



THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY: REALISM, COMMERCE, AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

The article explores Alexander Hamilton's realist, business-oriented, and morally grounded philosophy to shed light on the historical roots of U.S. foreign policy. Hamilton's contributions to America's constitutional and financial systems are well recognized. However, his perspectives on foreign policy continue to influence current debates about how the United States should engage with the world. This paper analyzes how Hamilton's focus on economic power, selective involvement, and moral realism created a lasting framework for American foreign policy. It relies on primary texts like the Federalist Papers and the Pacificus essays, along with modern realist scholarship. It suggests that Hamiltonian ideas—such as trade-focused foreign engagement, strategic neutrality, and a balanced yet principled approach to international relations—are still relevant to today's critical global issues, including economic interdependence, geopolitical competition, and diplomatic moral questions. This study offers a detailed view of how Hamiltonian realism can guide U.S. foreign policy in a multipolar world, connecting historical insights to present-day concerns. For scholars and professionals interested in the enduring impact of foundational ideas on American global leadership, this work provides policy-oriented insights by linking historical scholarship with international relations theory.

Keywords: Foreign policy; national interest; Hamiltonians; Federalists; Republicans;

INTRODUCTION

As the world's leading military and economic power, the United States of America has a special influence over global affairs. U.S. foreign policy has evolved through a complex interplay of historical, political, and ideological factors.

President John F. Kennedy, the 35th President of the United States, once remarked: "Domestic policy can only defeat us; foreign policy can kill us" (Kennedy, 1961). This explains the importance of foreign policy in the existence of the U.S.

Examining U.S. foreign policy may offer one valuable understanding of the past, present, and future of one of the world's most powerful nations. Foreign policy plays a pivotal role in shaping how the U.S. builds relationships with other nations and defines its national interests. It should not only safeguard U.S. security and defense but also promote the interests of Americans worldwide. National interests shape foreign policy, encompassing a range of political, economic, military, ideological, and humanitarian issues.



1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, some American scholars see U.S. foreign policy as one of the most resilient and enduring in the last two centuries. They have suggested various models based on the historical traditions of U.S. foreign policy. The success of U.S. foreign policy over the centuries is credited to four policy traditions named after four prominent figures in American and world history. In the 18th century, the principal architects of early U.S. foreign policy traditions were Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. This research paper focuses on Hamilton's foreign policy traditions and includes a comparative analysis. It argues that Hamiltonian traditions laid the ideological groundwork for U.S. foreign policy by offering different visions of national interest, international involvement, and the role of power in global affairs.

Scholars have long debated the intellectual foundation and enduring legacy of American foreign policy. Walter Russell Mead's major work, *Special Providence*, analyzes four historical traditions that have molded America's global posture: Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian, Jacksonian, and Wilsonian. Among these, the Hamiltonian model emphasizes strategic pragmatism, economic strength, and alliance-building as critical components of foreign engagement (Mead, 2002, pp. 4–6).

Henry Kissinger (1994) highlighted Hamilton's realist tendencies, asserting that foreign policy must balance strength with principle. Kissinger links Hamilton's pragmatism to realist diplomacy, focusing on power, statecraft, and the creation of durable institutions (Kissinger, 1994, pp. 29–34, 55–59).

More recent work, such as Stephen Walt's realist perspective, supports the idea that national interests and stability often outweigh ideological beliefs. While Walt is a contemporary realist, his reasoning aligns with Hamilton's caution against overextending power. He critiques ideological foreign policies and stresses national interests (Walt, 2005, pp. 55–59). This paper builds on these ideas by examining the Hamiltonian tradition as a clear and adaptable framework for understanding international relations. It also aims to show how Hamiltonian concepts remain relevant in the twenty-first century, especially in the development of economic diplomacy and strategic neutrality.

