Propositions For The US Foreign Policy

Posted on July 31, 2022

Introduction

Foreign-policy propositions are useful when they identify patterns that can be tested against evidence, but they become dangerous when policymakers treat them as universal laws. The United States–China relationship illustrates this problem. Economic interdependence, regime type, domestic political incentives, military deterrence, alliances, technology, and territorial disputes all shape the probability and form of conflict. No single theory can explain the relationship by itself. The most responsible approach is to distinguish well-supported tendencies from conditional claims and then ask how each proposition applies to a strategic rivalry involving two nuclear-armed powers with extensive trade ties. This essay evaluates commercial interdependence, democratic peace, selectorate theory, and deterrence, and it translates their insights into practical principles for U.S. policy.

What Makes a Foreign-Policy Proposition Persuasive?

A proposition gains credibility when its concepts are clearly defined, its causal mechanism is plausible, its evidence covers more than one convenient case, and competing explanations are considered. Statistical association alone is not enough. For example, peaceful countries may trade more because they are already peaceful, rather than trade independently causing peace. Researchers must also decide how to measure dependence, democracy, conflict, and the severity of disputes. Results can change when a study uses bilateral trade as a share of gross domestic product, total trade volume, foreign investment, or reliance on a critical product.

Policy application requires another step. Even a strong general relationship may not predict a specific crisis. Historical averages do not eliminate uncertainty, leaders can misperceive costs, and unusual cases may violate the pattern. The purpose of theory is therefore to improve judgment, identify risks, and test assumptions—not to produce automatic decisions.

Proposition One: Economic Interdependence Can Reduce Conflict

Liberal theories argue that economic interdependence can make conflict less attractive by raising its opportunity cost. States that benefit from trade, investment, finance, and supply networks have more to lose from war. Commercial groups may also pressure governments to avoid escalation, and repeated transactions can create channels for communication. Oneal and Russett found evidence that trade and democracy were associated with more peaceful relations in their study of interstate conflict. (Oneal & Russett, 1997)

The proposition is plausible but conditional. Interdependence can be asymmetric, meaning one side depends more heavily on the relationship. The less dependent state may gain leverage, while the more dependent state may feel vulnerable and seek to reduce exposure. States may also accept economic losses when leaders believe sovereignty, security, prestige, or regime survival is at stake. Interdependence can therefore deter conflict, create coercive tools, or motivate decoupling depending on how benefits and vulnerabilities are distributed.

Applying Interdependence to the United States and China

The United States and China remain economically connected through goods trade, investment legacies, agriculture, consumer products, industrial inputs, and global supply chains. Congressional Research Service reporting describes China as a major U.S. trade partner and market while also documenting concerns about market access, industrial policy, technology, data, and economic security. This relationship creates costs for confrontation. Producers, consumers, farmers, and firms on both sides can be affected by tariffs, export controls, supply disruptions, and retaliation. ("Congressional Research Service", 2025)

At the same time, both governments have sought to reduce selected dependencies in strategically sensitive sectors. The policy is not complete economic separation; it is a contested effort to decide which connections are ordinary commerce and which create unacceptable national-security risk. Semiconductors, telecommunications, critical minerals, advanced computing, pharmaceuticals, energy equipment, and infrastructure receive greater scrutiny than many non-sensitive consumer products. Recent U.S. policy has continued to combine tariffs and compliance reviews with negotiations over trade and market access.

This pattern supports a qualified proposition: broad economic ties can raise the cost of conflict, but dependence on critical technologies or inputs can generate security fears. U.S. policymakers should avoid assuming that either total integration or total separation guarantees peace. The more defensible strategy is targeted risk reduction, diversified supply chains, transparent rules, and continued trade where security concerns are limited.

Proposition Two: Democracies Rarely Fight One

Another

Democratic-peace research has generated one of the most influential propositions in international relations: established democracies appear less likely to fight wars against one another. Explanations emphasize public accountability, institutional constraints, bargaining transparency, and norms of compromise. Critics argue about definitions, historical exceptions, selection effects, and whether alliances or shared interests explain part of the observed peace.

