

The Logic of Counterpoint

Aspirations of Liberal Hegemony and Counter-Ideological Alignment

Igor A. Istomin

Abstract

Since the 2000s, the drive towards normative hegemony of liberalism promoted by the United States has contributed to the consolidation of new alignments on the international arena. As it posed an ideological threat to other systems of rule, American policy prompted some states towards balance by encouraging them to strengthen cooperation between themselves. This pattern of behavior is typical of any political belief system claiming to provide universally applicable solutions for building political order in societies. Such universalist ideologies appear intrinsically expansionist and uncompromising to alternatives. Governments, whose legitimacy relies on a universalist belief system, have

Igor A. Istomin, Ph.D. in Political Science

MGIMO University, Moscow, Russia

Associate Professor, Department of Applied International Political Analysis;

Senior Research Fellow, Laboratory for Analysis of International Processes

SPIN RSCI: 8424-4697

RSCI AuthorID: 333124

ResearcherID WoS: A-8494-2017

Scopus Author ID: 57185537900

E-mail: iaistomin@gmail.com

Tel.: (+7) 495-225-40-42

Address: 76 Vernadsky Prospect, Moscow 119454, Russia

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a vested interest in promoting it internationally in order to substantiate the foundations of their authority. They tend to invest various resources (and not just rhetorical capital) in the promulgation of their universalist ideology. This, however, leads to the rise of counter-ideological alignments uniting those states which find themselves ostracized or coerced. Western experts criticize such cooperative arrangements, built upon the rejection of American ideological hegemonism, as transactional and hollow in substance. This article attempts to show that such an assessment is erroneous since ideological threats are not just delusional, but they tend to become even more significant than traditional territorial disputes between major powers and influential regional players in the current international environment. The article substantiates this argument by providing a framework for assessing the impact of universalist ideologies on interstate relations, looking at the history of their promotion and evaluating recent patterns of ideational struggle and alignment formation.

Keywords: liberal ideology, liberal hegemony, universalist ideologies, counter-ideological alignment

CRITICAL VIEWS ON UNWELCOME ALIGNMENTS

The last decade witnessed the trend towards forming alignments among non-Western states. They vary from full-fledged intergovernmental organizations (such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) to less institutionalized associations (BRICS) to casual groupings. Rarely such coalitions develop into alliances with legally binding commitments of mutual assistance similar to U.S.-led multilateral and bilateral arrangements (such as NATO or the U.S.-Japanese alliance). Rather they typically suggest a more flexible rapprochement for political coordination and mutual support (on the typology of cooperative arrangements in international politics see Wilkins, 2011). A good example is trilateral cooperation between Russia, Turkey, and Iran which set up an informal grouping to address the Syrian issue.

While such coalitions are associated primarily with Moscow's and Beijing's activities, they are often joined by other states, condemned by the United States as illiberal or non-democratic. The list includes such different countries as Turkey, Iran, and Egypt in the Middle East

or Venezuela, Cuba and other “leftist” governments of the Bolivarian Alliance across Latin America. Cooperative arrangements are often criticized by Western experts as invariable and flawed (Lo, 2016; Kaplan, 2017; Stein 2018). As there are usually significant differences and even disputes between these countries, their cooperation is attributed to the common anti-American sentiment. It is presented as inherently opportunistic and hollow in substance.

This article attempts to show that such criticism is erroneous. While these alignments, indeed, come as a response to the policies adopted by the United States and its allies, they are not delusional or completely transactional. An ideological threat caused by America’s promotion of liberal hegemony bonds states together, even if they rely on incompatible principles of legitimacy. This article argues, therefore, that balancing coalitions emerging in response to the Western normative challenge are not necessarily less solid and enduring than other types of alignments.

In order to substantiate this claim, the following text is organized into six sections. The first one discusses the general role of ideologies in alignment formation. The second one examines historical cases of counter-ideological balancing. The third one explores foundations of the universalist claims associated with liberalism. The article also assesses America’s turn towards promoting liberal hegemony since the last decade of the Cold War. This leads to the discussion of an alignment response to the ideational threat for states, which are perceived as deviant by proponents of the universalist ideology. In conclusion, recent developments associated with liberalism are discussed in the context of previous attempts to establish normative hegemony.