2. EARLY FOREIGN POLICY IDEOLOGY AND LEADERSHIP

Hamiltonianism, the first of four traditional U.S. foreign policy schools, is closely connected to Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton was a strong supporter of the Constitution, one of the main authors of the *Federalist Papers*, head of the U.S. Department of the Treasury, and a trusted advisor in George Washington's administration. He is also known as the architect of the plan to pay off the U.S. Revolutionary War debt that accumulated between 1775 and 1783. Hamilton championed the idea of creating the nation's National Bank. Additionally, Hamilton defended U.S. interests by encouraging trade and economic growth. He believed that a solid financial foundation would not only unify the new nation but also establish its credibility internationally, laying the groundwork for a foreign policy focused on trade, stability, and national interests (Chernow, 2004).

As a senior member of George Washington's administration, Alexander Hamilton was often called upon to advise the president on sensitive international policy issues. In his role as the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, Hamilton frequently found himself in political rivalry with Thomas Jefferson, who served as the Secretary of State. While Jefferson favored closer ties with revolutionary France and stressed agrarian values, Hamilton pushed for strong commercial relationships with Britain and a healthy national economy. Despite their



different views, Washington relied heavily on Hamilton's ideas and judgment to solve the crucial questions of war and peace facing the young Republic.

3. FOREIGN POLICY PHILOSOPHY AND PRINCIPLES

According to Hamilton, a nation's foreign policy main goal is not only to protect its security and welfare but also to defend its national interests, which include intangible values like self-respect and honor. He argued these qualities are essential to gaining a nation's dignity and reputation on the world stage. In the "Federalist Papers," a collection of 85 essays written by Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay to support ratifying the Constitution, Hamilton wrote: "The causes of hostility among nations are innumerable. Some have a general and almost constant operation upon the collective bodies of society. Of this description are the love of power or the desire of preeminence and dominion—the jealousy of power, or the desire of equality and safety..." (Hamilton, 1788/2003, p. 52). This view influenced Hamilton's foreign policy approach, which recognized the realistic side of international relations based on national self-interest, while still stressing the importance of justice and moral principles. For Hamilton, recognizing these causes of hostility was key to managing diplomacy and keeping peace without sacrificing America's values or safety.

4. THE 1793 NEUTRALITY CRISIS AND DOMESTIC DEBATE

One of the earliest and most significant tests of Hamilton's foreign policy ideas took place during the outbreak of war between Britain and revolutionary France. This geopolitical challenge forced the new American republic to clarify its stance on international involvement, leading to the Proclamation of Neutrality. While Hamilton's foreign policy was rooted in 18th-century geopolitical concerns, his ideas continued to influence U.S. strategy well into the 20th and 21st centuries. From trade policies to wartime diplomacy, the Hamiltonian legacy has remained a steady guiding influence in the history of American global leadership.

Hamilton explained this point to the public with the first major foreign policy challenge faced by the young nation in spring 1793, amidst the war between Great Britain and revolutionary France. Between 1789 and 1799, France experienced a revolution characterized by political and social upheaval. During this period, France declared war on Britain in 1793. On April 19, 1793, President George Washington, with the support of his Cabinet, issued the famous "Proclamation of Neutrality," aiming to keep the United States out of the European conflict. The declaration stated that "U.S. citizens were prohibited from engaging in military intervention fighting for or against any belligerent powers on the seas" (Washington, 1793/1939, pp. 84–85).

However, the stance of neutrality was controversial, as many Americans felt loyalty to France, their revolutionary ally, and believed the U.S. had a moral duty to support France's fight against Britain. Others, including Hamilton, worried that involvement could threaten the nation's security, safety, and economic interests.

Hamilton's push for neutrality reflected his pragmatic foreign policy approach, which prioritized protecting the young nation's security and economic interests over ideological commitments. By avoiding entanglement in European conflicts, Hamilton sought to preserve American stability and promote trade, two key elements of his vision for a strong and prosperous republic.

Beyond prioritizing national interests, Hamilton highlighted the moral responsibilities of states in foreign relations. He believed nations should follow principles of



justice and good faith, meaning they should conduct their affairs with fairness, respect international laws and agreements, and act honestly and sincerely in diplomacy. He argued that although nations naturally pursue their interests, long-term stability and mutual trust can only be built through consistent adherence to these moral and legal standards (Hamilton, 1793/2005).

