The Ideas-Power Nexus

By John M. Owen IV

Insofar as I remember my own thinking before I was trained in political science, my natural inclination concerning political life was toward idealism. I tended to believe that ideas—especially political ideas or ideologies—were where the action was, and I assumed that ideologies motivated people more than material interests did. By “idealism” I do not mean the utopianism that political realists enjoy skewering;1 indeed, I was a sort of pessimist because bad ideas seemed to be winning in so many areas of the world. This pessimistic idealism may have come from my growing up during the Cold War with a father who was a formidable (and affable) anticommunist.

While in college, I spent a semester at a research institute outside of Vienna. This was in 1984, during the “new Cold War” of the first Reagan administration. The institute’s staff included Soviet and other Eastern bloc scientists and students. We all got along well enough as long as we avoided discussing politics. I took brief trips across the Iron Curtain into Prague and Budapest, and found people with the ordinary concerns of life but also deep misapprehensions about the United States. My time in Central Europe impressed upon me a more detached notion of ideas and international conflict, in which strife was caused less by the badness of communism—although bad it certainly was—than by the incompatibility of communism and democratic capitalism. Ideas still moved the world, but in a different way than I had thought. I published an op-ed article in my college newspaper suggesting that the root cause of the Cold War was Soviet resentment of American prestige.

I retain a basic idealist inclination, but being trained at Harvard as a political scientist forced me to take on board the constraining effects of material factors—chiefly, military strength and wealth. In other words, I had to come to terms with realism, in particular its emphasis on material power. Most realists are pessimistic concerning the possibility of permanent global cooperation and progress, and that sat well with my own inclinations. But realism, at least in its modern versions, grounds its pessimism in materialism, or the proposition that weapons and wealth, not ideas, are what international politics is all about.

My academic work has squared the circle by stressing the interaction between ideas and power. The ideas-power nexus has a great deal to do with foreign policy, as I shall explain below. My doctoral dissertation and first book concerned the so-called

John M. Owen IV is Ambassador Henry J. Taylor Professor of Foreign Affairs and Faculty Fellow, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia, and Editor-in-Chief, Security Studies.
democratic or liberal peace, the finding that liberal democracies do not fight wars against one another. The democratic peace was an obvious case of ideas — in the form of a particular type of regime — inhibiting war. But unlike most writing on the subject, mine emphasized the tendency for liberal democracies to be suspicious of non-democracies and to want to democratize them. I titled my book Liberal Peace, Liberal War. Of course, sometimes suspicion of authoritarian states is warranted, and we should all be glad that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union are gone. Yet my point is that, as others had already noted, states inside a league of peace will not necessarily have pacific relations with states outside of it.

The tendency to promote one’s own domestic regime, I found, was not limited to liberal democracies. Monarchies, communist and fascist states, and — going further back into European history — Catholic and Protestant states all had used various means, including lethal force, to spread or preserve their own systems in other states. My research showed that governments engaged in foreign regime promotion not only because they believed it the right thing to do, but also because they believed it in their interests to do so. Under certain conditions, suppressing a rival ideology in a neighboring country could make them more secure domestically and it also could extend or protect their influence over that country more broadly. I published a set of articles and a book titled The Clash of Ideas in World Politics elaborating this argument.

That states or governments can use ideologies, ideas about the best way of life, to their advantage; that their interests can suffer if a rival ideology advances; that at the same time, they can truly believe that their regime, their way of life, is more just, more productive, and more conducive to human flourishing; that they might even be right about that: these I take to be significant insights for foreign policy. For they mean that the liberal countries that promote human rights, self-government, and free markets — the United States, in the main, but also Canada, the Europeans, Japan, and others — are affecting their own interests and those of other societies as well. They are redistributing power, whether they know it or not. The point may seem obvious, but its significance eludes many scholars and policy makers.

Let us start by looking at economic liberalization in those “other societies,” or those acted upon by the United States. Liberal democracies work through international organizations and other means to induce countries to open their economies to external goods and capital. When a country does open its economy, some of its citizens win and others lose. That conclusion is straight out of international trade theory: firms with a comparative advantage will win; firms without a comparative advantage will lose. Thus potential losers from openness will use their political power to keep their nation’s economy more closed.

Less obvious, but no less real, is that democratization and political liberalization result in similar tensions between potential winners and losers in target states. Authoritarian rulers presumably violate human rights because they and their supporters
fear a loss of power and privilege were they to respect those rights. Freeing political prisoners, lifting censorship, allowing an ethnic group cultural autonomy – such moves normally would not threaten a liberal-democratic government, but they can compromise an authoritarian one. Thus when liberal democracies work through various means to enforce respect for human rights, those actors in the target state who benefit from violations of those rights stand to lose power.

