

# Constructions of United States National Identity within United States Foreign Policy Approaches

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the use of national identity as a rhetorical and strategic tool in shaping foreign policy by focusing particularly on United States presidents during instances of international conflict. Four administrations (George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden) show the extent to which presidents were subjective or strategic by identifying the national identity narratives employed over a longitudinal design to two case studies: the War in Afghanistan and the evolving United States and China rivalry over Taiwan. Qualitative coding of presidential statements indicates that each president exhibits a high degree of subjectivity, consistently framing United States' national identity in ways that align with their personal interpretations. These findings indicate that presidents show a predisposition towards reinforcing fixed narratives regardless of their foreign policy approach. The implications are that such rigid identity constructions limit the potential for inclusive or multifaceted policy approaches needed for nuanced diplomacy in a globalized world. Future research will examine pathways for leaders to incorporate broader and more diverse identity frames in foreign policy discourse.

**Keywords:** National Identity, United States Foreign Policy, Presidency, Identity Frames

## Introduction

As chief foreign policy maker, the President of the United States has great power in crafting their approaches abroad. However, as elected officials, they provide cues to constituents, justifying the choices they make. Such cues include framing of the national community. For example, there are often efforts made by presidents to reflect a liberal or civic, national identity even while undercutting such expressions by supporting illiberal regimes (Hartz, 1991). They make calls to spread democracy abroad, a common theme in United States history, and frequently take actions seeking to alter the supposed illiberal elements of those abroad by asserting values (individual rights, democratic government, capitalism) (Restad, 2012, 2014, 2016). However, there are other frames that stress ethnocultural nationalism in-group descriptions (white, Christian, male) within policy and statements (Horsman, 1981; Hunt, 2009; Karp, 2016; Restad, 2020). This nationalism asserts separation between a defined 'us' that holds certain qualities vs a 'them' that holds opposing or hostile qualities. For example, George W. Bush stated, "You're either with us or against us," in relation to his War on Terror (Bush, 2001c). Likewise, President Donald Trump (in his first term) limited acceptance of refugees from Muslim-majority countries. Lastly, the multicultural frame negotiates policy choices between various subgroup identities that make up an overall diverse national community. Presidents might highlight differing groups to strike a balance amongst those competing for influence (Hussain & Miller, 2006; Hill, 2015; Modood, 2018). Each frame discussed (civic, ethnocultural, or multicultural) exists in United States foreign policy and in the broader society from which all presidents are politically socialized (Goldgeier, 2018; Hill, 2015; Smith, 1990, Smith, 1994; Spencer & Wollman, 2002; Restad, 2012, 2016). My study of these frameworks' existence within United States' foreign policy finds identity predisposition. Each president has their own national identity framing by focusing on a singular frame, combining two, or even undermining one to elevate another. Each president has their own version of the national community they wish to present on the world stage.

However, in what context should we study such dynamics? I chose to study presidents' approaches to international conflict to observe if presidents exhibit rigidity or flexibility in

their framing of United States' national identity when presenting their policy choices. Using survey data, Ole R. Holsti, James N. Rosenau (1990), and Eugene R. Wittkopf (1990) identify classifications of foreign policy approaches based on support or opposition to militant and cooperative internationalism. The Wittkopf-Holsti-Rosenau Model has four approaches to foreign policy: hardliner, internationalist, isolationist, and accommodationist (Holsti & Rosenau 1990; Wittkopf 1990). These four are based on support or opposition to two dimensions of militant internationalism or cooperative internationalism. Support for militant internationalism asserts military action abroad or a projection of military strength beyond one's borders. Cooperativism is a conciliatory policy based on building agreements and working with other countries rather than military action. Table 1 shows that support or opposition on these two dimensions creates an axis of "four distinct foreign policy attitude clusters or foreign policy approaches: internationalists, isolationists, accommodationists, and hardliners" (Wittkopf, 1990, p 9). Hardliners support militant internationalism and oppose cooperative internationalism. Internationalists support both cooperative and militant internationalism. Isolationists oppose both cooperative and militant internationalism. Accommodationists oppose militant internationalism (MI) and support cooperative internationalism (CI).

Table 1. Wittkopf-Holsti-Rosenau Typology

	Oppose MI	Support MI
Support CI	Accommodationist	Internationalist
Oppose CI	Isolationist	Hardliner

Note. Adapted from *Faces of Internationalism Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, E.R. Wittkopf, 1990, Duke University Press & "The structure of foreign policy attitudes among American leaders", O. R. Holsti & J. N. Rosenau, 1990, *The Journal of Politics*.

