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THE PERENNIAL DILEMMA OF US FOREIGN POLICY: FROM MORALPOLITIK TO REALPOLITIK

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ABSTRACT

The endless struggle between two seemingly incompatible but occasionally convergent concepts, namely liberal values and national interests, has determined United States (US) foreign policy and its implementation throughout the nation's history. Based on the neoclassical realist assumptions shored up by the methodological insights offered by the five-dimensional pre-theory of foreign policy, this article reveals a persistent dichotomy in US foreign policy through the analysis of Washington's response to the Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Throughout history, US foreign policy has had a pendular behavioral pattern, swinging across a policy spectrum ranging from *moralpolitik* to *realpolitik*. While the inherent values-interests dilemma lies at the root of the inveterate oscillation of US foreign policy, the interplay of international stimulus and societal factors stands out as the principal source of its ambivalence, if not inconsistency, in the face of the upheavals that swept across the Middle East.

Keywords: US foreign policy, political culture, moralpolitik, realpolitik, Arab Spring.

INTRODUCTION

“The strength of a great power is diminished if it ceases to serve an idea,” said Raymond Aaron (1953, p. 91), underscoring the importance of the ideology underlying a major actor’s behavior abroad (Deudney & John Ikenberry, 2021, p. 7). Insofar as the ideational sources of a great power’s strategy in shoring up its strategic considerations that are defined in terms of national interests, it finds the opportunity to expand its reach and improve its international status. When material and ideational aspirations do not converge, however, tension arises within the realm of foreign policy, impeding it from wielding its potential influence or power in shaping specific outcomes.

As a country built upon Enlightenment values and a major international actor that has often faced the harsh realities of power politics, the US has known the struggle between two seemingly incompatible but occasionally convergent concepts, namely liberal values and national interests (Rose, 2021). This struggle has inevitably played out in its foreign policy (Powaski, 2019, p. 2; Schweigler, 2003, p. 60), creating the so-called tragedy of US diplomatic history, described as the subversion of genuine idealist impulses by near-inevitable power considerations and economic interests (Williams, 1972). The realism-idealism dichotomy has paved the way for the emergence of a pendular behavioral pattern that stems from the two fundamental contradictions of US foreign policy, notably between *moralpolitik* (values) and *realpolitik* (interests), as well as between isolationism and interventionism, and disengagement and internationalism, as a corollary (Ryan, 2000, p. 3).

One of the earliest examples of studies focusing on the pendular character of US foreign policy puts forward the “cyclical theory” (Perkins, 1962, pp. 136–55). Similarly, Klingberg (1952) analyzed US foreign policy by dividing it into periods of extroversion and introversion, each lasting for almost two decades. More recently, some argued that the swings of the engagement-disengagement pendulum followed the presidential terms in the post-Cold War era (Henriksen, 2017) and Sestanovich (2014) described the swings as occurring between maximalist strategies and retrenchment.

This article focuses on the deeper roots of the unceasing oscillation of US foreign policy since the American Revolution. It rests upon the

claim that the character or the form of the pendulum may change but acknowledging the values-interest dilemma as its true origin is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of US foreign policy. Therefore, this article sets out to challenge a misleading, though pervasive, tendency to see US foreign policy as a twentieth-century phenomenon, disregarding its subtle and persistent tradition (Mead, 2002b). By revealing the sources of this tradition this study seeks to answer this question: to what extent did this dilemma and the pendular nature of US foreign policy affect the Obama administration's response to the Arab Spring upheavals in Egypt, Libya, and Syria?

The Middle East, as the crossroads of vital geo-economic interests and the requirements of America's liberal creed, has long witnessed America's idealistic policies struggle to prevail over the realist alternative, posing vexing challenges to Washington (Clinton, 2014, pp. 276–277; Oren, 2007). As admitted by Condoleezza Rice (2005), former Secretary of State, the US, “for 60 years...pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region...and...achieved neither.” Given that the region has experienced, in the early 2000s, two transformative incidents, notably the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the so-called Arab Spring (Rogan, 2018, p. 609), the oscillation of American foreign policy has become more visible and perhaps, more problematic than ever (Kitchen, 2012, p. 57). As a result, the region has turned into a veritable arena to evaluate multiple aspects of the American foreign policy pendulum. The initial US attitude in the face of the sweeping popular upheavals that erupted in late 2010 demonstrated the quest for balancing the commitment to both ideational and material interests. Subsequently, the impulse to promote liberal democratic institutions in the region has remained central in inspiring American reactions to popular democratic demands (Haas, 2014, p. 6; Obama, 2011). Therefore, the apparent tension between the core American values and national interest shaped Washington's approach to the popular revolts in the region (Atlas, 2012) , as well as a heated public debate in this regard (Ha, 2017). However, focusing solely on US foreign policy in the face of the Arab Spring upheavals would lack a well-structured vision to develop a better understanding of the underlying societal and external forces that triggered the values-interests tension. Thus, the present article, taking the Middle East as a test bed, deals primarily with the deeply-ingrained roots of this inherent dilemma and attempts to unveil its impact on the American response to the popular revolts in the Arab world.

