

Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Post-Wilsonian Era: An Analysis of American Foreign Policy as a Derivative of Political Tradition Based on the Idealism-Realism Spectrum

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Abstract:

Ideology, as a system of ideas characterizing that forms the basis of theories and policies, shapes the way in which citizens and politicians conceptualize foreign policy. In analyzing the determinants of American foreign policy in the post-Wilsonian era, this research considers realism and idealism to be the two opposing foundational ideologies upon which additional systems in political thought are founded. An analysis of ideologies, in this sense, from isolationism to neoliberalism and expansionism demonstrates that the core ideological roots found in American policy doctrines are formed as a result of constant symbiotic interplay of political realism and idealism. Approaching ideology on the basis of continuity and change, this research attempts to analyze the areas in which ideologies influenced American foreign policy in the post-Wilson period by analyzing the prominent social and political understandings since the birth of America as a nation and state.. The main purpose of this academic study, therefore, is to identify the role of ideology in influencing American politicians and state policies, in the formation of policies characterizing foreign affairs of the United States.

Keywords: American foreign policy; American political thought; conservatism; idealism; liberalism; realism

INTRODUCTION

Ideologies are systems of ideas constituting any given practice, held at the individual as well as national level that serve to determine the conduct of American foreign policy. Arguably, what distinguishes the ideologies adopted by American politicians, primarily, are the values based on idealism that make the nation not also exemplary or pioneering but also “superior to other nations” and deserving of privileges over other states. (Mearsheimer, 2011, 8) The United States, like any other state, is subject to the competitive and conflictual aspects of political realism. Nonetheless, the foundations of Americans’ deeply rooted self-perception of exceptionalism arguably allow the United States policies to defy predominantly pragmatic interests in *realpolitik* in a way other nations cannot. American exceptionalism, accordingly, was born predominantly idealistic, although the symbiotic nature of realism and idealism necessitated in time that exceptional national features be built on and shaped in relation to policies characterized by realism as well. America has been identified as ‘the Kingdom of God on Earth,’ founded upon the European philosophical conception of the state, as ‘a sphere in which eternal truth and justice is or should be realized.’ (Tucker, 1978, 628) The endeavor to investigate the nature and role of ideology in shaping American foreign policy necessitates a historical analysis of the nation’s political narratives and policy choices. This paper will examine the origins, function and evolution of foundational and accompanying state ideologies in the form of state behavior, presidential doctrines and political legacies, to provide a basis for the adoption of recurring as well as contrasting foreign policy practices of the United States.

A comparison of the Foundational Era of America to the contemporary world demonstrates that foreign policy around the globe has in time turned more and more “structural.” States today exist in a society, and their behavior is impacted upon by norms that have arisen out of a reliance on liberal thought. Idealism is and has been remarkably prominent in American politics due to the unique intellectual and societal foundations of the republic, examined in this research. National ideology, defined as the sum of prevalent ideas and norms that guides the members of society in their behavior, can therefore be utilized in garnering popular support for administrations’ policies. (Levi, 1970, 20) The values at the heart of ideology in statecraft carry vital significance in steering

policy making processes and instructing ‘what ought to be.’ American society came into being prior to the formation of the U.S. as an actor in the order of competitive states, and possessed shared ideas other than blood or religion. This characteristic of the nation allowed its people to forego the competitive nationalism of the Old World, its restrictive geopolitical concerns and European feudalism in the making of the nation. Americans were virtually able to import political notions and ideologies of the enlightenment, such as individualism, republicanism, and federalism from Europe, to craft their identity. They had not needed, in other words, to make the mistakes other states had, for progress as a nation. As a mass society, Americans did not “grasp the politics, history, and social forces out of which foreign policy is typically made elsewhere,” (Lepgold and McKeown, 1995, p 383) and thus American politics was ‘exceptionally’ conducive to idealism in international relations.