While nations mainly act in their interest, it is wise and proper for them to uphold certain limits. This includes honoring treaties made and laws established over centuries.

Between 1793 and 1794, public debates under the pseudonyms Pacificus (Hamilton) and Helvetius (Madison), published in *The Gazette of the United States* in Philadelphia, played a significant role in shaping the politics of the young country. The Pacificus–Helvetius debate emerged from differing views on the constitutional distribution of foreign policy powers. Hamilton, writing as Pacificus, defended President Washington’s authority to declare neutrality without congressional approval, arguing that the executive branch held broad responsibility for foreign affairs. Conversely, Madison, under the pseudonym Helvetius, contended that such decisions fell under Congress’s powers to declare war and shape foreign policy. This exchange became a key event in American constitutional theory, influencing ongoing discussions about the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches in foreign policy matters (Chernow, 2004, pp. 461–470).

5. MORAL REALISM AND DIPLOMATIC ETHICS

In one of the Pacificus articles, Hamilton explained that “focusing on national interests does not mean being a selfish nation or disregarding other nations. As long as justice and good faith permit, a self-interested foreign policy will be most successful” (Hamilton, 1793/2005, p. 86). Hamilton never dismissed the importance of morality in foreign relations. Instead, he opposed impractical moral expectations—those that demand a nation act kindly without regard for its safety and welfare. He insisted that while the government could act generously, no policy should ever sacrifice the nation’s fundamental interests. During that period, the debate over whether to engage in conflicts abroad or remain uninvolved was at the forefront of public discussions on foreign policy. The main issue was that the U.S. had not yet established a clear stance on intervention or non-intervention. Choosing whether to involve oneself in another country’s internal affairs requires careful evaluation of the ethical and practical aspects of each specific situation and thus demands considerable caution (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.). Hamilton recognized this complexity and reminded Americans of the principles guiding their stance. He emphasized that assisting another nation's struggle for freedom is not only permissible but highly commendable. Therefore, politicians who follow the Hamiltonian foreign policy tradition cannot simply remain indifferent to foreign efforts to overthrow tyrannical regimes.

6. LONG-TERM IMPACT AND LEGACY

Followers of Hamiltonian principles tend to be conservative in their skepticism about perfect solutions but remain optimistic about the economic benefits that trade development can bring. Throughout the first century of the U.S., Hamilton advocated cooperation with Britain, then the world’s largest trading nation. In the 20th century, as British power waned, the United States emerged as the leader in global trade. Nevertheless, the essential belief persisted: commerce lies at the heart of foreign policy, serving as a guardian of peace and stability (Mead, 2002, pp. 99–110). At the same time, Hamilton emphasized that regardless of how unstable or undemocratic a nation’s government might be,



other countries should not attempt to incite rebellion in nations that are peacefully governed. His views on this matter were grounded in the principles of the Declaration of Independence. Hamilton argued that it is the right of each nation to decide whether to overthrow its government, weighing the risks and tolerances of its people. Thus, while it is appropriate to support an existing rebellion, it is not the duty of other nations to provoke unrest where none exists. Proponents of the Hamiltonian perspective argued that for the U.S. to become a global superpower, the national government should collaborate with major corporations, establish an international trade order, and develop economic ties abroad aligned with national interests. Simultaneously, the United States should maintain a competent military force, but the state must remain fundamentally democratic, not militaristic (Reveron, Gvosdev, Cloud, & Nau, 2019). The U.S.' vital interests depended on an open market, which could only be maintained by allowing the free flow of goods across international borders. Therefore, American cargo ships should enjoy the same rights and privileges as those of other nations when docking in foreign ports. According to Hamiltonian school proponents, the U.S. has pursued an increasingly global foreign policy since its establishment. World War I strengthened the ideas of strategic cooperation and solidarity with Britain; ideas rooted in the diplomatic outlook of George Washington and advanced by Hamilton's followers. Although Britain had already declared war on Germany, Hamiltonians supported aligning with Britain, emphasizing shared interests in maintaining global trade and stability. By the end of World War II, the United States had emerged as a dominant global economic power. Free trade became not just an economic tool, but a central instrument in the geopolitical struggle of the Cold War. Hamiltonians embraced this development, as they had long viewed trade expansion and commercial engagement as essential to U.S. prosperity and global influence. Their foreign policy philosophy placed a high priority on economic growth, and they believed that war should be avoided at all costs. Instead, the U.S. should build strong diplomatic and commercial relationships that can promote the interests of American traders and investors. The Hamiltonian legacy persisted in influencing American foreign policy in the years following World War II and the Cold War. The proponents of this approach focused on maintaining a liberal international economic system that allowed the free flow of capital as well as global financial stability. The emphasis on strategic economic involvement over military entanglement increased along with the number of academics and policymakers who shared Hamiltonian views.

