Nations want a world in which they can be safe – that's largely a matter of relative power and defense – and comfortable – that's largely a question of relative identity or how close or far apart their self-image is from the self-images of other countries.

Americans, like peoples of other nations, have different views about their nation's safety (security) and self-image (democracy). Let's consider four such views. Two views, the nationalist and realist, place the emphasis on safety over self-image. They focus on defending not projecting America's democracy and are comfortable in an anarchic world that includes non-democratic nations. Two others, the conservative and liberal internationalist views, emphasize self-image over safety. They focus on spreading democracy as a way to make the world safer, similar to domestic affairs.

The nationalist view emphasizes defense limited to border security, preventing outside intervention in the western hemisphere and at the outer extreme a strong navy and air force to secure free transit on the high seas. Beyond that, it expects nations in Europe, Asia, Middle East and Africa to defend themselves, just as the United States does. There is no more need or justification for the United States to interfere in their affairs. If attacked, however, America must retaliate fiercely and win. There is no substitute for victory. Nationalists advocate strong military forces acting independently of alliances and international organizations.
For nationalists American democracy is "unique" but not exceptional. It is different and therefore not necessarily applicable to other nations. An anarchic international system accommodates national differences, and nationalists feel no urge to change it. Nationalists identify with the Monroe Doctrine, Andrew Jackson, and westward expansion under President James K. Polk. Today nationalists include libertarians, unilateralists, and isolationists. Pat Buchanan, Ron Paul, the CATO Institute and the original George W. Bush reflect nationalist features – the desire for a more "humble" (i.e., limited) foreign policy, the fierce reaction to attack, avoiding alliances or multilateralism, and opposition to nation-building as in Iraq (which Bush got involved in, one can argue, only because the United States toppled authoritarian regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and now has to replace them with something).

The realist tradition supports a more assertive defense policy. Why wait to be attacked? Why not pursue stability beyond America's borders or hemisphere and form alliances to contain other nations that threaten to dominate in Europe or Asia? Some realists advocate balancing from off-shore (over the horizon) positions without forward deployment of land forces, ala British policy toward Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. Others support forward-based alliances and containment, such as NATO provided in the Cold War.

Realists see America as an "ordinary" country. If it is unique, so is every other country. To preserve stability, America must not favor democratic over non-democratic nations. It should have no permanent friends or foes but be free to align with any nation, regardless
of its domestic values. America's sudden reversal and alliance with Maoist China was the classic realist response to balancing power.

Realists identify historically with Alexander Hamilton, Teddy Roosevelt and Richard Nixon (and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger). Today they staff the Nixon Center and the journal, National Interest, and viscerally oppose the policy of regime change and democracy promotion, rather than containment, in Iraq and the Middle East.

The conservative internationalist tradition shifts the emphasis from defense to democracy. America is an "exceptional", not unique or ordinary, country because it is the leader of the free world. America can be safe only in a world that becomes more free. Conservative internationalists seek to export democracy but with the help of like-minded countries, not through universal international organizations that give non-democratic nations equal voice.

Conservative internationalists want a robust defense policy that goes beyond stability and seeks a "balance of power tilted toward freedom". The use of force is not a "last" resort after diplomacy fails but a "pervasive" support for diplomacy that battles oppressive ideologies warring against freedom. At a minimum, military strength defends global markets, which encourages trade and investment and the spread of economic freedom. At a maximum, military strength supports freedom fighters and dissidents around the world and hastens the day when oppressed peoples rise up and overthrow their authoritarian masters.
Conservative internationalists identify with Thomas Jefferson, Harry Truman, and Ronald Reagan. Today they include conservative institutions such as the American Enterprise Institute, Heritage Foundation, the journal, The Weekly Standard, and the newspaper, The Wall Street Journal. Conservative internationalists are often unhappy realists (Charles Krauthammer) who support freedom not just stability or skeptical liberal internationalists (Francis Fukuyama) who doubt the efficacy of international institutions.

The liberal internationalist view also gives priority to democracy but considers American democracy as more "universalist" than exceptionalist. America is part of a wider world movement toward modernization, secularism, pluralism and human rights. Other nations contribute to this movement as much as America. Therefore liberal internationalists favor giving all countries an equal voice in world affairs, whether they are democratic or not. To be legitimate, the use of force, beyond the right of self-defense, requires multilateral consent. Collective decision-making and multilateral institutions are the best means to promote greater pluralism and human rights.

Liberal internationalists are represented by Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. Today they find a home in the Brookings Institution, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and newspapers such as The New York Times and Washington Post. They originally opposed the invasion of Iraq because it was unilateral and unnecessary (preventive) and advocate political/diplomatic solutions both inside Iraq and in the region that reduce the use of force and violence.
Historically, Americans tend to cycle between periods of relative modesty in foreign affairs (nationalist and realist) and periods of greater ambition (internationalists). The Reagan era of ambition was followed by the George H.W. Bush era of relative restraint (reluctance to see the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia break up for fear of instability), which in turn was followed by a period of "soft" (liberal internationalist) expansionism under Bill Clinton (democratic enlargement and economic engagement). George W. Bush returned to a more modest nationalist agenda ("humble" foreign policy) and reacted fiercely, as nationalists do, to attack on American soil. Military victories in Afghanistan and Iraq, however, prompted a more ambitious focus on democracy promotion and nation-building. The pendulum in 2008 may swing again, this time back to realism and stability or forward to liberal internationalism and negotiations coupled with withdrawal of forces from Iraq and the Middle East.