

**Study Group on “U.S. Diplomacy: From Policy to Practice”**  
**Laurel Rapp, Senior Fellow, Watson School of International and Public Affairs**  
**Fall 2025**

**Dates:** Five Thursdays from 2:30-4pm, followed by optional office hours from 4-6pm (October 2, October 16, October 30, November 13, and November 20).

**Focus:** This study group explores the role of diplomacy in the United States’ national security toolkit, drawing on perspectives from senior policy practitioners, primary sources from government, as well scholarship from think tanks and academia. Over five sessions, course participants gain a better understanding of how foreign policy is developed, debated, and implemented; analyze the United States’ evolving role in the world; and build practical skills for exerting influence within large organizations. Participants explore the unique capabilities and limitations of diplomacy, the interplay between domestic politics and U.S. foreign policy, and the future of diplomacy. While policymaking from Washington will be the primary focus, the sessions also integrate comparative examples from other countries, including the People’s Republic of China.

Students interested in learning more about the actors and institutions that shape foreign policy (session 1), grand strategy (session 2), the contest to shape the next global order (session 3), American economic statecraft (session 4), and influence in large organizations and careers in diplomacy (session 5) 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 (October 2) – Inside the Machine: Washington's Foreign Policy-Making Process**

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, if not years, 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. This session also seeks to contextualize recent reform efforts over time – from Colin Powell’s Diplomacy 2.0 to DOGE.

### Discussion questions:

- What's an example of a poorly planned foreign policy decision, and what were the consequences?
- Based on your own observations or experiences interacting with the government, what do you think future government reform efforts address?

### Required reading:

- Masters, Jonathan. "U.S. Foreign Policy Powers: Congress and the President." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2 Mar. 2017, [www.cfr.org/backgrounders/us-foreign-policy-powers-congress-and-president](http://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/us-foreign-policy-powers-congress-and-president).
- White House. "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Reduces the Federal Bureaucracy." *The White House*, 19 Feb. 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/02/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-reduces-the-federal-bureaucracy/>.

### Optional reading:

- Abrams, Elliott. "State Department 'Reform' Plans Leave Much to Be Desired." *National Review*, 29 Apr. 2025, [www.nationalreview.com/2025/04/state-department-reform-plans-leave-much-to-be-desired/](http://www.nationalreview.com/2025/04/state-department-reform-plans-leave-much-to-be-desired/).
- Pollard, Michael S., et al. "The Foreign Service and American Public Opinion: Dynamics and Prospects." *RAND Corporation*, 8 June 2022, [www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA1845-1.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1845-1.html).

## **Session 2 (October 16) – “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. It also focuses on 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 NSS, what three elements would you highlight?

### Required reading:

- DuMont, Malia. "Elements of National Security Strategy." *Atlantic Council Strategy Consortium*, 28 Feb. 2019, [www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/strategy-consortium/elements-of-national-security-strategy/](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/strategy-consortium/elements-of-national-security-strategy/).
- Chin, John, et al. "Understanding National Security Strategies Through Time." *Texas National Security Review*, vol. 6, no. 4, Fall 2023, pp. 103-124, [tnsr.org/2023/09/understanding-national-security-strategies-through-time/](http://tnsr.org/2023/09/understanding-national-security-strategies-through-time/).

(\*Read introduction, “How are National Security Strategies Organized?”)

**Optional reading:**

- White House. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Dec. 2017, [trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf](https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf).  
(\*Read pgs. 1-15)
- White House. *National Security Strategy*. Oct. 2022, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.  
(\*Read pgs. 1-13)

**Session 3 (October 30) – Whose Rules? The Contest to Shape the Next International Order**

For decades, the United States has authored and underwritten the global national security and international financial order, drawing on its unrivaled military and economic preeminence. This global order the United States helped birth in the aftermath of World War II is now under significant strain, and there is a heated competition to shape what comes next. Countries such as China, Russia, and emerging powers across the “Global South” are offering visions of their own – all of which deemphasize the centrality of the United States in world affairs. Successive U.S. administrations have also proffered divergent visions for U.S. global leadership, leading to questions about U.S. policy continuity beyond four-year increments. In this session, participants discuss current challenges to the “international rules-based order,” debate the relevance of international institutions like the United Nations, and weigh the risks and opportunities in this volatile era.

**Discussion question:**

- What “rules” should be central to the next international order?

**Required reading:**

- Vinjamuri, Leslie, editor. "Competing Visions of International Order: Responses to U.S. Power in a Fracturing World." Chatham House Research Paper, 27 Mar. 2025, [www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/competing-visions-international-order](https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/competing-visions-international-order).
- Zhu, Guiyin. "Rise of Global South and Changes in Contemporary International Order." *China International Strategy Review*, vol. 6, 4 June 2024, pp. 58-77, [link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42533-024-00160-x](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42533-024-00160-x).  
(\*Read introduction, as well as section on “Global South and changes in international rules and institutions.”)

**Session 4 (November 13) – American Economic Statecraft in a Changing World**

*[Confirmed Speaker: Heather Hulbert, former Chief of Staff, U.S. Trade Representative]*

Opening foreign markets for American-made goods and importing foreign goods for American consumers was one of the earliest functions of the U.S. diplomatic service, beginning in the 1790s. U.S. efforts to expand trade and define a set of rules for international commerce have been broadly successful over time, though have met growing backlash both in the United States and around the world. In this session, participants explore the long-standing role of U.S. diplomacy in strengthening the domestic economy – from market access to foreign investment to trade barriers – and evaluate differences in recent Administrations’ international economic statecraft agendas, lessons learned that

led to corrections, and looming challenges to the global economic system. A case study exploring U.S. export control regimes for some of the most sensitive and powerful American-made AI technology illustrates the complexities of balancing protectionism and partnership.

**Discussion question:**

- How have U.S. economic policies affected your or the communities to which you belong?

**Required reading:**

- Ahmed, Salman, et al. "Making U.S. Foreign Policy Work Better for the Middle Class." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 23 Sept. 2020, [www.carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/09/making-us-foreign-policy-work-better-for-the-middle-class?lang=en](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/09/making-us-foreign-policy-work-better-for-the-middle-class?lang=en).
- Fontaine, Richard. "The Trump-Biden-Trump Foreign Policy: American Strategy's Strange Continuity." *Foreign Affairs*, 20 Jan. 2025, [www.foreignaffairs.com/trump-biden-trump-foreign-policy](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/trump-biden-trump-foreign-policy).

**Session 5 (November 20) – Being the Change We Want to See: How to Move Bureaucracies**

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 often resists change, it has also periodically demonstrated a willingness to adapt. 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. The final session also covers post-graduate career paths in foreign policy.

**Discussion question:**

- What are the tradeoffs to working within a system versus influencing it externally? Are you drawn more to the former or the latter as you begin to build a career?

**Required reading:**

- Emmons, Garry, et al. "Encouraging Dissent in Decision-Making." *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge Series*, 1 Oct. 2007, [www.library.hbs.edu/working-knowledge/encouraging-dissent-in-decision-making](http://www.library.hbs.edu/working-knowledge/encouraging-dissent-in-decision-making).
- 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, [www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-foreign-policy-inertia](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-foreign-policy-inertia).

**Optional reading:**

- Berndt, Sarah, and Holly Holzer. "The State Department Dissent Channel: History and Impact." *American Foreign Service Association*, [www.afsa.org/state-department-dissent-channel-history-and-impact](http://www.afsa.org/state-department-dissent-channel-history-and-impact).

**About the Instructor:** A 2025-2026 *Watson 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.