7. FOUNDATIONAL THEMES SUMMARIZED

Hamilton's foreign policy vision can be enhanced by summarizing its fundamental ideas as follows:

Trade and the economic base:

Hamilton believed that the core of all national power was economic strength. He envisioned a lively commercial republic built on banking, industry, and international trade.

His foreign policy philosophy was shaped by this economic view, which believed that trade, rather than conquest, should be the primary way the U.S. interacts globally. He argued that trade not only creates prosperity but also encourages peace by building interdependencies that deter conflict.

Hamilton viewed economic strength as the foundation of national power. He believed that independent, land-owning farmers were the most virtuous citizens and the backbone of a healthy democracy. Hamilton envisioned a vibrant commercial republic, centered around banking, manufacturing, and international trade.



His aims to establish a national bank, assume state obligations, and stabilize public credit were not just internal economic changes; they served as tools to boost America's international standing. In Hamilton's vision, credibility and trust were essential for securing loans, forming alliances, and exerting influence.

Later Hamiltonians, continuing this tradition, supported trade alliances, global markets, and postwar economic institutions like the Bretton Woods system—an international financial framework established in 1944 to promote monetary stability and global economic cooperation—viewing them as extensions of Hamilton's foundational ideas. They prioritized free markets, stable currencies, and international financial institutions as ways to secure American prosperity and worldwide leadership (Mead, 2002, pp. 145–151).

8. REALISM AND NATIONAL INTEREST

Realism, which emphasizes a country's strategic self-interest over ideological goals, underpins Hamilton's foreign policy thinking. He recognized that power struggles, rivalry, and the quest for influence drive international politics.

Hamilton's worldview closely aligns with realism in international relations. Realist theorists, such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, argue that national interest, survival, and strategic advantage should take precedence over moral or ideological considerations in foreign policy. These ideas are reflected in Hamilton's focus on security, trade, and power. However, he did not wholly abandon morality, unlike some realists. Instead, he advocated for moral realism, which believes that moral behavior and international law are beneficial for long-term state stability and credibility, in addition to justice. This hybrid approach demonstrates the flexibility and foresight of Hamilton's foreign policy doctrine by situating it between classical realism and modern liberalism.

He asserted that the U.S. must secure its position in the world through careful calculation rather than sentiment. While he recognizes that ideals like liberty and justice are important, these should be promoted in ways that enhance national prestige and security. For Hamilton, national interest encompassed not only military strength but also fiscal stability, institutional legitimacy, and ethical leadership. His approach rejected overly idealistic views of global unity and aimed to position the United States for success in an international system often marked by rivalry and discord.

This commitment to realism is evident in his endorsement of a neutral foreign policy during the 1793 Anglo-French war. While many Americans were emotionally drawn to support revolutionary France, Hamilton warned that strategic reasoning should prevail over emotional reactions, as early entanglement could threaten America's fragile unity and sovereignty.