Scholars use this model to test connections between approaches and social variables, including national identity (Citrin et al., 1994; Guth, 2013a; Guth, 2013b; Jorgensen, 2020). My research tests alignments of approaches and identity frames across four administrations (George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden) as they engage with international conflicts. The War in Afghanistan and the United States-China conflict over Taiwan are the conflicts chosen. These cases are useful because they provide variance by representing active or latent conflicts, respectively. In addition, they occur across all four administrations, which allows for a longitudinal study of different presidents and consistency in cases. To be clear, presidents' decision-making and differing choices are not under examination. The concern is whether presidents deploy a frame to suit their approach or if they are subjective in their conception of nationhood. Statements are gathered and coded to identify combinations of framed policy approaches. Table 1-1 indicates the time periods in which sampling occurs. Statements are collected at key moments of policy announcements for the conflict in Afghanistan. The Conflict over Taiwan required selecting statements from cases over the course of the whole administration. The time periods selected provide moments where the presidents are articulating the United States' approach to the conflict and likely articulating the national community being served by such actions. This paper examines instances around the war in Afghanistan because this conflict has moments of specific policy changes. Whereas the conflict with China over Taiwan is examined over the entire administration of each president, because it is a latent conflict. The coding schema identifies chunks within statements made by presidents and then broadens them out to more macro-level ideas falling into the categories where the codes indicate they fit into foreign policy approaches and national identity frames.

Table 2. Dates for Data collection

Chosen War in Afghanistan		The Conflict Over Taiwan
George W. Bush	- Operation Enduring Freedom (Oct. 7th, 2001)	Bush Administration – Jan. 20, 2001, to Jan. 20, 2009
Barack Obama	- Obama’s Afghanistan surge (Dec. 1, 2009) - Drawdown of troops in Afghanistan (June 22, 2011)	Obama Administration – Jan. 20, 2009, to Jan. 20, 2017
Donald Trump	- Addition of 4,000 troops (Aug. 21, 2017) - Signing the Doha Agreement (Feb. 29, 2020)	(first) Trump Administration – Jan. 20, 2017, to Jan. 20, 2021
Joe Biden	- Afghanistan Withdraw (Aug. 16, 2021)	Biden Administration – Jan. 20, 2021, to Jan. 20, 2025

## Findings

The results from the concept coding and discourse analysis from the collected data support the scholarship of identity predisposition. Scholars argue that national identity frameworks and foreign policy approaches are mutually constitutive (Campbell, 1998; Citrin et al., 1994; McCartney, 2019). The lens through which leaders see the world is national identity, as they carry out foreign policy, which reinforces their framing of identity. Despite this tendency, scholars ask whether presidents choose a national identity that is most advantageous to their policy (Citrin et al., 1994; McCartney, 2019; Zentner & LeMay, 2020). Recent research suggests presidents are more subjective leaders who have a predisposed national identity (Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2011; Hintz, 2018; Steffens et al., 2015; Moss, 2017; Powers, 2022). The results of this study were quite informative, as presidents did not change frames to suit their approaches. In other words, variation should occur if presidents are being strategic, but frames did not change with the approach and rather suggest a favoured predisposition towards a particular construction of national identity. The following describes the findings for each president, showing the evolution of their policy approaches, but with a predisposed nature towards national identity frames.

### President George W. Bush: Frames and Approaches

George W. Bush does not change his framing of the War in Afghanistan as his approaches shift from hardliner to internationalist. Bush validates identity predisposition by mixing ethnocultural and civic into one identity frame. He frames his approaches by highlighting civic elements of the United States that position the country as ‘civilized’ against the ‘uncivilized’ ethnocultural other. Bush sets standards of civic ideals - democracy, free market economics, and religious freedom but he argues that it is ethnocultural markers that helped the United States perfect those values. Bush places the United States at the center of civilization, with the responsibility to spread civic values in the Middle East to make the out-group closer to the ‘civilized’ in-group. Bush often performs cultural actions of the dominant group; in the United States, these are White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. Bush says to take comfort “...in Psalm 23: ‘Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me’” (Bush, 2001b). This is not a general assertion of religious faith but specific to Judeo-Christian religions. In the same speech, he rallies a civic nation blind to its differences, built on mutual respect for ideals like freedom, saying, “...Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace...we go forward to defend freedom...” (Bush, 2001b). Each statement combines these ethnocultural and civic signifiers to link the former as the reason for success in the latter. He argues that the unparalleled success of the

United States' ethnocultural group in achieving civic nationhood it justifies fighting to "...save civilization..." from those who reject it (Bush, 2001d). Bush's approaches shift between actions like the War in Afghanistan as a hardline (exclusively militant) approach vs. a more conciliatory internationalist approach for those he deems as 'civilized'.