UNIVERSALIST IDEOLOGIES AND POLITICS OF LEGITIMATION

Literature on international alignments traditionally tended to overlook ideological motives as a rationale for political and military cooperation. As it was focused primarily on the challenges of territorial expansion, it did not account much for ideational variables (Liska, 1962; Osgood, 1968). Stephen Walt was the first to

systematically assess the impact of ideology on alliance formation and remained skeptical of it. He claimed that similarity of political regimes does not provide a strong foundation for their cooperation. The latter collapses as soon as the interests of the parties on the international arena start to diverge (Walt, 1990).

In the 2000s, a number of scholars sought to revise this skepticism. Drawing upon diverse historical records, they demonstrated that ideological affinities and cleavages could lead to confusion in decision-making, causing under-balancing in response to military threats (Hass, 2003; 2014). They also identified the rise of new ideologies as a trigger for security dilemmas, which often prompted states to strengthen their alignments and form solid rivalry blocs. This effect, however, was primarily attributed to inaccurate perceptions and miscalculations (Owen, 2005). Greater engagement between states with different dominant ideologies was advised as a cure against polarization and enmity. Such a perspective is incomplete or possibly even flawed, as it underestimates the expansionist character of at least some belief systems.

If we refer to ideology as a set of collectively held convictions about organizing principles for political order within states, we have to acknowledge its capacity to serve as an instrument for legitimation of existing governments and ruling elites (Haas, 2003). Authority could not rely exclusively on brutal force. Any political regime seeks normative foundations for its survival. Ideology provides a rationale for the established system of rule in a country by claiming that it is better than any available alternatives. This function of social justification was made clear in Winston Churchill's famous remark that "democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time" (Churchill, 2008, p. 574).

Some ideologies claim that their organizing principles can provide solutions for establishing order in any society. Historical examples include political designs relying on world religions as sources of justification (throughout the Middle Ages they dominated both in Catholic Europe and in the Islamic East). The governing structures of individual states then reflected a divinely prescribed

universal order. Similarly, modernity witnessed universalist claims of Absolutism, Republicanism, Marxism, and Liberalism to provide ultimate models of political rule.

Indeed, they all argued to deliver the most socially desirable and ultimate recipes for just and effective authority. Universalist ideologies claim to transcend individual societies and are assertive in their superiority over alternative ideologies, regardless of local conditions. Only one system of rule is presumed to be the best and only it could be truly legitimate. This position makes universalist ideologies incompatible with alternative approaches to establishing political order (including competing universalist claims). Their own normative persuasiveness largely depends on the extent to which they are spread. Broad recognition is required to substantiate such claims of superiority. If other systems of rule become equally competitive, they undermine the whole universalist argument (examples of transnational effects of political models were traced by Gunitsky, 2017).

Political regimes whose legitimacy depends on such ideologies retain a vested interest in their promotion abroad. Stability at home becomes partly dependent on it, as ideological isolation undermines their normative foundations. If other societies do not follow the same model, local population may express reservation to retain preference to the established system of rule, while the success of states built on alternative foundations may exacerbate their temptation to abandon it.

Although political belief systems are ideational constructs, their adherents not only rely on rhetorical persuasion but can also mobilize—through control over state institutions—all instruments of national power, including military, economic and informational resources, in order to promote their universalist ideology. Therefore, in countries which fail to comply with the political standards established by universalist ideologies the ruling elites are threatened not just in normative, but also in practical ways. They could be subjected to various forms of coercion and subversion for failure to accept the “right” order.

Prospects of external pressure encourage governments which are challenged by proponents of universalist ideologies to align together in response. Ideological motives then become inseparable from self-serving interests, because normative threats undermine authority of the ruling elites and established political order. A common normative threat may outweigh disagreements over other issues, which become overshadowed by the anxiety over political survival. Therefore, coalitions counter universalist ideologies even where they are expected to be quite solid.

Such defensive alignments suggest multiple forms of cooperation and not just rhetorical support to counter pressures associated with the promotion of universalist ideology. An important consequence of the rise of the latter is that its opponents do not need to have much similarity to align among themselves. A common normative threat makes governments to join forces even if they rely on incompatible principles for political legitimation. Universalist ideologies foster this process by treating dissenters, regardless of their differences, as manifestations of the same evil.

In a nutshell, the rise of universalist ideologies increases tensions in international politics and leads to realignment of states whose political leadership perceives these ideologies as a threat to their legitimacy. This perception is not just a product of miscalculation or overreaction. Political belief systems are often expansionist and rely on forceful promulgation. Thus, the argument regarding universalist ideologies follows the logic applied by Realists to revisionist states which seek territorial aggrandizement (Schweller, 1994).

