests first. They might not like how the current administration is executing that approach, but they trust Republicans more than Democrats to pursue it earnestly. The result is a trust gap.

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“I don’t think that’s necessarily equitable if one country is contributing so much more than the other.”

- **White, college-educated man, 25-55**

Leading Abroad Starts At Home

We tested different frames of America’s role in the world. The most effective messages were those that put American interests front and center, including arguments that directly tied foreign policy to economic security, US manufacturing, and technological leadership. When foreign policy was presented as directly benefiting Americans, rather than as moralistic or abstract, it became more persuasive. Our top-performing message:

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“Our foreign policy should protect Americans and help our economy. We need to treat economic security like national security by bringing key manufacturing back home, staying ahead in new technologies like AI, and working closely with our allies to stand up to Russia and China, protect American technology, and keep the world safer and more stable.”

More hawkish framing, on the other hand, struggled to resonate, with participants noting the language was overly aggressive and reductive. Overall, participants rejected rhetoric that equated American strength with military escalation.

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“The United States can’t step back from the world while our enemies grow stronger. We need to stay strong, support our military, and stand up to threats as they arise. Weakness invites aggression, so we must back our allies, hold Russia and China accountable, and use all our tools to defend freedom and democracy abroad.”

Participants were also open to the case for alliances, but only when they were framed less as commitments we owe the world and more as tools that make the US stronger and more competitive. Participants had a common sense perspective that Trump’s bullying of foreign partners could come back to bite us.

The Bottom Line

When it comes to foreign policy, Americans are not calling for a retreat of US leadership, but they are demanding a reset. Americans are increasingly unwilling to support global engagement that feels untethered from priorities at home. What they want is a foreign

policy that is more explicitly self-interested—protects American jobs, secures key supply chains, and strengthens national security.

For now, Americans default to Republicans on foreign policy, even as they remain frustrated by the volatility and theatrics of the current administration. But this tension creates an opening for Democrats to present a vision of decisive American leadership that is value-driven, aligned with our friends, and provides concrete economic and security benefits at home.

Methodology

Third Way partnered with Impact Research to conduct a series of focus groups on February 3-4, 2026, across a total of 34 swing voters nationwide from non-college white men (ages 25-55), college-educated white women (55-75), black men (25-55), non-college white women (35-65), and college-educated white men (25-55).