In the case of Taiwan, Bush decides on an accommodationist approach with China over the island, with an internationalist approach for the region. Bush talks of "developing nations" like Taiwan, describing them as akin to the United States with elements of civic identity, specifically capitalism and democracy protected by the United States (Bush, 2001a). The President sees Taiwan as one among many countries whose economic openness marks potential for change in China. He argues this should be approached from accommodation, saying "...societies that open to commerce across their borders will open to democracy within... [and]...I believe in open trade with China, because I believe that freedom can triumph in China" (Bush, 2001a). Along with the one China policy to appease China about Taiwan, it shows a conciliatory rather than military approach to bring alignment on civic ideals. In other words, this is an accommodationist approach, but he notably adds a military element when talking about the region and not Taiwan specificity. Despite this mix of approaches, Bush's combination of identity framing is not present in statements regarding Taiwan as it is for Afghanistan. While the civic framing was maintained for Taiwan regardless of approach, the variation with the War in Afghanistan requires further research. The other presidents follow with their own predispositions towards identity framing.

### **President Barack Obama: Frames and Approaches**

President Barack Obama commits to cooperative and military (internationalism) options in Afghanistan until his civic conditions are met. Once those conditions are met, troops can be removed for an accommodationist approach. Like Bush, Obama shows a predisposition by having a singular construction of national identity for all his approaches. This is shown in claims that Afghanistan can see a "...gradual evolution of human institutions..." fulfilling civic criteria (Obama 2009b). Across all statements sampled, the President demonstrates a preference for civic nationhood to articulate not only his approaches but also his conditions for moving between them. Obama reiterates a commitment of troops that are "...going to be represented there until we have fully transferred to the Afghan military and security forces" (Obama, 2011b). This is both militant and cooperative (internationalism) because he acknowledges the use of United States' troops and Afghan forces (Obama, 2011c). This suggests a move towards a cooperative disposition to the conflict, but it is less clear when the turning point will take place with the removal of troops (accommodationist). Obama drifts between continued internationalism and a desired transition to accommodation. It is always civic elements that are the conditions for that transition in Afghanistan, which include protecting citizens, upholding ideals, and protecting democracy. When dealing with the issue of Taiwan, Obama displays almost rhythmic precision and State Department phraseology. He constantly says, "I reaffirmed our commitment to a 'One China' Policy based on the three U.S.-China communiques and the Taiwan Relations Act" (Obama, 2011a). Policy statements such as this accompany combinations of cooperative foreign policy and opposition to militant action. The result of such wording describes an accommodationist approach with the clarity that he does not want "...to change that policy and that approach" (Obama, 2009a). Obama chooses to link the United States and Taiwan as aligned democratic societies that find common cause. Like Bush, he places Taiwan in a civic in-group "...based on common interests and a shared commitment to freedom and democracy," but always in the larger context of an accommodationist approach (Obama, 2012). Obama is clear that such an approach with China over the island could develop into internationalism, like Bush's policy throughout East Asia. In both conflicts, Obama prefers civic framing, which furthers the evidence of predisposition when using national identity in foreign policy.