Alignments emerging in response could be defined as counter-ideological in the sense that they are built on a common threat to the system of rule rather than on some shared characteristics. This defensive agenda is, however, quite normal in guiding international cooperation, where, as George Liskaput put it, alignments are “against and only derivatively for, someone or something” (Liska, 1962, p. 12). Following the logic advanced by Kenneth Waltz, such arrangements last only as long as a common threat remains valid (Waltz, 2010). Yet, since universalist belief systems retain their

persuasiveness through time and states engaged in their promotion are often rather powerful, counter-ideological alignments become durable.

HISTORICAL CASES OF COUNTER-IDEOLOGICAL BALANCING

The rise of universalist ideologies is often associated with the emergence of global modernity in the 19th century (Buzan, Lawson, 2009). However, attempts at establishing normative hegemony could be traced much earlier. Every world religion provides a vision of rightful social and political order and therefore fulfils legitimating functions associated with ideology. This means that attempts at establishing normative hegemony date back quite far in history.

This section provides a brief empirical justification of theoretical logic presented earlier through two prominent examples of alignment triggered by universalist ideologies. The first one manifested itself as Protestant and Catholic coalitions throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. The second one was produced by concerns regarding assertive promotion of Marxism after 1917. Both cases illustrate that the rise of universalist claims leads to greater tensions in international politics and fosters counter-ideological balancing.

During the period before Reformation political legitimation in Europe was rooted in the Catholic doctrine despite occasional minor disruptions by heretical movements. Henceforth, religious teaching announced by Martin Luther in 1517 was not initially perceived as a major threat to the established order. As it rapidly achieved popular recognition, however, perceptions started to change.

Luther himself was careful not to question the established institutions of political authority, but his teaching implicitly undermined them by delegitimizing religious foundations which provided sacred sanction for the structures of rule. Subordination to a prince retaining allegiance to the wicked Catholic Pope became ethically problematic for the adherents of the new faith. Their orientation towards individual consciousness rather than salvation through the clergy was also incompatible with the traditional vision of a hierarchical social organization.

Other leaders of Reformation were less politically conservative than Luther. His main opponent on ecclesiastical matters Huldrych Zwingli also criticized the dynastic principle of succession and called for “Republican rule” (Birnbaum, 1959). The most radical wing of Reformation was represented by Anabaptists and smaller sects which propagated absolute egalitarianism (Kaufmann, 2017). All these movements, despite their common hostility towards Catholicism, remained deeply divided on ecclesiastical and social matters. Therefore, they initially cherished open animosity towards each other.

The challenge posed by new religious and social ideas affected not only local rulers in German lands, but the very central institutions of the *Holy Roman Empire*. Although, some of the Protestant leaders promoted greater imperial centralization at the expense of principalities, this approach did not enjoy much influence within the Reformation movement. Meanwhile, the title of the Holy Roman Empire itself suggested reliance on religious justification (Dixon, 2008).

Henceforth, the period between 1521 and 1648 was marked by continuous struggle between Catholic forces and various strands of Protestantism, repeatedly accompanied by military clashes, which culminated in the Thirty Years’ War. Throughout this period, individual German principalities and other European states were persuaded to form alignments to respond to normative threats. Starting from the Catholic League of Dessau (1525) and the Protestant League of Torgau (1526) concerns regarding religious legitimation of political orders often (although not always) trumped other considerations (Owen, 2005).

For example, the Bavarian Wittelsbach family had to cooperate with the Habsburgs despite their competition for dominance in the Empire. On the other hand, electors of Saxony were time and again forced to join the Reformist cause, reneging on their loyalty to the imperial institutions. Anxiety regarding the normative threat also manifested itself in the tendency of the Catholics to treat with hostility all sorts of Protestantism without discriminating between

its various strands. This led Lutherans, Zwinglians and Calvinists to unite, despite their deep differences over religious and political matters (for these differences see Dixon, 2016, pp. 111-178).

The aspirations of the Catholic and Reformation doctrines to establish normative hegemony combined with their institutional base for forceful promotion affected local rulers and emperors. They produced clear threats to the legitimacy of princes, encouraging them to balance normative threats by forming alignments among themselves. Their coalitions appeared to be rather robust and demanding in terms of mutual commitments, as they suggested joint military struggle. Only the total exhaustion by the middle of the 17th century tamed the universalist inclination of the proponents of either faith. It paved the way for the establishment of the international political system built around a balance of material, not ideational power.

The record of the twentieth century is no less valuable in terms of understanding the alignment patterns, as it was marked by complex interrelations between perceptions of territorial and normative threats. The previous century boasted an impressive rise in the economic wealth, but it was not accompanied by greater social welfare and equality. This contradiction contributed to the emergence of Marxism, which promised to overcome the growing injustice through radical transformation of the relations of production.

