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The Relevance of Universal Values to a Nation's Soft Power

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International relations is often portrayed as anarchic. States must provide for their own defense, and when survival is at stake, ends are said to justify means regardless of other values. But this view ducks hard questions by oversimplifying. Some foreign policy issues relate to the survival of a nation, but most do not. Many important foreign policy choices about human rights or climate change or the distribution of vaccines do not involve war. Most foreign policy issues involve trade-offs among values that require choices, not application of a rigid formula. It is tautological or, at best, trivial to say that all states act in their national interest. The important question is whether leaders

define that national interest narrowly or broadly to include universal values.

Skeptics argue that the notion of a "world community" is a myth, and where there are no common values, leaders must think narrowly. John Mearsheimer argues that, "states operate in a self-help world in which the best way to survive is to be as powerful as possible, even if that requires pursuing ruthless policies. That is not a pretty story, but there is no better alternative if survival is a country's paramount goal."¹ Survival trumps universal values. If international relations is simply the realm of "kill or be killed," then there is no dispute about how the national interest is defined. But

¹ John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 216.



international politics consists of much more than mere survival, and realists who pretend universal values do not matter are merely disguising their choice. Survival comes first, but that is not the end of the list of values. Most of international politics is not about survival.

Realists correctly argue that international relations is power politics, but power is more than bombs, bullets, and economic resources. Power is defined as the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one prefers, and one can do that by coercion (sticks), payment (carrots), and attraction (soft power). Soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment. A proper understanding of power must include all three aspects. Because soft power is rarely sufficient by itself and takes longer to accomplish its effects, leaders often find the hard power of coercion or payment more tempting. But when wielded alone, hard power can involve higher costs than when it is combined with the soft power of attraction. The Roman Empire rested not only on its legions, but also on the attraction of Roman culture. The Berlin Wall came down not under an artillery barrage, but from hammers and bulldozers wielded by people who had lost faith in Communism and were attracted to the values of the West. A nation's soft power rests upon its culture, its values, and its policies when they are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others. That legitimacy is affected by whether a nation's actions are perceived as congruent or contradictory of universal values. In other words, such values enhance a nation's soft power.²

While it is weak, a degree of international human community exists. Our intuitions about common humanity are hardwired into us by evolution. Most humans respond to pictures of starving children, even if not all would allow them to cross borders or take them into their homes. Cosmopolitans argue that basic human rights are universal. "They are not respecters of political boundaries and require a universalist politics to implement them; even if this means breaching the wall of state sovereignty."³ While many people would not go so far as the cosmopolitans do, they

also hold multiple loyalties to several communities at the same time in a series of widening concentric circles that extend beyond national boundaries. That provides room for including some universal values in the definition of the national interest. There is an important difference between inclusive and exclusive nationalism.⁴

International anarchy simply means "without government," but that does not necessarily mean chaos. Liberals argue that rudimentary practices and institutions such as balance of power, international law, norms, and international organizations can create enough order to establish a framework for meaningful moral choices in most cases. Even in the extreme circumstances of war, law and universal values can play a role. The just war doctrine originated in the early Christian church and became secularized after the 17th century. Today, it provides a broad normative structure that considers all three dimensions of good ends, discriminating and proportional means, and the probability of successful consequences. The code is more than theoretical. It is enshrined both in international humanitarian law (the Geneva Conventions) and, in the case of the United States, the Uniform Code of Military Justice.⁵

Nonetheless, different perceptions of the degree of anarchy affect the way leaders and followers frame their choices. Writing after the English Civil War in the 17th century, Thomas Hobbes imagined a state of nature without government as a war of all against all where life was "nasty, brutish, and short." In contrast, writing in a somewhat more peaceful period, John Locke imagined a state of nature as involving social contracts that permitted the successful pursuit of life, liberty, and property. Liberal analysts say that although there is no world government, there is a degree of world governance. Anarchy has limits. While many "realists" have a mental map of a Hobbesian world composed primarily of warring states, "liberals" see a world of peoples with rights organized into nations that develop rules and institutions to manage their relations.⁶ The rise of human rights law after World

² See Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

³ David Luban, "The Romance of the Nation State," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 9 (Summer 1980): 392.

⁴ Joseph S. Nye, *Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁵ Michael Walzer, *Arguing about War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁶ G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).