The opposing camp of ideology, realism, is presumed to offer accurate explanations for state behavior based on the rational and positivist approaches to foreign relations, as states are obligated by earthly concerns and anarchy to prioritize survival for the protection of their existence, borders and national security at large. Although realists emphasize the anarchic order in the international system, Mearsheimer, an offensive realist, acknowledges this is “not to say that the system is characterized by chaos or disorder.” (2011, 5) The United States is endowed with the qualifications to contribute to international order as an exemplary leader, as its conception as a state has been embellished with elements of what is known in the literature as American exceptionalism. Because exceptionalism depicts US global dominance via “representations of a destabilized world order in need of US power to maintain order,” (Pease, 2009, 20) American exceptionalism may carry elements of political realism based on dominance, in addition to idealism based on exemplary leadership. America was a nation born on a mission to be “a city upon a hill’ as a product of “some divine plan,” (Engen, 2020) and a beacon of hope for the world. The United States is and has been thought to be exceptional in its ability to defy, at times and when needed, external factors and the quest for material advantage, to play the game of states on its own terms. Americans view the instruments and objectives of realpolitik suspiciously (Lepgold and McKeown, 1995, 370) and this peculiarity allows the U.S. to bypass the boundaries of material interests, and justify conflict or cooperation with reference to an exceptional, morally superior position.

The challenge that emerges in the effort to determine the nature and influence of ideology in foreign policy is the arduous endeavor to acquire practical insight into the process of foreign policy stages. The impact and the agency of values and idealism or interests and realism, demonstrated by scholarship focusing on the making and the implementation of foreign policies comparatively, are not mutually exclusive. Distinguishing the function of opposing ideologies, Levi argues that although idealism-driven ideology may play a minor role in deciding the state's objectives and plan to reach them, it plays the more important role in justifying the decision once it has been made. (1970, p. 5) This point reveals that statesmen's choices have to be accounted for through the information that the state has been and will be circulating.

In defining the conduct of American foreign policy, presidential doctrines are of utmost importance and will be a major source of analysis for this research. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 is renowned for its articulation of the scope of the state's influence. Just as ideology and the self-image of nations evolve over time, American administrations were to refer to Monroe's Doctrine in justifying the adoption of ever more expansionist policies in the conquest of the American frontier and the expansion into the rest of the globe. Reinforced by the moral and divine superiority granted by Manifest Destiny, American interventionism and the use of hard power assumed elements of offensive realism as a rising power. In the twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt's 'Big Stick' ideology which was a realist consequence of increasing U.S. capabilities, would be countered by the idealist agenda and liberal institutionalism put forth by President Woodrow Wilson.

The formation of foreign policy since the Wilsonian era demonstrates a transition into a new period in which influence by and exposure to offshore developments transformed American presidential doctrines. The ideological orientation of the United States gained practical salience as presidents acted in anticipation of reactions from increasingly larger audiences, and were motivated to be responsive to the international system. Drawing on the exceptional nature of the U.S.' foundation era, Wilson guaranteed that the objectives of foreign policy were the means to protect and promote individual freedom and well-being, in line with Jeffersonian thought. Ever-growing national

interests, on the other hand, necessitated that the U.S. “police” free trade and (collective) security from the Panama Canal to Germany and Taiwan. It is demonstrated in this research that in diverse geopolitical settings, elements of idealism and realism in American foreign policy evolve and complement one another toward the conduct, formulation and articulation of American foreign policy. In this regard, ideology has played a key role in establishing a moral position for the United States especially during World War 2, the Cold War and the War on Terror.

The aftermath of the Great Depression and the First World War engendered vacillating trends of idealism and isolationism as well as unilateralism, multilateralism and interventionism. The enhanced role and recognition of the United States in the post-Wilsonian era was followed by the need for novel narratives, doctrines, allies, adversaries, and ideological alignments. In foreign policy, the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan introduced notable foreign policy concepts such as the fight against communism, containment and the necessity to expand interventionism in transatlantic affairs. The United States was ready to invest in strengthening allies to oppose the threat posed by the Soviet Union. The presidents had to provide justifications for American interventionism and the use of military power. Still, diplomacy and unilateralist militarism had been harmonized within the newly-crafted image of the nation, as the American involvement in the Korean war (1950) and the Suez Crisis (1956) involved multilateral conduct in combat. Realism and idealism are competing theories/ideologies in understanding the rationale behind the making and implementation of American foreign policy.