Marxism also explicitly associated the nature of political regimes with the composition of predominant social classes. In the long term, it foresaw complete abolishment of the state itself, yet its immediate goal was to bring governments under control of socialist parties claiming to represent the proletariat. Marxists portrayed the bourgeoisie, which according to their logic had political control under capitalism, as their primary opponent, treating dynastic monarchies and liberal republics as equal enemies (Marx, 1848).

A clear connection with popular grievances and a convincing explanation of their roots immediately provided the Marxist ideology with a wide transnational appeal. However, it lacked government support to back its propositions with the power of the state. The

situation changed dramatically after the Russian revolution of 1917. Ironically, hardline Marxists came to power in a predominantly agricultural country with a very small industrial social stratum.

Soon after that the Bolsheviks engaged in the active promotion of socialism abroad, although their domestic positions were vulnerable. This policy clearly stemmed from the Marxist teaching, which demanded a high level of industrial production for transition towards socialism. The leader of the Russian revolution, Vladimir Lenin, amended this proposition, claiming that an uprising should start in the “weakest link” of capitalism, where the power of the bourgeoisie is still shaky (Lenin, 1917). However, he did not expect the socialist government to survive under these conditions, as it lacked economic foundations. To solidify their positions, the Bolsheviks needed a World Revolution to follow the Russian one. Their universalist ideological aspirations were reflected in the creation of the Communist International (Comintern), which provided coordination among Marxist parties across Europe.

Although the failure of socialist uprisings across Europe after WWI convinced the Bolsheviks to adopt a policy of “peaceful coexistence,” the image of Soviet Russia as an ideological and political threat solidified in the West. As a result, Soviet Russia failed to achieve recognition from most European nations and the United States. Furthermore, its military and economic weakness precluded more active alignment among capitalist states, while Moscow was effectively isolated and ostracized (Steiner, 2007, 131-179).

Throughout the 1930s, the West’s policy of containment began to soften, as it needed more assistance from the Soviet Union due to the reemergence of revanchist Germany, which sought territorial aggrandizement rather than promulgation of universalist political claims. In 1934, the Soviet Union was even admitted to the League of Nations, but this rapprochement was far from easy and complete. Major Western states (namely Britain and France) remained torn between territorial and normative threats posed by the Axis powers and the Marxist parties (Haas, 2003). These complicated alignment calculations enabled Germany to engage in a revision of the European

order. Only then Western capitalists and Soviet Marxists united in the Grand Alliance to defeat a common enemy.

After WWII, the Soviet Union became the locus of both strategic and normative challenge for the West, which spurred renewed and more vigorous efforts to contain Marxism and the rising superpower which professed it. For much of the Cold War, Soviet influence was closely associated with any socialist movement, even though its ideological appeal and allegiance to promoting the universalist cause started to crumble by the early 1970s (Gaddis, 2005). Henceforth, Western states under the leadership of the United States were eager to support any regimes opposing Marxism regardless of their domestic political arrangements (the most vivid examples included theocratic Saudi Arabia and the Shah's Iran, as well as dictatorial South Korea, Taiwan, and South Vietnam). Apart from more informal arrangements, they constructed a string of military alliances aimed to contain the Soviet threat (such as NATO, the U.S.-Spanish Treaty, the Bagdad Pact, SEATO, and ANZUS).

These policies persisted even though the Soviet Union had made a transition from a revolutionary state to a conservative and mostly satisfied power. This change was problematic in itself because historical legacies and the remaining domestic dogmatism required that Moscow continue residual support of popular movements across Africa and Latin America, even while seeking strategic *détente* with the United States. The logic of the Marxist normative challenge and counter-ideological alignment eventually faded by the late 1980s, when the Soviet Union engaged in domestic reforms, which enabled it to renege on Socialist universalism (Fedyashin, 2019, 364-371).

The two brief cases presented above show that universalist visions regarding the organizing principles of political communities can produce dire consequences for international politics by fostering new rivalries or solidifying existing ones. However, not every ideology becomes universalist. There are some that emphasize unique features of individual society and, therefore, do not imply transnational export.

Nationalism suggests a particularistic appeal because it does not necessarily foresee ideational expansionism associated with

the promotion of a certain political regime. On the contrary, its proponents demand that others should not meddle in the domestic affairs of their countries (that is not to say that it cannot be used to justify territorial expansion). Nationalism has established itself as the dominant ideology of the modern world and even managed to define 'nation-state' as the primary political entity of the international system.