The proposition should not be misread as saying democracies are generally peaceful. Democratic states have fought many wars against non-democracies and have used covert action, intervention, and coercion. Nor does it follow that changing another country's regime will automatically create peace. Forced democratization can produce instability and resistance, while transitional regimes may behave unpredictably. Regime type is one factor among many.

Implications for U.S.–China Relations

China's political system differs fundamentally from that of the United States, but this fact alone does not predict war. It may affect information flows, leadership accountability, nationalism, civil-military decision-making, and the way commitments are communicated. However, geography, nuclear weapons, economic costs, alliance commitments, military capabilities, and crisis management may be more immediate determinants of escalation.

U.S. policy should therefore defend democratic values and human rights without treating regime change as a simple conflict-prevention instrument. Diplomatic communication must be designed for the political system that exists, not the one Washington might prefer. Analysts should examine how decisions are made within China's party-state while recognizing uncertainty and avoiding cultural or ideological stereotypes.

Proposition Three: Selectorate Size Shapes Leaders' Incentives

Selectorate theory argues that leaders remain in power by maintaining support from a winning coalition. Political systems with large coalitions generally require leaders to provide broader public goods, while systems with small coalitions may rely more heavily on private rewards to essential supporters. The theory has generated testable claims about war, resource allocation, and leadership survival.

Applied to conflict, the theory suggests that leaders in large-coalition systems may be selective about entering wars because failure can threaten political survival. Yet democratic leaders also face electoral pressures, partisan competition, media incentives, and public anger that can encourage toughness. Leaders in smaller-coalition systems may suppress opposition and absorb losses, but they must still manage elite support, economic performance, and military credibility. The theory clarifies incentives without removing the need for case-specific analysis.

Deterrence and the Nuclear Constraint

Nuclear deterrence is another important proposition. When two states possess survivable nuclear forces, leaders understand that a large war could impose catastrophic costs. This mutual vulnerability makes deliberate total war less likely, but it does not eliminate competition below the nuclear threshold. States may use sanctions, cyber operations, maritime pressure, influence campaigns, limited military probes, or support for partners while assuming the adversary will avoid major escalation.

The United States and China therefore face a paradox. Nuclear weapons reduce the rational appeal of all-out war, yet confidence in that restraint may encourage risk-taking in limited confrontations. Accidents, miscommunication, or different perceptions of red lines can still produce escalation. Effective deterrence requires credible capability and alliance commitments, but it also requires crisis communication, operational discipline, and channels that allow leaders to step back without humiliation.

Taiwan and Maritime Disputes as Tests of Theory

Taiwan is the most dangerous potential flashpoint because it combines identity, sovereignty, military geography, domestic legitimacy, and alliance credibility. Economic interdependence cannot be assumed to outweigh these stakes. The longstanding U.S. one-China policy is distinct from the People's Republic of China's one-China principle, and U.S. policy is guided by domestic law and executive commitments while maintaining unofficial relations with Taiwan. Preserving peace requires deterring unilateral coercion and discouraging unilateral changes to the status quo.

The South and East China Seas provide additional settings for gray-zone competition. Congressional Research Service analysis identifies maritime disputes, island construction, military facilities, and pressure on regional claimants as continuing concerns. These situations may remain below the threshold of war, but repeated encounters between ships and aircraft create risks. Alliances and partnerships can deter coercion, yet poorly signaled actions can also increase fear. Theory points toward a combination of presence, clarity, proportionality, and communication. ("Congressional Research Service", 2025)

Why Reduced Interdependence Is Not Automatically Safer

Some policymakers argue that lower economic dependence gives the United States freedom to impose costs without harming itself. That can be true in selected sectors, especially when one supplier controls a critical input. Diversification can improve resilience and reduce coercive leverage. However, indiscriminate separation may remove stabilizing interests, raise consumer and producer costs, divide allies, and encourage competing technological blocs.