Furthermore, the theoretical and methodological approaches of this study are built upon the idea that lines separating the domestic and international political realms have been eroding for the last few decades (Hill, 2016, p. 1). An accurate and comprehensive account of an actor's foreign policy entails, *inter alia*, the inclusion of the domestic factors and their interaction with other dynamics in the analysis (Zakaria, 1992, p. 198). The neoclassical realist theory that insists on the significance of internal and external dynamics in analyzing a country's foreign policy (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 59; Rose, 1998, p. 146) constitutes the theoretical framework of this article. The primary contribution of this theoretical approach is that it eliminates the spatial divide within the realm of foreign policy. Instead, it views unit-level dynamics as intervening variables that filter external input through the policy-making mechanism (Elman & Jensen, 2014, p. 11; Dueck, 2009, p. 141). Only a multi-dimensional approach can explain why states affected by similar systemic stimuli react differently. No less importantly, one can explore why an actor develops similar responses to various external influences solely by taking its idiosyncrasies into account.

This perspective leads us to use James Rosenau's five-dimensional pre-theory of foreign policy as the principal methodological tool. The pre-theory puts emphasis on a funnel-shaped mechanism composed of five filters, namely systemic, societal, governmental, role, and individual variables (Rosenau, 1980, p. 128). Given that the perennial dilemma of US foreign policy is primarily the product of the country's deeply rooted political culture, the societal dynamics will be central in our analysis. As for US foreign policy, the societal environment constitutes "the broadest layer" of the funnel, and "the political culture of the United States – the basic needs, values, beliefs, and self-images widely shared by Americans about their political system – stands out as a primary societal source" (McCormick, 2018, p. 11). The elements composing the American political culture, as the product of the deep historical ties strengthened by a sense of unity, mission, and success, are potent forces that account for its role in world affairs and its strategic preferences. Additionally, the analysis will include the impact of secondary societal dynamics, public opinion and congressional processes, and external dynamics on Washington's response to the Arab Spring.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The first section focuses on US political culture, which swings US foreign policy

towards *moralpolitik* by nurturing humanitarian concerns. The second section deals with the secondary societal forces as significant factors that set the ground for the unceasing oscillation of US foreign policy. Then, two subsequent sections analyze the American strategy in the tumultuous popular uprisings and its essential internal and external determinants. Our analysis will demonstrate how the interplay of multiple factors at different levels shaped the US response in accordance with the country's long-standing foreign policy tradition.

POLITICAL CULTURE AS A SOURCE OF US FOREIGN POLICY DILEMMA

Former Secretary of State George Shultz described, in a nutshell, the ambivalent American understanding of foreign policy: “Americans, being a moral people, want our foreign policy to reflect the values we espouse as a nation. But Americans, being a practical people, also want our foreign policy to be effective” (“Excerpts from Speech by Shultz,” 1984). The clash between the US commitment to the core liberal values and principles embedded in the nation's political culture and to the security of its allies, along with its considerations of self-evident national interests and power, has long shaped the debate in Washington. Not surprisingly, the quest for finding an answer to the question of which commitment should guide American behavior abroad has brought about controversial decisions, if not foreign policy failures.

Indeed, the tension between realism and idealism is an inherent feature of Western political thought, not solely the American understanding (Graebner, 2002, p. 311). The roots of the everlasting conflict between ideals and amoral interests can be traced back to Ancient Greece. As for the US, the origins of this unceasing tension, some argue, can be found in the lines drawn by the Founding Fathers, whose heritage sowed the seeds of the different facets of the country's strategic culture (Dueck, 2008; Mead, 2002a). Others see the dichotomous character as the product of the debate between realists and moralists/idealists, which shaped the American approach to foreign policy in the early twentieth century (Thompson, 1960).