However, nationalism's basic requirement that every society should define its political organization by itself is challenged by a number of alternatives to liberalism as the most prominent universalist belief system. The latter can coexist with the nation-state and even rely on the advantages of this political entity, but in its current form it often contradicts the nationalist demand for sovereignty and non-interference.

LATE ARRIVAL OF LIBERAL EXPANSIONISM

Ironically, liberalism emerged initially as a particularistic response to the struggle between incompatible religious universalisms of early modern Europe described in the previous section. It reflected the inability of various branches of Christianity to agree on basic, foundational principles. Henceforth, it demanded that such clashes should be resolved by individuals on a personal basis, building upon their moral consciousness and tolerance towards alternative points of view. Initially it did not suggest any specific form of government.

Mearsheimer attributes the transformation of this particularistic liberalism into a more assertive one to transition from negative civil freedoms to positive social rights (Mearsheimer, 2018). This explanation is not entirely convincing, however, as such transformation did not preclude a greater change in the role of liberalism for political legitimation. It is more plausible to suggest that it acquired its current universalist form when it merged with the ideas of Republicanism and electoral democracy.

This transformed liberalism from a belief system built upon the freedom of personal convictions, private property and tolerance in social interaction into a genuine political ideology prescribing a

certain system of rule. It was no longer about individuals to decide for themselves, but also about how their governments should be arranged. Integration of individual liberties and the majority rule, however, was far from natural or inevitable at the outset.

Throughout the 19th century, British liberalism, for example, coexisted with dynastic monarchism and demonstrated sincere disdain for the vulgarity of democratic governance (Schake, 2017). Meanwhile, Ancient and Medieval history provides a vast record of Republican institutions long before the primacy of personal freedoms was proclaimed by the Enlightenment. Political regimes of that time were explicitly built upon subjugation of the individual to the collective will of the community. This illiberal character of traditional democracies was reflected in the Athenian practice to expel citizens through popular vote (the so-called “ostracism”). In this context, the current Western political form, far from being a preordained set of suiting puzzles, represents a fusion of somewhat contradictory principles.

Nevertheless, American and French revolutions of the late 18th century produced a mixture of political and civic ideals, which pre-defined the foundations of modern liberal democracy (Bukovansky, 2010). This innovation immediately caused international consequences as France under the Republican government engaged in active proliferation of its ideology. This policy outraged existing monarchies and brought them into successive coalitions, aiming to rollback revolutionary achievements and restore the *ancien régime*.

The newly created United States was different from France on two important accounts. Firstly, the American republic in its early days remained less politically radical than the French one. The preservation of slavery in the New World contrasted sharply with the abolition of serfdom and feudal privileges in France. Moreover, the American system remained quite patrician, with a number of in-built mechanisms to guarantee against extremes of mass politics.

Secondly, while American colonies proclaimed in rather universalist terms that all people were endowed with unalienable freedoms and that “to secure these rights, Governments are

instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed” (Declaration of Independence 1776), the United States retained a strong sense of exceptionalism (Onuf 2012). It was built by those migrants who had escaped Europe, because they were unable to fulfill economic, social and religious aspirations there. So, the American political thought implied strict differentiation of their new home from the Old World.

While the United States aspired to be a shining “city on the hill” and a model for the humankind to follow, initially it did not seek to assertively promote its institutions abroad. The legitimacy of its political order was defined by its contrast to others, not by ideological proselytism. Throughout the subsequent historical period, the United States remained torn between several foreign policy traditions reflecting various aspects of American identity (Schlesinger, 1999; Mead, 2013).

From the very outset, the United States was expansionist and a bully on the American continent. However, the lack of appetite towards normative promotion enabled this republic, unlike its counterpart in Paris, to integrate swiftly and smoothly in the international system. The ideological challenge that it presented to the European courts dwarfed in comparison with the French, Spanish, Dutch and even Russian aversion to the British maritime domination. Therefore, all these powers either directly supported rebellious colonies or maintained benevolent neutrality during the American revolutionary war.

As the French experiment was defeated and the American republic remained inward-looking, liberalism could not rely on the state for international promotion. The revolutionary menace was still a challenge for European dynastic monarchies, to which they responded throughout the 19th century by establishing the Holy Alliance and later trilateral coalitions of Austria, Germany, and Russia (Rosecrance, 2014). However, this ideological threat to political order was partially coerced and partially accommodated to the effect that until WWI the only major power which converted back to Republicanism was once again France. Meanwhile, Italy’s

and Germany's unification, as well as Japan's transformation were achieved under monarchical rule (Taylor, 1954).