Joseph Nye speaks at Harvard University in an interview with Xinhua, the Chinese news agency, in October 2019. (Photo by Xie E / Xinhua via Getty)

War II, including the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was a reaction to the horror of genocide. While many nations have signed these conventions, they often fail to adhere to them or interpret them in different ways. The world is far from a consensus on universal values, and even within nations there are deep differences. Nonetheless, universal values affect politics and power.⁷ In 2015, German Chancellor Angela Merkel acted boldly to allow entry for Syrian refugees. While her actions were consistent with universal values, they also provoked a domestic nationalist backlash.

Realism is an appropriate starting point for successful foreign policy leaders. The problem is that too many realists stop where they start. Instead, they should realize that cosmopolitan and liberal concerns for broad universal values often have something additional to contribute in many situations. Realism privileges order and national security over other values. Given how humans react when they feel insecure and the prevalence of “lifeboat ethics” when survival is in jeopardy, realism is a necessary foundation for a moral

foreign policy. But it is not sufficient. The question is one of degree. Since there is never perfect security, the crucial question is what degree of security must be assured before other values such as welfare, identity, or rights become part of a foreign policy. Many foreign policy choices involve questions like arms sales, or criticizing the human rights behavior of another country, or linking trade sanctions to political behavior. When realists treat such trade-offs as matters of life or death, they are simply ducking hard issues about values. It is not enough to say that security comes first. Leaders (and analysts) must assess accurately how Hobbesian or Lockean a particular situation is and where an action lies on a continuum between security and other important values. They must also consider the effect of their choices on their nation’s soft power.

As mentioned above, values affect a nation’s attractiveness or soft power. Various efforts have been made to measure and index nations’ soft power. One of the most prominent has been the “Soft Power 30” constructed by the British consultancy Portland.⁸ While Portland found some variation from year to year, the top countries tended always to be democracies, suggesting the importance of universal values in generating soft power. Autocracies like Russia or China tended to rank in the lower end of the list. On the other hand, attractiveness depends on the perceptions of the beholder and can vary from country to country and group to group within countries. Public opinion polls are another common way to measure soft power, and they show such variation. Autocracies sometimes find other autocracies attractive. It is interesting that in the great power competition between the U.S. and China, polls find China lagging behind the U.S. on most continents, but the two countries are tied in Africa.⁹

The case of China is particularly interesting regarding soft power and universal values. As China dramatically developed its hard power resources, leaders realized that it would be more acceptable if it were accompanied by soft power. This is a smart strategy because as China’s hard military and economic power grew, it could frighten its neighbors into balancing coalitions. If it could accompany its rise with an

⁷ Beth Simmons, *Mobilizing for Human Rights: International Law in Domestic Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁸ Portland, *The Soft Power 30: A Global Ranking of Soft Power* (London, 2019).

⁹ Thomas P. Sheehy and Joseph Asunka, “Countering China on the Continent: A Look at African Views,” United States Institute of Peace, June 23, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/06/countering-china-continent-look-african-views>.



increase in its soft power, China could weaken the incentives for these coalitions. In 2007, Chinese president Hu Jintao told the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party that they needed to invest more in soft power, and this continued under President Xi Jinping. Billions of dollars were invested to promote soft power, but China has had mixed success with its soft power strategy. Its impressive record of economic growth that has raised hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and its traditional culture have been important sources of attraction, but polls show it lags behind the United States, including in Asia.¹⁰

Much of a country's soft power comes from its civil society rather than from its government. Government propaganda is usually not credible and often does not attract, and thus, does not produce soft power. China needs to give more leeway to the talents of its civil society, but this is difficult to reconcile with tight party control. Chinese soft power is also held back by its territorial disputes with its neighbors. Creating a Confucius Institute to teach Chinese culture will not generate positive attraction if Chinese naval vessels are chasing fishing boats out of disputed waters in the South China Sea. And assertive "wolf warrior diplomacy" responds to popular nationalism at home, but is counterproductive abroad. It can undercut the soft power benefits from infrastructure spending in China's Belt and Road Initiative. Since the COVID pandemic, China has also used vaccine diplomacy to enhance its soft power, though with mixed results. It is interesting that unlike the Cold War days of Mao Zedong, China's soft power strategy has rested less on ideological proselytizing of universal Communist values and more heavily on transactional relationships.