### **President Donald Trump: Frames and Approaches**

President Trump's framing of the War in Afghanistan is unique. When adding 4,000 troops to the conflict, he stresses that all options are available, signaling an internationalist approach. However, while the Afghan government is an ally in a military struggle, he stresses that the United States is no longer spreading civic ideals. This narrows cooperative support, saying, "We are a partner and a friend, but we will not dictate to the Afghan people how to live or how to govern...We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists" (Trump, 2017c). In this internationalist approach, Trump has a framing that holds ethnocultural premises while dismissing the spread of civic identity to others to justify limiting cooperative actions, while still retaining allies. When expressing internationalism, he says, "...all instruments of American power—diplomatic, economic, and military—toward a successful outcome" (Trump, 2017c). Trump's predisposition for ethnocultural framing appears as he does not temper his words as Bush and Obama did. His predecessors said that the Islamic faith had been hijacked by terrorists and thus chose their words to not insinuate a war against Islam. Trump, on the other hand, indicts the religion by saying, "We will destroy radical Islamic terrorism," and we are "combating the evils of all civilization" (Trump, 2017a, 2017b). This ethnocultural framing continues even as his policy approaches change. Trump assumes civic ideals undermine a nation's unique ethnocultural characteristics that bind them to "destinies" (Trump, 2017t). Around the signing of the Doha Agreement, Trump minimizes cooperative pledges for other countries on the basis that civic ideals should not or cannot be spread. He says, "We're bringing them back home. American troops cannot be the policemen for the world, or create democracy in other nations that, frankly, probably don't want it. The job of the American military is to secure and defend our country" (Trump, 2020b). The President exhibits isolationism by not assuring the security of allies (cooperative opposition) and removing the military presence (militant opposition). The idea of creating democracy in Afghanistan is dismissed because they "don't want it," which implies outsiders cannot appreciate civic ideals (Trump, 2020b). Trump rejects the universality of civic values for an ethnocultural logic of distinct, separate wholes. Other research documents this ethnocultural perspective of a United States surrounded by 'non-Americans' (others) incapable of valuing the distinctive aspects of the domestic in-group (Holland & Fermor, 2020; Restad, 2022). He argues it is better to protect the in-group at home from the logic that engaging abroad to change others is futile. Trump says, "...as we bring back our troops, we are committed to ensuring that foreign terrorists are denied admission to America....We must keep radical Islamic terrorists the hell out of our country" (Trump, 2020b). He chooses isolationism because his predisposition is an ethnocultural nationhood where civic ideals are exclusive to that in-group, only defended through retrenched foreign policy. Despite the appearance of civic codes, the analysis shows ethnocultural beliefs about civic ideals. Trump's favored ethnocultural frame is voiced while denouncing civic nationalism. An accommodationist approach describes negotiations with the Taliban with the belief that civic ideals cannot be spread. He rejects "nation-building abroad" to shape institutions and opposes the military acting as "law enforcement agencies," and it is better to extricate ourselves from the conflict (Trump, 2017d; Trump, 2020a). Trump has an accommodationist approach via a policy of negotiation (cooperative support) to facilitate troop withdrawal (militant opposition).

The conflict over Taiwan did not have enough statements to form any meaningful conclusions. Despite the lack of data from the second sampled conflict, the data from the War in Afghanistan provides further evidence of what has already appeared. Trump's statements are a bit more complicated, but his predisposition to frame civic national identity from an ethnocultural logic does not change. Trump's approaches might shift, but his predisposition to nationhood remains the same, marking a trend for all three presidents thus far.



## **President Joe Biden: Frames and Approaches**

Biden shows an accommodationist approach to the War in Afghanistan. This aligns with Trump in that Biden carries out the Doha Agreement by withdrawing from the country. However, Biden does not use identity frames. Bush, Obama, and Trump all had their own preferred framing regardless of the approach. Biden only tries to disconnect civic framing from the conflict, but without the ethnocultural framing of Trump. There is a logic to Biden's lack of framing because civic ideals had been used by Bush and Obama to justify the conflict, and it is difficult to use them without sinking deeper into the war. Biden wants to end military engagement in Afghanistan, and to do that, he steps away from civic framing tied to that conflict. Unlike Trump, Biden does not do this with an ethnocultural undertone; rather, he argues that the policy of nation-building failed. Biden argues, "we did not go to Afghanistan to nation-build..." and Afghans "decide their future and how to run their country" (Biden, 2021a). He redefines the policy towards the anti-terrorist mission and away from spreading civic ideals. His cooperative foreign policy is not shaping institutions but reaching deals to achieve anti-terrorism goals. This narrowing of cooperative support means that while the United States might not trust the Taliban, it is up to the Afghan government to hold the country. He states several times when asked about support for the United States to back the Afghan government that it is up to them "...to decide on what government they want not us to impose..." it (Biden, 2021a). Support for civic governance is separate from foreign policy, shown by Biden as the country fell to the Taliban, saying, "so far, the Taliban has not taken action against U.S. forces...allowing Americans to pass through and the like" (Biden, 2021b). Biden has no conditions on continued withdrawal or the structure of the Afghan government, with a preference for policy goals (withdrawal) rather than ideals. Foreign policy "...depends on conduct" and being able to carry out actions in its interests, but Biden does not "...see where that is in our overwhelming interest..." to remain in the conflict (Biden, 2021b). This is an accommodation shift arguing that using troops for "...a democratic, cohesive, and unified Afghanistan..." is counterproductive and will not "...make us stronger...safer at home" (Biden, 2021b). The application of troops should be to carry out clear combat missions, and cooperative foreign policy tools to spread those ideals. Biden is not abandoning civic values but using more effective tools (accommodationist approach), arguing the way to promote those ideals "...is not through endless military deployments, but through diplomacy, economic tools, and rallying the rest of the world..." (Biden, 2021b). Removing troops from Afghanistan (militant opposition) is the start of an approach that places more of a focus on cooperative support (i.e., humanitarian aid and arms deals) but not military use. The United States will keep framing its actions in othering terms between democratic and non-democratic forces but use cooperative policy options that lean more towards accommodation.