The interwar period brought a major political upheaval with an initial push for establishing liberal democracies in Europe and later a rollback under pressure from fascist regimes. However, it was again a period without a clear champion for liberal universalism, as Britain and France were focused on their long-term relative decline (Steiner, 2007, pp. 182-254). The United States which could have taken up this role owing to the increased material capacities retained self-isolationism. Instead, the most dynamic and expansionist ideology of the time was Marxism, supported by Soviet Russia, while the United States and other liberal states were passive or reactionary (Fogleson, 2013; Larsen, 2013).

Throughout WWI and the Cold War, the struggle against the Axis powers and later Soviet Communism led the United States to finally overcome self-isolationism and adopt normative rhetoric of fighting for a "free world." Washington even orchestrated the establishment of liberal regimes across Western Europe and in Japan right after WWII. However, in most cases it remained careful enough to support useful dictatorships, while suppressing popular movements associated with the left (Huber, 2015, p. 51). Its shift towards assertive promotion of political liberalism was still to emerge.

U.S. TURN TOWARDS PROMOTING THE LIBERAL CAUSE

The situation changed in the late 1970s. By that time the United States had transformed into a more liberal country with greater civil equality and social freedoms. Washington also recognized that its support for loyal autocracies ceded a powerful liberation movement in the Third World to the Soviets. However, the most important driver of ideological proselytism was a severe crisis of confidence in American society towards its own political system.

It was caused by popular disillusionment in the political elites following their lies during the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. The belief in American exceptionalism did not evaporate altogether, but Washington appeared to be rotten and corrupt.

Popular mistrust affected the elites from both major parties, which were found guilty of undermining public trust (Schudson, 2004).

The sense of vulnerability forced the American elites to revise previous policies and engage in messianic promotion of liberal universalism. This crusade was launched under Democratic President Jimmy Carter (Stuckey, 2008), but easily became bipartisan and was continued by his successors. Quite illustratively, the new impetus to ideological promotion led to the inauguration in 1983 of the National Endowment for Democracy, an organization funded by the American federal budget to promote liberalism.

The collapse of the Soviet Union largely discredited the main universalist alternative to liberal democracy, producing a sense of triumph in the West (Fukuyama, 1989). This led to the U.S.'s attempts to consolidate its normative hegemony internationally. Both Democratic and Republican administrations engaged in active ideological promotion.

However, the United States was not very consistent in its pursuits, and normative aspirations did not always prevail over other considerations; the advancement of liberalism played a major role in U.S. policy. In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton based his National Security Strategy on the enlargement of the Western community built upon common values (A National Security Strategy, 1994). The next American leader, George W. Bush, announced the “freedom agenda” with a focus on the Middle East as the centerpiece of his foreign policy (Hassan, 2008).

Support for the liberal hegemony included not just rhetorical persuasion through passionate speeches, but also practical steps. Those included both assistance to adherents to the democratic cause and outright coercion against states that were viewed as resistant to its appeal. This led to the introduction of such derogatory categories as ‘rogue-states’ and ‘axis of evil,’ aimed to stigmatize a combination of autocratic governments and inappropriate international behavior (Litwak, 2000). These categories became associated with the policy of regime change, which the United States pursued through multiple means, including military ones.

Washington was not alone in this pursuit. Other Western actors followed the path and even attempted to replace Washington as the main champion of liberal ideology. Quite illustratively, the European Union formed its foreign policy identity on a “normative power” concept aimed to promote liberal standards in its neighborhood and beyond (Manners, 2002). Brussels introduced the conditionality principle as a major instrument to foster the ideological agenda by integrating political clauses into economic agreements with weaker states (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2008). Concerns over the ideological primacy created within the West a spiraling demand that Washington retain assertiveness in the ideological proselytism.

However, by the end of the 2000s, entrapment in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the general sense of overexpansion reduced self-confidence in American foreign policy (Brzezinski, 2008; Fukuyama, 2007). This does not mean, however, that the aspiration to advance liberalism faded completely (Carothers, 2012). Even while President Barack Obama initially sought to restrain the ideological component in his foreign policy, these plans were buried after the political upheavals across the Arab world in 2010-2011.