It should be remembered, however, that the U.S. simultaneously adopted a neoliberal ideology in economics built upon free trade and the use of the dollar as a reserve global currency. This meant that unlike the foundation era in which America had to find a way to exist in a world system of mercantilism dominated by major global powers, the United States now had the means to dictate the norms and conduct of trade and global finance in much the same way it sought to become the only superpower by defeating the Soviet Union. America’s economic policies mirrored, on the other hand, its foundational values of idealism-driven exceptionalism that purported to ‘free trade’ from its shackles. (Tucker & Hendrickson, 1990: 141) As economics and politics are both fields of foreign policy, this dichotomy in the manifestations of state ideology remains a crucial area to

be explored and examined on a case by case basis. In this period, the U.S.' reliance on diplomacy and economic cooperation was recurrently accompanied by aggression and unilateral action. The salience of ideology and interests remains a constant in U.S. foreign policy and explains America's stance on neoliberalism, democracy and institutionalism. The Eisenhower-planned and Kennedy-launched failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba proves doctrines are passed on through administrations. Elsewhere, the Middle East stood at the intersection of the nation's political, military and economic interests, which expedited the Carter administration's departure from a dialogue-based foreign policy in favor of hard power. Ideologically, President Carter had to adopt an aggressive anti-Soviet position and abandon the twin-pillar policy of the Nixon Doctrine's detached oversight on the Persian Gulf. This shift in foreign policy portrays pragmatism and interests may trump ideology, doctrines and legacies in foreign policy.

In light of these explanations, this research attempts to design and implement a research framework investigating the ideological foundations of American foreign policy doctrines as well as politicians' individual decision-making. This study aims to demonstrate that a dual analysis of ideology, on the basis of realism and idealism as two polar opposites, can be employed to assess the vacillating foreign policy trends in the conduct of United States foreign policy that contrast or parallel pillars in American political thought.

Related Literature

Based on a number of scholars whose work I have examined in this research, I hold that the nature of political ideologies adopted by states and politicians can be analyzed via a bipolar theoretical framework. Idealism and realism are considered to be two opposing ideological foundations that characterize American foreign policy, and tie to other accompanying political strategies and philosophies influencing state behavior and individuals' decision making in politics. In the field of social sciences, there are many studies delving into the distinct features defining idealist and realist behavior. This research draws not only on the extant literature on the relevant First Great Debate in International Relations but also on an understanding of the two major theories of interstate politics that are liberalism and realism.

Idealism, in this paper, is primarily associated with inherent idiosyncratic values and the exemplary global role of the United States as a flag-bearer of liberty in promoting democracy, multilateral conduct, diplomacy and cooperation. Realism, on the other hand, correlates with the politics and maximization of power, competition, pragmatic interests and the enforcement role of the United States around the globe. On the nature of the function and coexistence of these two ideologies in governance, it will be argued that a society undeniably is built on common national interests, and yet it is values and beliefs that serve to strengthen it by conceiving a sense of community and identity.

Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems Theory posits that multiple systems composed of different forms of order exist in the world, that serve to determine the economic and political systemic role of each state. As a leader of the core countries, the United States arguably demonstrates behavior that follows as well as enforces global order underlined by its hegemony in the economic, political and military spheres of influence among nations. Analyzing American foreign policy in line with this systemic framework facilitates an inquiry into the sources of cooperation and conflict in relation to the realist dictates of hegemony. Built upon the tenets of structural realism, such a world of systemic competition encourages power maximization and attempts to punish anarchy. Still, a constructivist approach to examining American foreign policy clarifies that the identity of state, in and of itself, can engender behavior associated with liberalism, cooperation and enhanced institutionalism.

On the sources of conflict and cooperation, Kenneth Waltz identifies three images that influence foreign policy. The human nature of politicians, the sociopolitics and identity of each state, and the structure of global politics correspond to the three proposed sources or images of state behavior, and this research offers an account of all three aspects, primarily in reference to the second image. In the post-Wilsonian era, American exceptionalism is argued to demonstrate the tenets of political liberalism and idealism in line with the literature, like in the foundation era, unless realism is noted to be especially influential in foreign policies. Other studies that concentrate on the tangible, practical objectives achievable through foreign policy reveal that it is an arduous task to determine

at any given time whether the United States capitulates to pragmatic interests and political realism, or acts on idealist exceptionalism in the practice or making of foreign policy.