A broad rupture could also create a “use it or lose it” mentality if either side believes its relative position is deteriorating. The key distinction is between resilience and isolation. Resilience creates alternatives, inventories, trusted suppliers, and domestic capacity while preserving beneficial exchange. Isolation seeks to eliminate contact and may intensify threat perceptions. U.S. policy should prioritize the former.

Policy Recommendations Derived from the Evidence

First, the United States should maintain strong deterrence while investing in crisis management. Military capability, alliance coordination, and protection of regional access should be paired with reliable communication between civilian and military officials. Second, economic policy should distinguish strategic vulnerabilities from ordinary trade. Export controls and investment restrictions should be narrow enough to protect security without becoming undefined instruments of commercial protection.

Third, Washington should coordinate with allies and partners. Unilateral pressure is less effective when firms and supply chains can reroute through third countries, and inconsistent rules can weaken trust. Fourth, policymakers should preserve diplomatic engagement even during rivalry. Negotiation does not imply agreement; it creates information and can reduce miscalculation. Fifth, human-rights policy should use accurate evidence and lawful instruments while avoiding claims that political liberalization alone will solve security disputes.

Finally, the United States should test its own assumptions. Analysts should specify what outcome a tariff, sanction, deployment, or alliance initiative is expected to produce and how success will be measured. Policies that impose costs but do not change behavior should be reviewed rather than maintained as symbols of resolve.

Limitations of the Major Propositions

Interdependence theory can underestimate nationalism and asymmetric vulnerability. Democratic-peace theory can encourage false confidence about democracies and oversimplification of non-democracies. Selectorate theory may reduce complex institutions to coalition size. Deterrence theory assumes leaders perceive capabilities and costs accurately. Each proposition offers a lens, but none captures technology, climate risk, ideology, individual psychology, bureaucratic politics, and accidental escalation at the same time.

The best analysis therefore uses several propositions in combination. Economic ties may discourage war, nuclear deterrence may limit escalation, regime incentives may shape risk tolerance, and territorial disputes may still generate crises. A policy built on only one of these insights will be fragile.

Conclusion

Empirical propositions improve U.S. foreign policy when they are treated as conditional guidance rather than universal law. Economic interdependence can raise the cost of U.S.–China conflict, but critical dependencies can also create leverage and insecurity. Democratic-peace and selectorate theories illuminate political incentives without proving that regime type determines war. Nuclear deterrence makes total conflict catastrophic, yet rivalry can persist through trade pressure, technology restrictions, cyber activity, and maritime encounters. The most defensible U.S. strategy combines targeted economic resilience, credible deterrence, allied coordination, diplomatic communication, and continual testing of policy assumptions. The objective should not be to choose between engagement and competition as absolute alternatives, but to manage both in ways that reduce coercion and preserve peace.

References

Bueno de Mesquita, B., Morrow, J. D., Siverson, R. M., & Smith, A. (2004). Testing novel implications from the selectorate theory of war. *World Politics, 56*(3), 363–388.

Congressional Research Service. (2025). *U.S.-China strategic competition in South and East China Seas: Background and issues for Congress* (R42784). https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R42784

Congressional Research Service. (2025). *U.S.-China trade relations* (IF11284). https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11284

Congressional Research Service. (2025). *The U.S. "one-China" policy and Taiwan* (IF12503). https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12503

Oneal, J. R., & Russett, B. M. (1997). The classical liberals were right: Democracy, interdependence, and conflict, 1950–1985. *International Studies Quarterly, 41*(2), 267–294.

Russett, B., Layne, C., Spiro, D. E., & Doyle, M. W. (1995). The democratic peace. *International Security, 19*(4), 164–184.

Office of the United States Trade Representative. (2026). *USTR seeks public comment on the scope and operation of a mechanism to promote balanced and reciprocal trade with China*. https://ustr.gov/about/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2026/june/ustr-seeks-public-comment-scope-and-operation-mechanism-promote-balanced-and-reciprocal-trade-china