Nevertheless, *moralpolitik* is part of the oldest political tradition in America, whereas *realpolitik* has appeared progressively with the

emergence of America's international standing as a global power. The critical turning point that creates a radical shift in the American approach to foreign policy, accelerating the oscillation, came with the Spanish-American War in 1898 and the subsequent rise of the US to a major international status (Kissinger, 2015, p. 240, 246; Mandelbaum, 2016, pp. 367–368; Mead, 2009; Zakaria, 1998, pp. 181–182). Thus, the inherent values-interests dilemma has been the constituting element of the long-standing US foreign policy tradition. Nurtured by Lockean liberalism embedded in the country's political culture (Hartz, 1991) and based on the belief in the self-defined American exceptionalism and the concept of Manifest Destiny (Forsythe & McMahan, 2016, p. 1; McCrisken, 2003; Weeks, 2013, p. xxi; Weinberg, 1935, p. 8), the values-oriented view of foreign policy has been the basis of US actions abroad (McCormick, 1985, p. 1). The material interest-centered perspective, in turn, has incrementally become a primary impetus for US choices, limiting the impact of liberal impulses in foreign policy-making as US involvement in world affairs intensified, especially where vital interests are at stake (Deudney & Meiser, 2008, p. 35; Nau, 2015, p. 46). This tension, creating a pendular behavioral pattern, lies at the root of the oscillation of US foreign policy from *moralpolitik* to *realpolitik*.

The origins of the pendular nature of US foreign policy can be found in the country's political culture. Indeed, the exploration of culture as a productive venue for analyzing foreign policy is hardly a new phenomenon. Traditionally, many studies take cultural dynamics as independent variables with causal links to foreign policy (Liland, 1993; Morin, 2013, p. 97). However, the tendency to take cultural elements as independent variables not only diminishes the explanatory capacity of the analysis because of its inherent disregard of the systemic factors but also makes a comparative approach almost inevitable. Rather, taking cultural dynamics in a secondary role as intervening variables leads to a more accurate and comprehensive interpretation of an actor's foreign policy. Since states, consciously or not, always seek to express themselves in their actions, the principal components of a nation's political culture, notably the political values, ideas, beliefs, and ideals, inspire the strategic preferences of the actor on the international scene, under systemic pressure (Ryan, 2000, p. 298). Without altering the primary role of external determinants, cultural and ideational factors exert a powerful impact as complementary components of the foreign policy-making process (Dueck, 2008, p.

166). In other words, the capacity of political culture to shape foreign policy is inherently limited by the nature of inter-state interactions. Rather than dictating any specific policy course, cultural dynamics offer a road map to frame end-means relations and a repertoire of available alternatives to decision-makers (Elkins & Simeon, 1979, pp. 128–131; Johnston, 1995, p. 42).

Given the strong ties between the country's internal structure and core values and its foreign policy decisions (Isaak, 1977, p. 2), US political culture offers the most salient explanation for the source of the perennial foreign policy dilemma. The fundamental divide marking the American political culture has been between the advocates of limited liability and those who persisted in relying on morality in the name of classical liberal assumptions (Dueck, 2008, p. 21). While the former fed off the belief in the uniqueness of the American experience and the necessity of steering clear of the mercantilist policies of the Old World -non-entanglement, the latter was built upon the nation's idealist, even utopian hopes and motivated by a firm conviction in a self-assigned Divine mission. In retrospect, the mainstream strands of the American strategic culture have been the central forces shaping US behavior abroad. Their constant impact on American foreign policy choices throughout history has been so strong that they have eventually become the essential determinants of US tradition in this realm. Two traditional views of foreign policy in the US, namely isolationism and internationalism, were the products of these two dominant features of the American strategic culture. The inherent struggle within the realm of US foreign policy has, therefore, occurred between an unwavering conviction in the necessity of promoting liberal values on the global scale by various means and the apparent reluctance to shoulder the costs of the idealist vision often requiring significant commitment overseas.