9. NEUTRALITY AND SELECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Hamilton's foreign policy skirted the extremes of isolationism or interventionism. His doctrine of selective engagement meant that the U.S. should participate only when its interests or values were at stake, and otherwise avoid costly or unneeded entanglements.

This idea was first articulated in the 1793 Proclamation of Neutrality. The United States maintained its resources and sovereignty while continuing trade with both sides of the European War by remaining neutral. For Hamilton, neutrality was strategic independence rather than weakness.

However, neutrality did not imply indifference. Hamilton asserted that when conditions allowed and circumstances were favorable, he supported liberty and opposed



tyranny. He recognized that a young nation must choose its conflicts carefully, and that offering moral support does not always require military intervention.

Over time, this flexible approach converted into a doctrine of balanced diplomacy: The U.S. could intervene to safeguard liberty or commerce, but only when its national interest, capacity, and international law aligned. The Hamiltonian school came to be defined by its pragmatic orientation (Washington, 1793/1939).

Morality in Foreign Affairs

Though often labeled a realist, Hamilton did not forsake moral responsibility in foreign policy. He emphasized that justice, good faith, and honesty are vital for building lasting peace and maintaining global respect.

In the *Pacificus* essays, Hamilton argued that foreign policy must adhere to treaties, international norms, and ethical standards because these promote international stability and predictability. He warned that ignoring morality in foreign affairs would ultimately backfire, leading to chaos, mistrust, and retaliation. His moral realism acknowledged that while states must prioritize national survival and strategic interests above all, they are also bound by moral duty and legal principles.

He wrote: “A nation that acts unjustly toward others cannot expect justice in return.” (Hamilton, 1793/2005).

Hamilton’s foreign policy philosophy represents a harmonious integration of national ideals and pragmatic concerns. It continues to provide a coherent approach to tackling today’s global problems, where protection of human rights and the promotion of economic wellbeing must be pursued simultaneously.

Realism, national interest, economic engagement, selective diplomacy, and moral responsibility collectively establish the lasting and resilient nature of Hamiltonian foreign policy. They reflect a coherent vision of America’s role in the world: not serving as a global law enforcer, nor standing as a distant spectator, but as a pragmatic, principled, and commercially engaged republic.

Hamilton’s theories remain highly relevant in today’s world. Many principles of Hamiltonian foreign policy still influence American actions, including promoting free trade, maintaining economic connections, avoiding unnecessary military conflicts, and strategically protecting national interests. From Bretton Woods to the World Trade Organization, the liberal economic order that developed after World War II reflects Hamilton’s belief that trade can be a tool for influence and peace. Hamiltonian realism and economic statecraft are still evident in current debates over sanctions, energy diplomacy, and U.S.-China relations. The Hamiltonian legacy provides a valuable framework for balancing interests and ideals in a world shaped by competition and interdependence. This approach will guide America’s navigation of both its history and its future.

CONCLUSION

The early traditions of U.S. foreign policy demonstrate a delicate balance between strategic goals and moral obligations. These concepts, which date back to the early years of the American republic, emphasized national security, economic strength, and global legitimacy while being mindful of ethical commitments in foreign affairs. The emphasis on neutrality, selective participation, and commerce established a practical foundation that allowed the nascent nation to thrive while avoiding costly entanglements. These founding ideas evolved at a time when the United States was establishing its identity not only domestically, but also globally.



Realism served as a guiding compass, recognizing the intricacies of international affairs while avoiding naive idealism. At the same time, a sense of justice, good faith, and treaty adherence demonstrated a commitment to ethical diplomacy. The convergence of economic development and foreign policy strategy became a distinguishing feature of America's ascension to global power. Trade was more than just a source of wealth; it was also a means of achieving peace and influence.

These early traditions still shape American foreign policy today, teaching lessons of restraint, principle, and pragmatism. In a world now dominated by power struggles, ideological conflicts, and economic ties, the insights from the foundation era remain very relevant. Understanding these origins offers a clearer view of how the U.S. might handle current global challenges—not just with force, but through a sustained mix of interest, morality, and strategic vision.

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