In contrast to his predecessors, in the Taiwan conflict, Biden commits to military assistance. In remarks on the subject, he illustrates the power of the United States military and then communicates the "serious mistake" of prompting the use of military forces (Biden, 2021d). While this is a warning to China, Biden also stresses dialogue on the subject. This approach prefers diplomacy while keeping military options open and thus is internationalist. Bush and Obama used accommodationist approaches specifically regarding Taiwan, but internationalism in East Asia. Biden is more aggressive on the issues. Still, he does not place this posture in a national identity, and the lack of framing could be Biden's propensity, as with Afghanistan, to avoid such rhetoric for military actions. Regarding Taiwan, the goal seems to be to convey a line that, when crossed, the policy approach will change. Biden has the usual language of the "One China" Policy, and that Taiwan's "independence" is not on the table, but when asked if the United States would defend the island, he says "yes." (Biden, 2022a). By the President's admission, the conflict in Ukraine raises the stakes of threatening other United States proxies. Thus, military action is an open part of the United States' policy, while in the past, such language was avoided. Like his approach to Afghanistan, Biden

reflects cooperative support after speaking with Chinese leadership (Biden, 2022b). Biden hopes that understanding can be reached, but later remarks detail the limits of his militant opposition, saying that “the ‘One China’ Policy...does not mean—that China has...the jurisdiction to go in and use force to take over Taiwan” (Biden, 2023). This opens the possibility of militancy, and such a shift is in the context of current events. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is directly related, according to Biden, saying an invasion of Taiwan would “...dislocate the entire region and be another action similar to what happened in Ukraine...it’s a burden that is even stronger” (Biden, 2023). Chinese aggression is the same as the conflict in Ukraine, raising the stakes to include militancy for an internationalist approach.

Analysis of the data set indicates that Biden uses a preferred civic framing only when conveying approaches with a cooperative policy option. When militancy is involved, the president chooses to deemphasize national identity framing. This implies a strategic choice, but it is not so much that the president is choosing a frame to match the approach rather his tendency not to use national identity framing for militant action. Biden is more apt to use the current state of the world to frame his policy choices concerning Taiwan and move away from spreading civic values that characterized past actions in Afghanistan. In these two cases, the President makes a foreign policy justification without a national identity frame.

## Conclusion

This study sought to address the error in judging leaders as always acting strategically. Leaders have predispositions that they draw from, like the national identity they present as their country engages in a conflict. While leaders engage with these phenomena in their own way, their subjective beliefs must be understood as they explain state actions in accordance with those views on nationhood. At times, a President like Bush (in the conflict over Taiwan) might highlight one part of that nation over another, but even in that case, different approaches did not change the persistent use of civic nationhood. The change in Bush’s framing from the War in Afghanistan to Taiwan merits further investigation, but it does not affect the overall finding of this study, as it could support a more selective use of framing when other variables are considered. This study shows that recent United States chief executives involved in international conflicts use national identity frames that do not correlate with their policy approaches. The implication of this is that the subjectivity of chief executives is of greater importance because these fixed articulations are often linked to a condition upon which a policy approach can change. Thus, another question is awaiting research. How determinative are national identity frames on the conditions for presidents to change foreign policy approaches? It could be that future research finds such conditions purely rhetorical or that they hold more weight in decision-making. Regardless, identity predisposition places added importance on examining a president’s identity conceptions. As the data suggests, presidents have a predisposed framing that is not likely to change during their time in office; however, a fixed view invites miscalculations. As presidents exercise foreign policy built on assertions of national identity, their hardened view of the United States will likely ripple through a conflict. Effects could be that those involved seek to negotiate, continue fighting, or turn to others for assistance based on how they react to the United States’ rhetoric. Researchers should observe the effects of different frames on a conflict and how presidents can work outside their favored identity frame. Bush, Obama, and Trump each have an identity predisposition, and multiculturalism hardly ever appears. What are the possibilities of presidents articulating a multicultural understanding of conflicts? Could a national identity frame be deployed that engages with the world’s diversity while justifying a foreign policy approach? Answering these questions navigates a path towards a multicultural foreign policy, allowing us to hope for a United States that constructively engages in a world of differences.

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