This research portrays that exceptionalism is based on Mearsheimer's view that "American elites, as well as the American public, tend to regard realism with hostility." (Ruggie, 1995, 68) Historically, it has been a deeply-rooted norm in American foreign policy that diplomacy and alliance building hinge on moral and ideological conditions to be evaluated by the United States. The presence of such morally-founded justifications in the history of U.S. presidential doctrines and policy making, as well as exceptions to this norm, prompt this inquiry into the determinants and characteristics of foreign policy in the United States. Ever since the end of World War 2, it is found that America has enjoyed a position to set the rules in the system of international relations, intervene in the affairs of states deemed "deviant" and adjusted its national narrative and ideologies accordingly.

As mentioned, the structural turn of international relations, with world politics becoming a society in the post-Wilsonian era, has brought about concepts such as defensive offensive realism used to understand foreign policy behavior today. The variance of elements of idealism and realism in different U.S. presidential doctrines and policies indicate that new information and interests can alter vital values and beliefs, and ideologies evolve and gain flexibility in relation to national interests. (Levi, 1970, 13) Today in the 21st century, vacillating trends in foreign policy are precedented as well as novel in the history of U.S. statecraft. The Bush administration's neoconservative ideology was led by foreign policy hawks seeking a revival of patriotism, militarism and expansionism. The otherization of America's enemies has resurged as a foreign policy tool, as did containment and phrases such as the 'axis of evil'. State ideology and presidential doctrines continued to adapt to shape Barack Obama's and Donald Trump's complex foreign policy choices in Libya, Venezuela, Ukraine and Syria. Today, the diversity of rivaling opinions held by U.S. policy makers and world leaders demonstrates the salience of political ideology in foreign affairs. (Gill, 2016, 138)

Research Method & Questions

The subject of the research relates to the internal as well as external factors constituting the ideological foundations and national interests that influence foreign policy and presidential doctrines. The role of ideology will be examined in its lasting salience to shape public discourse and foreign affairs in the post-Wilson political era. The problem that is the basis of this research paper is the effort to shed light on the motivations for state behavior and foreign policy agendas. In this study, a qualitative method of research is to be utilized methodologically, in terms of data collection and interpretation. The case studies and periods of history necessitate a thorough contextual analysis throughout the research.

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the function of ideology in shaping and being shaped by the conduct of American foreign policy. To that end, social, political and economic factors impacting this equation will be examined from theoretical and practical outlooks, with an extensive focus on the executive office of the president of the United States and how state behavior may be situated within the theories of international relations. To that end, this study draws upon the literature on realism and liberalism, structural realism and the further conceptual and systemic frameworks such as the World Systems Theory, to illustrate the binary symbiosis of elements of idealist and realist thought in the making and implementation of American foreign policy. The research refers to scholars who have depicted the United States from a constructivist approach, to highlight the salience of Kenneth Waltz's second image of the sources of cooperation and conflict, which is the socio-political, ideological setting in which foreign policies are constructed. Due to the lengthy time period through which American foreign policy is examined, an analysis of idealism and realism found in American presidents' policy choices entails in this study an evaluation of the progression of state behavior and international norms, in line with the structural and institutional development in global politics that has arguably served to transform the interstate "system" into a society. Overall, a theoretically analytical and critical assessment of American foreign policy, based on the characteristics of specific political ideologies employed, will be attempted.

This research, responding to the problem of identifying causes of cooperation and conflict as well as the adoption of realism and idealism therein, will put forward and seek to illustrate the factors that influence the adoption of political realism or idealism as the main components of ideologies in American foreign policy. It will seek to answer the question as to what components are most essential in the resort to aggression, threat and war, as well as to diplomacy and inter-state dialogue. Another relevant question, in line with the globally systemic analysis of international relations, revolves around the extent to which parallels are observed between foreign policies driven by economics and those driven by politics and power in the United States. In exploring the changing global dynamics outside of the United States that have contributed to the adoption of ideological orientations and foreign policies in American politics the formulation of a thesis and hypotheses, therefore, will necessitate a pivotal point of analysis that will recurrently address the most influential events and characters of American foreign policy in the post-Wilsonian era.

