

Thinking through U.S. national interests

A projector will be helpful for this module so everyone can see the list.

Discussions of U.S. foreign policy in general, and national security in particular, often include discussions of U.S. “national interests.” Frequently, when the United States becomes involved in a war, leaders assert that there was a threat “vital” national interests. There have been many competing descriptions of what U.S. national interests are and how important they are relative to one another.

Discussions about which national interests to prioritize are central to any effort to formulate a national security strategy. What is most important? What tradeoffs can be made? Failure to prioritize correctly can make a foreign policy ineffective or counterproductive. Failure to prioritize at all can lead to foreign policy overextension, confusion, waste, and even self-contradiction. The global scene is likely to become more competitive in our lifetimes as China and Russia rise. We’re unlikely to get everything we want. Effective prioritization is key.

This interactive exercise lets your group think about how to prioritize among interests. The spreadsheet includes a list of possible national interests, which you must then put in order based on how important you think they are for American security. This will quickly force your group to debate hard choices. Is it more important to defend an ally in war, or to avoid a nuclear strike on America’s homeland? Which is more dangerous: terrorism or hostile states? Should our foreign policy prioritize Asia or Europe?

How to use the module

Open the spreadsheet and display it on the projector. You’ll go through the list of possible interests one at a time and place them in order of importance on the Your Priorities list. Cut an item off the Possible Interests column and use the Insert Cut Cells function to begin building the list. (Don’t just cut and paste, as you risk pasting over other interests.) If it’s helpful to move through the possible interests thematically, you can use the sort function in the Category Order column before you begin. (The list is currently randomized.)

To help figure out how to rank two interests, you can ask a simple question: if we could only have one, which would it be? Or, as the party game goes: “Would you rather?”

For example, one interest on the list is that a major terrorist attack not occur in the United States. Another interest is that a minor terrorist attack not occur in the United States. It would be nice to have no terrorist attacks at all, but forced to choose, most people would agree that it’s more important to avoid a major terrorist attack than to avoid a minor one, so avoiding major attack would go above avoiding minor attack on the list.

Note also that this is an attempt to think through **U.S.** interests. To help frame the questions, ask yourself: which interests should U.S. policymakers prioritize in order to secure the United States?

A small group can probably build the rankings purely through discussion. A larger group might need to vote. One way to do this quickly is to point at the bottom of the list and slowly move your finger upwards. Members of the group should raise their hands when they think you've gone too high for the interest in question. When half the room has their hands up, you're around the right spot and can either put the interest on the list right then and there or you can have a group discussion about just where it belongs before a final vote.

You'll want to put the most energy into getting the interests you're putting near the top in the right order, since those are most important. Whether an interest is in first or third place matters more than whether it's in thirty-first or thirty-third.

The list of interests and some definitions are adapted from [*America's National Interests*](#), a 1996 report produced by The Commission on America's National Interests (a bipartisan panel of leading U.S. policymakers, legislators, and intellectuals).

Discussion topics

- Once you've built the list, you can discuss where the dividing line is between vital interests and other types of interests. Definitions drawn from the CANI report are found on the Definitions tab on the spreadsheet.
- In general, the "avoid war with" items will be below all the things which it'd be worth going to war with that country to avoid.
- At what level on the list should America be willing, if necessary to attain that interest, to:
 - Use military force?
 - Take a small number of military casualties?
 - Take a very large number of military casualties?
 - Use ground troops?
 - Use nuclear weapons?
 - Spend a large amount of money, even if it means taking it away from popular domestic programs, raising taxes, or massively expanding the national debt (whichever you'd most want to avoid)?

- At what point would you personally be willing to join the military and fight?
- Do other countries prioritize their interests the same way?
- Do some items that are low priorities for us impact items that are high priorities for them? Examples:
 - A country that highly prioritizes being free of foreign political influence vs. U.S. supporting the spread of human rights or democracy in that country
 - A country that highly prioritizes not having a hostile power on its borders vs. that country's neighbors being free to choose to align against it
- Does current U.S. strategy reflect the prioritization on your list? Some possible tensions:
 - Under “extended deterrence,” America shields many of its treaty allies from attack using its own nuclear arsenal. This prioritizes the survival of those allies over America not being attacked by nuclear weapons. Implicitly, it prioritizes hostile hegemony not emerging over not being attacked by nuclear weapons, too.
 - Support for the spread of democracy has caused tension with Russia and China.
 - U.S. strategy documents frequently do not distinguish between attacks on the United States and attacks on its allies.
 - The expansion of NATO was frequently seen as a way to support the spread of democracy, but it also entailed being willing to fight Russia over new places.
 - Some worry that placing strong financial sanctions on other countries in order to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons (to Iran), punish small-scale violations of human rights (in Russia), or punish military aggression (by Russia) could make states look for ways to make America less central in the global financial system.