Liberal democracies rightly see human rights as a matter of justice but they are also a matter of power. Muammar Qaddafi was wicked but he had an invincible interest in perpetuating the regime that sustained him, and in an instrumental sense he was rational to oppose liberalization and democratization. By the same token, some of his opponents were rational to favor more liberty and democracy in Libya because these things would enhance their ability to shape outcomes. After Qaddafi was ousted, the competition began over who would have political power in Libya. No doubt many of the competitors are persons of good will. But none of them are disinterested.

More important for international politics, the promotion of free markets, liberal rights, and democracy redistributes power at the global level. Whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, these policy tools are instrumental to US hegemony.5

How does that work? It is in the interests of any state to have as friendly a political and economic environment as possible — one that is less threatening to its security and more conducive to its accumulation of wealth. Autarkic states — those seeking economic self-sufficiency — tend to build empires because they require exclusive economic access to resources. By contrast, economically liberal states such as the United States seek to break up empires so as to maximize economic opportunities and partners abroad. They do not want to annex foreign territory; they want to open it up to their investors and merchants. US economic growth depends increasingly upon global growth. This is why the United States has been determined to maintain hegemony in the Middle East: not because, as some critics imagine, it wants to own more oil deposits or destroy Islam, but rather to maintain stable energy prices for the US and hence the global economy.

Maximizing international economic growth is per se a good thing, and Americans are right to think so. What they often miss is that pressing other countries to open their economies has also helped extend the United States’ time atop the global hierarchy.

Likewise, promoting democracy and human rights has helped prolong US hegemony. If democracies do not fight one another; if they tend to be faithful allies; to produce fewer terrorists; to keep better control of their weapons of mass destruction; and vote with the United States in the UN General Assembly; then it is to US advantage, all else being equal, to have more democracies in the world. Democracy is endogenous with economic development, to join more international ties: liberal democracies tend to become more independent, to be more reliable international partners in general.7 Liberal capitalist democracies have concrete material interests in cooperating with the United States. They also tend to share goals, measuring national success not by how feared they are, or whether their territory is expanding, or by how
far they are defying the United States; but instead by how fast their economies are
growing, how healthy their democracy is, and so on. Joseph Nye calls the ability to get
others to want what you want “soft power,” and he argues that it is a force multiplier
for the United States — or any country that has it.8

The promotion and spread of individual liberty and free markets is related to more
familiar instruments of US hegemony, namely international institutions. Most interna-
tional relations scholars accept that institutions such as NATO, the WTO, the IMF, the
G-20, and so on ease international cooperation by lowering transaction costs among
states.9 But institutions do more than that. John Ikenberry argues persuasively that the
United States constructed the predominant international institutions during and after
the Second World War to facilitate cooperation but also to perpetuate US hegemony.
These institutions resulted from bargains between the United States and other democ-
racies that had less power. The United States agreed to bind itself to clear rules so as to
make its outsized power more acceptable. In exchange, smaller democracies agreed not
to challenge US primacy.10 In short, the United States has preserved its global primacy
by, among other things, promoting liberal institutions within and among countries.

Now, none of this means that American and fellow capitalist democracies
always work together in perfect harmony. For that matter, when the United States
has disputes with subordinate members of the liberal-democratic club, US interests
do not always prevail. That is clearly the case with Europe. The United States lost a
major case involving Boeing Aircraft in March 2012, in which the WTO ruled that
the US government pays massive illegal subsidies to the giant corporation, giving it
an unfair advantage over Europe’s Airbus.11 France and Germany, two major NATO
allies, actively tried to block the US-led war in Iraq that began in 2003. Sometimes
fellow democracies are quite aloof; India tilted toward the Soviet Union during the
Cold War, though its economic and security ties with the United States have grown
robustly since the early 1990s.

Neither is it only the United States that is helped by the spread of democracy and
free markets. Other liberal democracies benefit as well. Most obviously, the nations
of the European Union now enjoy greater security and prosperity than ever in their
long histories, thanks in part to the shared domestic institutions that allow them to
construct common regional institutions. More broadly, liberal democracies in Asia
and Latin America enjoy benefits from US hegemony, including economic growth
and a resulting entrenchment of electoral democracy. (Africa and the Middle East have not conformed to this
happy story. African democracy has not corresponded to higher economic growth, and, apart from the anomalous
policies of George W. Bush, the United States has not promoted liberal democracy in the Middle East.)

Non-democracies can benefit as well, if they enact the right policies. In fact, since the 1980s, authoritarian
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(though not Leninism) and exporting to the United

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States and the many nations whose economies US hegemony has opened over the decades.

Notwithstanding all of these points, the promotion of democracy, free markets, and international institutions has sustained the US global position. Had the United States not been the activist global power it has been since the Second World War, it would have saved a great deal of money, but it would have foregone a great deal more money because it would have done without the trade, investment, and influence that it enjoys as a result. But the larger point I am making here is that the spread of what Americans and many others rightly regard as good things cannot be divorced from the perpetuation of US power.