RESULTS

In this research, it has been suggested that the founding of the constitutional republic and the internal development of civil society in the United States have had a major impact on the formulation of political ideologies, which in turn are observed to influence the state's foreign policy agenda. Of major concern was the role and function of idiosyncratic features of American national identity that are observed to characterize presidential doctrines. To that end, ideological foundations of American political thought such as American exceptionalism were associated primarily with political idealism. This function of exceptionalism is supported by Mearsheimer's view that "American elites, as well as the American public, tend to regard realism with hostility." (Ruggie, 1995, 68)

From an ideological perspective, the interplay and competition between realism and idealism are present in many principal events in American history and foreign policy. The American Revolution is arguably the most defining event in the inauguration of the United States as a distinguished actor whose foreign affairs portrayed endemic national characteristics, interests and ideology. The nation's sympathy for the French Revolution was therefore based on the promotion of civil

liberties and the rule of the people in the face of imperial tyranny, mirroring the national tendency toward embracing liberal thought in governance. War, for example, was the ultimate nemesis in Jeffersonian thought, and its costs brought the many under the domination of the few, but practically this did not stop Jefferson from adopting some degree of expansionism and using threats of aggression. (Tucker & Hendrickson, 1990: 140)

Manifest Destiny and Jacksonianism are prime examples of political idealism being wielded toward the “reactionary” objectives of the emerging expansion-driven offensive realism of the United States. In fact, a reading of the Civil War of 1861 once again points to a social cleavage marked by conflicting aspects of realism and idealism in the form of conservative and liberal thought on the issues of forced labor, slavery and plantations. Just as Abraham Lincoln embraced an idealistic stance in abolition, Woodrow Wilson guaranteed that the objectives of foreign policy were the means to protect and promote individual freedom and well-being. The post-Wilsonian era therefore paved the way for the position of America in a world in need of leadership. Pragmatically, it was arguably the recognition that global hegemony cannot be sustained due to geopolitical difficulties, as asserted by Mearsheimer, that the United States sought to supplement its global military influence and expansion during the Cold War via a reliance on its national image in global politics and on liberal institutionalism.

The exceptional American belief fueled primarily by idealism promoted that no other state possessed the means and exemplary leadership qualities of America. (Holsti, 2010, 381) The ideological orientation of the United States gained practical salience as presidents acted in anticipation of reactions from increasingly larger audiences, and were motivated to be responsive to the international system. As idealism was geared toward the maintenance of cooperation and contribution in the neoliberal order, America’s economic policies initially mirrored its foundational values of idealism-driven exceptionalism that purported to ‘free trade’ from its shackles. (Tucker & Hendrickson, 1990: 141) Ideology, in the form of interventionism, aligned the United States with diverse allies from different geographies, especially after the announcement of the Truman Doctrine in 1947 and the founding of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949. Next, a world order of free trade and cooperation was followed by the politics of power that

endowed the U.S. with the additional necessary duty, that has gained following the Cold War, of “policing the world” to ensure compliance with the international system.

Access to oil, global economic crises and other regional conflicts were areas of concern the United States continued to be entangled with, as part of its aspiration to ‘police the world’ in the American century. (Bokat-Lindell, 2021) The objective in American foreign policy in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union was to capitalize on the defeat of the adversary in various novel ways around the globe. The next era of confrontation in foreign affairs arrived after the September 11 attacks, as the perpetrator’s base of operations was Afghanistan, where American support for a right wing regime had contributed to a hub for fundamentalism. The breakthroughs in American foreign policy in the post-Wilsonian era demonstrate that different eras present varying threats, opportunities and motivations impacting state behavior, and that ideological systems are likewise not static.

DISCUSSION

In this study, a number of issues and debates in tying to the rationales for state behavior in international relations have been examined and responded to. Linking classical societal and individual elements of realism and liberalism in governance to the ideological nature and conduct of foreign affairs within the structural realism of world politics today, this study attempts to highlight the national factors that are often linked to either one of realist or idealist approaches to the making of foreign policies. In building a narrative based on the progression of ideas in American politics, the findings from the analysis of major events in American foreign policy depict that the foundational era of the United States has been pivotal in creating lasting legacies that impact later generations’ foreign policy agendas.

