



Study Group on “U.S. Diplomacy: From Policy to Practice”
Laurel Rapp, Senior Fellow, Watson School of International and Public Affairs
Spring 2026

Dates: Five 90-minute gatherings across two weeks in March and April.

The study group will convene from 1-2:30pm on Monday, March 2; Tuesday, March 3; Thursday, March 5; Monday, April 13; and Tuesday, April 14. Optional office hours will be offered from 2:30-4:30pm those days.

Focus: Considering a career in diplomacy? Hoping to gain insight into how foreign policy is made beyond the scenes? Aiming to influence large institutions often resistant to change?

This study group seeks to answer these questions by exploring the practice of diplomacy in the United States’ national security toolkit. It draws on perspectives from senior policy practitioners, primary sources from government, as well as scholarship from think tanks and academia. Participants explore the unique capabilities and limitations of diplomacy, the interplay between domestic politics and U.S. foreign policy, and the future of diplomacy.

Students interested in learning more about the actors and institutions that shape foreign policy (session 1), US grand strategy (session 2), influence within large organizations (session 3), economic diplomacy (session 4), reforms of diplomatic institutions to meet 21st century challenges (session 5), and careers in diplomacy (session 6) are encouraged to attend.

Structure and Expectation: At least half of each class will be dedicated to open conversation about concepts covered in the opening remarks and readings. Participants are expected to attend each session and come prepared to engage with the assigned reading material.

Session 1 (Monday, March 2; 1-2:30pm) – Inside the Machine: Washington's Foreign Policy-Making

A major foreign policy announcement from the President of the United States – whether in the form of a new trade deal, a ceasefire agreement, or a new approach to an historic adversary – typically represents the final stage in a lengthy, behind-the-scenes policy debate. Senior political officials, U.S. diplomats, members of the intelligence community, and beyond have likely spent months developing options, mitigating risks, and outlining an implementation roadmap. This session focuses on the major players in Washington policymaking – from the State Department to the interagency to Congress – their distinct institutional cultures, the role of domestic politics, and Americans’ view of diplomacy. It explores when and why decisionmakers circumvent this process, and how President Trump’s first year back in office has fundamentally changed the way Washington works.

Discussion questions:

- Who makes US foreign policy, and how has this power shifted over time?

Required reading:

- [“How Congress and the President shape US foreign policy.”](#) Briefing from European Policy Research Center, March 2017.
- Neumann, Ronald. [“Demystifying the Interagency Process and Explaining the Ambassador’s Role.”](#) *InterAgency Journal*, Summer 2015.

Optional reading:

- Goldsmith, Jack and Bob Bauer. [“Trump’s Impact on Executive Power, Eleven Months in.”](#) American Enterprise Institute, 18 December 2025.

Session 2 (Tuesday, March 3; 1-2:30pm) – Crafting a Grand Strategy: America's National Security Blueprints

All major foreign policy decisions are informed by foundational strategies – or at least should be. The National Security Strategy (NSS), published within the first year of each Presidential term, is the United States’ primary strategy document from which diplomatic strategy flows. The NSS is an Administration’s public articulation of how its views core U.S. interests, its national security goals, and its plan to achieve these objectives, drawing on the full suite of U.S. military, economic, and diplomatic power. This session delves into the formulation of the NSS and other major strategy documents, agencies’ roles in their implementation, and major differences across recent NSSes – focusing particularly on President Trump’s December 2025 strategy and its stark departure from past models. It also explores best practice in policy planning and the recent forms it has taken within the U.S. government.

Discussion question:

- If you were writing the next National Security Strategy, what three elements would you highlight?

Required reading:

- DuMont, Malia. [“Elements of National Security Strategy.”](#) *Atlantic Council Strategy Consortium*, 28 Feb. 2019.
- White House. [National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#). Dec. 2025.

Optional reading:

- Chin, John, et al. [“Understanding National Security Strategies Through Time.”](#) *Texas National Security Review*, vol. 6, no. 4, Fall 2023, pp. 103-124. (*Read introduction, “How are National Security Strategies Organized?”*)
- Rapp, Laurel. [“Trump’s new National Security Strategy: Cut deals, hammer Europe, and tread gently around autocrats.”](#) Chatham House, 9 December 2025.