In response, the United States reverted to assertive advocacy of liberal hegemony (Goldberg, 2016). In 2013, the USAID adopted the *Strategy on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance* aimed “to support the establishment and consolidation of inclusive and accountable democracies to advance freedom, dignity and development” (USAID, 2013). Throughout the 2010s, the United States openly allocated more than \$2 billion annually for assistance to political transformation in foreign countries (Lawson and Epstein, 2019). Although this amount remained marginal for the American federal budget, it reflected a sustainable commitment to the cause.

The victory of Donald Trump in the presidential election in 2016 triggered panic among the proponents of democracy promotion (Carothers and Brown, 2018; Frum, 2018). His approach to foreign policy, at least in the first two years, suggested deemphasizing normative issues in interactions with foreign leaders. Moreover, his budget requests for both the 2018 and 2019 fiscal years included 40%

cuts in assistance associated with democracy promotion (Lawson and Epstein, 2019).

However, the State Department continues to invest in liberal claims regardless of the president's engagement. Federal funds allocated for democracy promotion in 2018 retained the level compatible with the Obama period (and, therefore, relatively higher than under George W. Bush). Meanwhile, political instability in Venezuela since early 2019 witnessed America's major involvement in support of the anti-government forces.

Overall, the universalist claims of liberal ideology were deeply internalized by the United States in the last forty years. Their advancement through various means emerged as an essential element of the U.S. foreign policy. The latter is founded on the conviction that for the world to be really safe it needs to consist of democracies only (Hartz, 1991, p. 284). Moreover, the growing domestic polarization and social dissatisfaction throughout the 2010s once again problematized the foundations of political order in the United States. This creates a greater need for additional sources of legitimation. A wide international recognition of liberal ideology acquires renewed importance in this regard.

THE RISE OF COUNTER-IDEOLOGICAL PUSHBACK

In the previous sections, liberal ideology and, consequently, liberal hegemony were understood in a narrow, political sense. This conceptualization of liberal hegemony differs from the one adopted by other authors (Layne, 2007, pp. 118-135). It intentionally excluded matters of *laissez-fair* as they do not present an immediate and direct threat to political elites. Quite illustratively, after the Cold War the spread of capitalism and market economy produced a lesser pushback than democracy promotion.

The U.S. policy of liberal hegemony established standards of appropriateness for political institutions and social practices. They were further operationalized through specific measurements (like the Freedom House's ranking of free, partially free and non-free states). Such instruments, due to the desire to create a single, composite

index, imply a differentiation of political regimes along just one axis, grading the scale of compliance against the reference ideal (Freedom, 2018). In political rhetoric, this scale often collapses into even simpler binary opposition of democracies versus autocracies (for simplification of analytical concepts for political purposes see Ish-Shalom, 2013). The latter category incorporates all systems of rule which do not fit in the liberal standards of appropriateness.

In the 2000s, such practices started to produce much wider international effects. In the 1990s stigmatization as “rogue-states” was applied primarily to weak states (such as Cuba, North Korea, and Syria). In the following decade the United States challenged the political foundations of a broader range of more potent actors, accusing them of attempts to export illiberal institutions (China, Russia, and even Turkey, which remained America’s NATO ally). The initial, more relaxed attitude was produced by the belief that the spread of liberalism would become automatic and irresistible. With time, however, the United States felt greater impatience and urgency to actively promote its normative claims.

As a result, the list of states, which are suspicious towards American ideological agenda became long and heterogenous. The United States disregarded multiple differences between political systems of individual states. It placed governments relying upon the Communist party rule and Islamic doctrines in the same category. It even ostracized electoral democracies, if they failed to comply with liberal standards, placing them in the authoritarian camp. Populism, despite its direct appeal to public majority for legitimation, was assessed as antithetic to the liberal ideal (Zakaria, 2007).

A rich history of American support for anti-government movements and coup-d’états on foreign soil (O’Rourke, 2017) as well as U.S. open efforts to promote the normative agenda contributed to concerns in countries opposing the universalist claims of the United States. They perceived the threat to their systems of rule as not only ideational and rhetorical, but as something that could have significant diplomatic and economic, if not military, implications. This created a rationale for greater cooperation between governments, which were

placed by Washington into the derogatory category of autocratic regimes. So far, it has mostly taken the form of soft balancing rather than demanding military alliances (Paul, 2018).

One vivid example of such alignment is the burgeoning Russian-Turkish cooperation, which is developing despite multiple areas of disagreement. The two countries share a long record of military competition, as well as conflicting interests over Syria. In 2015, Ankara even shot down a Russian jet fighter, accusing it of violation of its airspace. This brought the two states close to a direct military stand-off. There are also reasons for rivalry between Russia and Turkey in the Caucasus and Central Asia, where they are both politically active and economically engaged. Since the 2000s, Turkey has been viewed as a hub for potential pipeline projects to transfer the Caspian oil and gas in circumvention of Russia (Titov, 2015).