It is assumed that the monumental cults of personality and doctrines of the Founding Fathers have laid the foundation for prominent geopolitical strategies of the United States, including democracy promotion and the containment doctrine. Although the argument that the sociopolitical makeup of any given nation has a bearing on its foreign policy behavior has been relatively demonstrable for

the United States, it should be remembered that America enjoys and has for a long time enjoyed a privileged position among other nations in international relations. Therefore, American statesmen's use of political idealism may in fact tie to the fact it can be a playmaker, competitor or a rogue hegemon within a world order of primarily its own creation. It follows that idealism and liberalism in international politics may strictly mirror how states, based on their material capabilities, are able to view and interpret anarchy in the order, relative to their power.

The designing and implementation of order in the neoliberal, neoconservative global system, as outlined in this research, points to parallels observed between foreign policies driven by economics and those driven by politics and power in the United States. Regardless of how alarming, threats and enemies are observed to characterize and steer American foreign policy makers' role in multilateral institutions. It should be remembered, however, that realism and idealism have been found in this research to evolve and complement one another, and it is expected that future American foreign policies will demonstrate both of these ideological components in different manners, in response to threats facing the United States.

CONCLUSION

The interlinked nature of realism and idealism, as fundamental ideologies characterizing American foreign policy, is accentuated on the basis of expansionism, within the dynamic dialectical relationship between the maintenance of neoliberal globalization and neoconservative interventionism deemed necessary. The expansionist function of the economic, political as well as military domains of foreign policy were instrumentalized as finance capital initially penetrates other states' national economies, to subject "even states enjoying the fullest political independence" (Lenin, 1916, 61 & 62) American military involvement in countries such as Libya and Iraq, as explained in this research, is arguably tied to economic concerns in relation to the 'global police' role of the United States within the neoliberal order. In this sense, it can be argued that America not only ranks other nations based on a moral perception of their democratic and civilizational development, but also seeks to punish the outliers of the American-led world order that do not 'obey' their systemic role as designated by the World Systems Theory.

In this world order characterized by neoliberalism as well as neoconservatism, therefore, the United States continues to act as an “arbiter of good and evil” (Ryn, 2003, 395) and act unilaterally as well as multilaterally based on its political power in global institutions such as the United Nations and its Security Council. The Post-Cold War American objective of the Hamiltonian vision of an integrated and arguably ‘centralized’ global economy, and liberal institutionalism and the political order of Woodrow Wilson (Mead, 1999, 19) are supplemented by Jacksonians’ preference for hard power and interventionism. Just as the War on Terror served to perpetuate the justification of American military involvement in varying geographies, the containment of states of the ‘evil school’ today such as Iran and North Korea demonstrates areas of continuity in line with the politics of power combined with moral idealism. Elements of change, on the other hand, are observed in the variations in administrations’ commitment to international agreements such as the Paris agreement, the ever-increasing resort to multilateralism and interstate diplomacy, drone warfare and troop commitment, as well as the selection of new geographies

Overall, this research establishes that within the evolution of both realism and idealism in American foreign policy, idealism and liberalism have been the more flexible one in its ability to introduce novel concepts and methods in international relations. Both of these ideological components of foreign policy display reactionary and complementary characteristics, although realism and conservatism are observed to engender particularly far-reaching consequences in times of major American and global crises. Just as Donald Trump’s military isolationism did not stop the president from taking unilateral action in the assassination of Suleimani, the liberal/pacifist stance of Joseph Biden did not prevent him rallying behind Ukraine via economic and military equipment aid in the war against Russia. Despite fluctuation in policy choices based on the individual preferences of presidents and their doctrines, American foreign policy generally demonstrates a commitment to realist interests for the maintaining of the nation’s role in global economic and political order. Elements of continuity and change are expected to ‘remain’ in the foreign affairs of the United States, serving to balance out the adoption of ideological positions in relation to each other.

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