In contrast, though American soft power also rests in part on transactions, it has also relied heavily on universal values related to democracy and liberal views of human rights. Some Europeans described the American presence in Western Europe during the Cold War as an "empire by invitation," in contrast to the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe.¹¹ In recent years, however, some Europeans and others have begun to

worry about the American commitment to universal democratic values.

As international polls show, the Trump years were not kind to American soft power.¹² This was partly a reaction to his narrowly nativist foreign policies of turning away from allies and multilateral institutions summarized in his slogan "America First." Friends became even more concerned when Trump undercut universal values of democracy by trying to disrupt the orderly transition of political power after he lost the 2020 election. Jan. 6, 2021, witnessed the shock of a mob invading the Capitol building. American attractiveness was diminished.

American soft power has suffered in the past, but the country showed a capacity for resilience and reform. In the 1960s, cities were burning over racial protests, and the country was mired in Vietnam War protests. Bombs exploded in universities and government buildings. Martin Luther King, Jr., and two Kennedys were assassinated. Yet within a decade, a series of reforms passed Congress, and the honesty of Gerald Ford, the human rights policies of Jimmy Carter, and the optimism of Ronald Reagan helped restore American soft power.

Moreover, even when crowds marched through the world's streets protesting American policies in Vietnam, the protesters sang Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "We Shall Overcome" more than the Communist "Internationale." An anthem from the American Civil Rights Movement based on universal values illustrated that America's power to attract rested not on government policy, but in large part on civil society and a capacity to be self-critical and reform.

Unlike hard-power assets (such as armed forces), many soft-power resources are separate from the government and attract others despite politics. Hollywood movies that showcase independent women or protesting minorities can attract others. So too does a diverse and free press, as well as the charitable work of U.S. foundations and the freedom of inquiry at American universities. Firms, universities, foundations,

¹⁰ David Shambaugh, *China and the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹¹ Keir Lundstadt, *Empire by Invitation: The United States and European integration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹² https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/09/15/global-views-united-states-trump-coronavirus-pew-poll/?utm_campaign=wp_post_most&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&wpisrc=nl_most.



churches, and protest movements develop soft power of their own, which may reinforce others' views of the country. Peaceful protests can actually generate soft power.

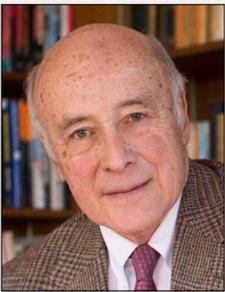
On the other hand, the mob in the Capitol was far from peaceful, and provided a disturbing illustration of the way that Trump exacerbated political polarization by making his myth of a stolen election a litmus test in the Republican Party. The U.S. has seen an increase in political polarization over the past two decades, well before the 2016 election. Many senators and members of Congress were cowed by threats of a primary challenge by members of Trump's base. Fortunately, in a federal system, a democratic political culture produced many local heroes, such as secretaries and state legislators who stood up to Trump's efforts to intimidate them into "finding" votes. It is important to remember that the 2020 election saw an unprecedented turnout of voters who were able to unseat a demagogue. And it was sustained in more than sixty court cases overseen by an independent judiciary.

This does not mean that all is well with American democracy. The Trump presidency eroded a number of democratic norms. Polarization persists, and a significant portion of Trump's base believes his lies about the election rather than the evidence of the courts. Social media business models exacerbate the existing polarization by being based on algorithms that

profit from polarizing extremism, and the companies are only slowly beginning to respond to their manipulation by conspiracy theorists. Public opinion and Congressional hearings are beginning to put pressure on companies like Facebook and Google, but the problem of polarization is far from solved.

At the same time, American culture still has great sources of resilience. The universal values of a democratic society, such as freedom of the press, independent courts, and the right to peaceful protest, remain among the greatest sources of America's soft power. Even when mistaken government policies reduce American attractiveness, the ability of American society to criticize itself and correct our own mistakes makes us attractive to others at a deeper level. Commitment of the younger generation to democracy and cosmopolitan values is also important.

In short, soft power is only part of a country's power. It must be combined with hard power in ways that are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory. And universal values are not the only source of soft power. A reputation for being benevolent and competent also generates attraction. But legitimacy matters, and for much of the world where democracy and rights are important, a country's alignment with universal values is a vital source of soft power. We see this playing out in world politics today. True realism does not neglect universal values or soft power. □



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