- [“Breaking down Trump’s National Security Strategy.”](#) Brookings Institution, 8 December 2025.
- White House. [National Security Strategy](#). Oct. 2022. (*Read pgs. 1-13)

Session 3 (Thursday, March 5; 1-2:30pm) – Being the Change We Want to See: How to Move Bureaucracies

Confirmed Guest Speaker: Ciara Knudsen, former Senior State Department and USAID Official (and Brown alumna)

Large institutions are often criticized for pursuing policies and defending cultures that reflect status quo thinking and preserve their own power, and the U.S. national security architecture is no exception. Though the State Department is no exception, it has also adapted over time – whether driven by huge external shocks, senior leadership initiative, or by change agents within the bureaucracy. In this session, participants explore the role of individuals in promoting institutional change from within, including by mastering the “rules of the game,” effective dissent, seeding new ideas, and the growing role of AI in decision-making.

Discussion questions:

- What are the most effective strategies to affect change from within an organization?
- What are the tradeoffs to working within a system versus influencing it externally?

Required reading:

- Emmons, Garry, et al. [“Encouraging Dissent in Decision-Making.”](#) *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge Series*, 1 Oct. 2007,
- Chivvis, Christopher, and Stephen Wertheim. [“America's Foreign Policy Inertia: How the Next President Can Make Change in a System Built to Resist It.”](#) *Foreign Affairs*, 14 Oct. 2024,

Optional reading:

- Berndt, Sarah, and Holly Holzer. [“The State Department Dissent Channel: History and Impact.”](#) *American Foreign Service Association*.

Session 4 (Monday, April 13; 1-2:30pm) – Reforming Diplomacy. The Trump Administration’s dramatic efforts to reshape the State Department have reignited long-standing questions about the appropriate size, scope, and function of diplomacy in this era of greater diffusion of global power and greater digital connectivity. While this Administration’s reforms have been unique in scale and destructiveness, efforts to reform the practice of US diplomacy and its main institutions are not new. In this session, participants will discuss lessons learned from past efforts, the future of diplomacy, and the reforms needed to achieve this vision.

Discussion question:

- How does – and should – greater digital connectivity and increasing AI capability change the practice of diplomacy? Do we still need diplomats on the ground across 180+ countries?
- What should the next Secretary of State prioritize in his/her diplomatic reform agenda?

Required reading:

- White House. "[Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Reduces the Federal Bureaucracy.](#)" *The White House*, 19 Feb. 2025.
- "[Historical Lessons for State Department Reform.](#)" FP21. 12 June 2023.

Optional reading:

- "[Secretary Antony J. Blinken on the Modernization of American Diplomacy.](#)" Speech to the Foreign Service Institute, 27 October 2025.
- Abrams, Elliott. "[State Department 'Reform' Plans Leave Much to Be Desired.](#)" *National Review*, 29 April 2025.

Session 5 (Thursday, April 16; 1-2:30pm) – Careers in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy. The final session covers post-graduate career paths in US diplomacy and foreign policy, whether at the White House, State Department, other US government foreign affairs agencies, Congress, or beyond. From internships to senior leadership roles, participants will discuss practical strategies to pursue careers in government and better understand the distinctions between civil servants, foreign service officers, political appointees, and contractors. Participants will depart with a roadmap for launching their own careers in foreign policy for the years and decades ahead.

About the Instructor: A 2025-2026 *Brown School of International and Public Affairs* senior fellow, Laurel Rapp is a foreign policy leader and practitioner with nearly two decades of experience at the State Department, National Security Council, Senate, and non-profit space. Following her departure from government in August 2025, Laurel joined Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, an independent policy institute based in London where she serves as U.S. and North America Program Director.

While in government, Laurel served as Deputy Director of Secretary of State Blinken's Policy Planning Staff, where she managed the Dissent Channel, the Secretary's Foreign Affairs Policy Board, and other strategic initiatives. From 2021-2023, she served as a member of the Policy Planning Staff focused on the United Nations and the Middle East. After joining the State Department in 2011, Laurel worked on Middle East issues for the Deputy Secretary of State, the National Security Council, and the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. She also covered UN and multilateral issues with the Bureau of International Organization Affairs and the U.S. Mission to the UN's Washington office. In 2020, Laurel served as a fellow on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee focused on Europe and South & Central Asia. Before her time in government, Laurel worked at the OneVoice Movement, a Middle East-focused youth organization in New York, and conducted research on youth political participation in Morocco as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar. Laurel graduated from Brown University and received a master's degree in public policy from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. She speaks some Arabic, French, and Italian.