Despite all these potential breaking points and mutual grievances, the two states in the last few years have engaged in a serious political rapprochement and cooperation on a wide range of issues. Together with Iran, they have established a fragile, but relatively enduring *modus vivendi* in Syria. Russia has also emerged as a major energy supplier, a partner in the construction of an atomic power plant and even as a weapons provider for Turkey. These examples illustrate the high level of mutual interest as they involve strategically sensitive issues.

While the two states have not created a formal alliance, their political alignment has solidified as both states face pressure from the United States. Their governments are viewed by Washington as in-compliant with its liberal standards of appropriateness. The moment of revelation was the failed coup against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who accused the United States of coordinating and encouraging his political opponents (Arango and Yeginsu, 2016). Moscow, on the other side, was among the first to express its support of the current Turkish leadership (Kirişçi, 2016).

A still longer history of intense criticism, dating back to at least the mid-2000s, has been received by Russia from the West for its domestic institutions (Russia's Wrong Direction, 2006). Therefore, tensions in such matters as post-Soviet space, European security and

other foreign policy issues are linked by Western commentators to the Russian domestic political system (Tsygankov, 2012). Russia's position regarding NATO's enlargement and the Ukraine conflict were directly attributed to insecurities of its political leadership (McFaul, Sestanovich and Mearsheimer, 2014).

As Moscow and Ankara are increasingly perceived by the United States and the European Union as pariahs, their ties with the Western partners have been severed. Ostracism by the liberal regimes and common concern regarding the interference in their domestic affairs have pushed Russia and Turkey towards rapprochement and opened up opportunities for closer multifaceted cooperation, despite geopolitical odds.

This and other similar alignments do not presuppose a shared belief system or similar sources of legitimation. Members of counter-ideological coalitions agree primarily on what they reject, but do not seek to establish a unified alternative to liberal universalism. Therefore, these coalitions remain inclusive and flexible and extend cooperation to any partner that is not engaged in the promotion of hegemonic claims.

The weakness of such cooperative arrangements is often attributed to the lack of a common positive agenda. However, this is not always the case. The above-mentioned Russian-Turkish rapprochement demonstrates that the two states have found multiple areas for practical collaboration as soon as a common threat overshadowed their geopolitical differences. A common agenda is conducive to alignment, even if it does not drive these relations.

Since it is unlikely that universalist claims of Western liberalism will evaporate any time soon, they will continue to produce a rationale for counter-ideological alignments. Despite the recent talk about the West's decline, the United States remains the most influential international actor on the global stage and its ideological agenda cannot be dismissed. Therefore, the foundations of counter-ideological alignments remain quite solid. Furthermore, a relatively low probability of a direct military clash over territorial possessions between major powers currently means that normative threats could be expected to play the primary role in political elites' calculations.

The ultimate cause for a breakup of counter-ideological alignments could originate as a result of transition to Western-type liberalism in those states which are currently ostracized by Washington. However, political developments throughout the last decade do not point in this direction at all. On the contrary, today international politics is determined by the broadening pluralism of models for organizing systems of rule. In many states nationalist aspirations to establish political institutions independently of external influences have grown ever stronger since the 2000s (Weber, 2018). This particularistic pushback, in combination with the persisting assertiveness of liberal universalism, creates a breeding ground for counter-ideological alignments.

* * *

Liberalism tends to claim that it is different from other political belief systems as it is built upon the prevalence of personal freedoms and not on the subjugation of an individual to various forms of collective identities. Today, it is impossible to assess the validity of assertions of liberalism in view of its radical departure from other ideological constructs. Liberal democracy has been recognized across the world, but not universally. Despite assurances of its benevolence, liberal democracy can be very intolerant to alternative visions of organizing political order.

History demonstrates that major universalist ideologies inevitably caused a pushback from the governments which felt being threatened. The states which engaged in promoting desirable principles of political organization repeatedly had to face counter-ideological alignments. The Habsburg Empire, revolutionary France and the Soviet Union, which advanced Catholic Universalism, Republicanism and Marxism respectively, were among the victims of failed efforts of ideological promulgation. In each of these cases attempts to establish (or restore) normative hegemony increased the level of tension in international affairs.

From this perspective, U.S. and European policies represent just another example in the long line. They can be very costly for their champions, as well as counterproductive to the cause itself.

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