Fellow liberal democracies are aware of the workings of US hegemony. Indeed, they probably understand hegemony better than we do, since they must endure slights and humiliations that Americans are not aware that they inflict. But liberal-democratic partners generally endure rather than oppose US hegemony. They must constantly think about the alternatives, and challenging US primacy would be costly and possibly bring about something worse. That is how hegemony works: it co-opts so that it does not have to coerce.

It is the countries that differ sharply with the United States on democracy, human rights, markets, or some combination of the three that reveal power is being exercised. These are the countries mostly likely to resist US hegemony and to try to construct alternative world orders. It is no accident that China is the country that has gone the farthest in this direction, via its increases in military spending and attempts to foster East Asian cooperation without the United States. Nor is it accidental that Russia has become much more resistant to US primacy since the accession to power of the non-liberal Vladimir Putin. In Latin America, it is Venezuela under the socialist authoritarian Hugo Chavez that is most determined to be out from under the United States. In the Middle East, it is the Islamic Republic of Iran that is most bent on driving the Americans and their client regimes out and in establishing an alternative regional order.

What does recognition of the entanglement of US power with freedom and justice have to do with foreign policy?

Let me start by noting that few in the foreign policy world grasp, or at least acknowledge, this power-freedom entanglement. Hegemony is complex, even paradoxical. Those we usually call realists, whose analysis looks chiefly at military power, do not recognize the promotion of domestic and international institutions as force multipliers. Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense under the first administration of George W. Bush, was once asked his opinion of soft power. “I don’t know what that means,” was his reply, and he spoke for many. Realists have no problem with the United States seeking advantage because the world is a competitive and dangerous place. But to them, promoting US ideals offers no advantage. Power inheres in armies, carrier battle groups, drones, and the Green Berets; ideas about the good life or liberty have nothing to do with it. Realists regard the raid that killed Osama bin Laden as vindicating their position. Carefully calibrated military force, not the spread of freedom, makes America more secure.
On the opposite end of the political spectrum, the same fundamental mistake is evident. Many American liberals insist that power and principle are separate and must not be conflated. They are following the spirit of Woodrow Wilson. In April 1917, when Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany, he declared that “we act . . . not in enmity towards a people or with the desire to bring any injury or disadvantage upon them, but only in armed opposition to an irresponsible government which has thrown aside all considerations of humanity and of right . . .” Wilsonians are like realists in that they separate power from justice. The difference is that Wilsonians want the United States to pursue the latter rather than the former. They are more comfortable with the use of hard power to vindicate human rights precisely because it seems the most disinterested. Thus, human rights activists Susan Rice and Samantha Power favored the NATO air strikes in Libya in 2011.

Wilsonians are certainly correct that the entwining of power and principle is uncomfortable and something not to be stressed in diplomacy. Imagine the international reaction if President Obama proclaimed, “America supports freedom for all of the world’s people, regardless of nationality. We believe everyone deserves liberty. But to tell you the truth, what we really like is the fact that a more democratic world helps keep America number one!” The candid speechwriter responsible for that line would be fired before he could board Air Force One for the flight back to Washington.

A third group, the so-called neoconservatives, does see the connection between power and justice; they know how international hegemony works. In the 1980s, Paul Wolfowitz pushed the Reagan administration to pursue a “freedom agenda” because it was not only the right thing to do, it would also help the United States beat the communist Soviet Union in the global Cold War. The same Wolfowitz, in the G.W. Bush administration, used that reasoning to argue for democracy promotion in the Middle East: democratizing Iraq would make the United States more secure. The trouble with the neoconservatives is that they did not appreciate the implications of their own analysis. If soft power is power then its exercise is bound to generate resistance and repulsion from those who are immune to it. The repulsion will be serious precisely because the stakes are as high as the neoconservatives say they are. Thus Iraq.

All of these mainstream views come up short, then. How should policy makers take on board the insight that US power is entangled with the promotion of US values? Understanding how hegemony works does not yield a clear algorithm for US foreign policy. It does not mean that the United States should simply retreat from global involvement for fear of being hypocritical or self-serving; US liberal hegemony has helped people in many countries, as well as Americans themselves. Nor does it mean that the United States should go abroad, in the words of John Quincy Adams, “in search of monsters to destroy.” Soft power will encounter countervailing power.

Understanding how hegemony works does not yield a clear algorithm for US foreign policy.
My scholarly work on the ideas-power nexus has taught me a much more general lesson: US policy makers should be aware that when they promote democracy, human rights, and markets — whether by force or by international institutional pressure — they are, indirectly but unmistakably, promoting US power. That is why America, even when it does the right thing, will never be loved, at least not for long. Policy makers skeptical of soft power should also be aware that promoting US power can sometimes entail promoting democracy, human rights, and market economics. Applying this twofold lesson will not magically end the world’s problems. Its application must vary with circumstance. But learning it is a matter of self-awareness, and that can only be a good thing.

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