Furthermore, four distinct subcultures have emerged that derived from these reluctant and idealist views. Strongly linked to the classical liberal aspect of the American strategic culture, two subcultures, namely progressive (Jeffersonian) and internationalist (Wilsonian) have emerged, whereas realist (Hamiltonian) and nationalist (Jacksonian) approaches have appeared as extensions of the preference for limited liability (Dueck, 2008, p. 25–34; Mead 2002a). The subcultures illustrate different views as to how the US should and can engage with the outside world and the primary guide for its international

actions. As for the policy means and methods, Jeffersonianism and Jacksonianism insist on a relatively introverted approach. In turn, the other two emphasize the necessity of a proactive, crusader attitude in advancing American interests and promoting its core values abroad (Clarke & Ricketts, 2017, p. 366). Regarding the guiding principle of foreign policy, Wilsonians and Jeffersonians see the moral impulses imbued with a cosmopolitan view as the principal determinants. The Jacksonian and Hamiltonian visions, on the other hand, advocate a parochial and unilateral form of nationalism and the primacy of commercial and economic interests, respectively (Mead, 2002a, pp. 99–263).

Throughout the nineteenth century, notably between the enunciation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 and the Spanish-American War of 1898, the US approach to world affairs was characterized by an isolationist stance with a hemispheric character (Weeks, 2013, p. 118). While the country followed a relatively interventionist path in the Western Hemisphere, America had not engaged in the troubles that occurred in Europe during the Napoleonic Wars and in the following century preceding World War I (WWI). Nevertheless, this did not mean the devaluation of the commitment to liberal democratic values in foreign affairs. Rather, it stemmed from the prevalence of a unilateralist and parochial definition of national interest. With the US engagement in the war against Spain in 1898 came the gradual replacement of isolationism as the engine of foreign policy by an internationalist posture. In particular, President Wilson's efforts during and after WWI to propel the country in this direction, despite the initial failure, undermined the very foundations of isolationism as a veritable policy option and set the ground for post-WWII US internationalism. In parallel with a growing US role on the global scale, this transformation shifted the swings of the pendulum from isolationism-internationalism to *moralpolitik-realpolitik*, and occasionally to the exemplarist-crusader debate. Thus, US foreign policy in the twentieth century had witnessed recurrent clashes between liberal ideas and the overwhelming geopolitical realities of the world (Ikenberry et al., 2011, p. 6). The liberal influences that provide the basis for idealistic actions for American foreign policy have been, from time to time, bounded by often unyielding requirements of power politics that ultimately prioritize material interests and balance of power considerations.

Therefore, Wilsonianism, being one of the four strands of the American approach to foreign policy, deserves special attention as it represents the *moralpolitik* edge of the policy spectrum. The Wilsonian liberal internationalism, being inherently idealistic, rests upon a view that the US can and should tend to shape other actors' behavior and concern in their international actions, as well as their domestic structures (Zoellick, 2020, p. 138). Its intellectual roots reside in the Kantian liberal tradition. Accordingly, the internal characteristics of states are critical in inspiring their attitude at the international level (Ikenberry et al., 2011, p. 10). One of the pillars of its ideational structure rests upon a cosmopolitan conviction that foreign policy, as illustrated by Wilson's quest to reorganize international relations in a more liberal and democratic way, must transcend selfish national interest and serve human concerns (Herring, 2008, p. 380). The second source of inspiration for Wilsonianism was a firm belief in the universal character of the core American values, such as individual liberty, freedom, and self-government grounded on the consent of the governed. For Wilson, America's core values and ideas "would appeal to all peoples" (Manela, 2007, p. 23).

Wilsonian ideas had, indeed, existed long before Wilson took office and have become one of the main intellectual and practical guides of US foreign policy long after his presidency, especially in the post-Cold War era from Haiti to Bosnia, Somalia to Kosovo, and Libya. The foundational principles of liberal internationalism have constituted the basis of the American urge to reshape the internal political structures of other countries in its own image, which is a salient "part of the country's political and cultural DNA" (Mandelbaum, 2016, p. 8). His vision has embodied the values-oriented internationalist American approach to world affairs, and the principles that he devotedly advocated have become the backbone of the American understanding of foreign policy (Ambrosius, 2002, p. 1; Kissinger, 1994, p. 52). Despite charges of impracticability and leading the country to utopian, cosmopolitan illusions in pursuit of achieving abstract lofty purposes (Kristol, 1983, pp. 227, 262–263), or even intervention-proneness (Mearsheimer, 2018, p. 218), Wilsonian liberal internationalism, with its insistence on morality in shaping US behavior abroad, has remained a substantial force swinging the pendulum towards *moralpolitik*.

Admittedly, the values-interests dilemma in US foreign policy has occasionally engendered a divide, if not inconsistency, between

rhetoric and practice. This so-called “discernible gap” has appeared in the form of interests-based initiatives clad in moralistic language (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 25). One cannot deny that public rhetoric flavored by liberal tenets could resonate within a wider audience in American society, and policymakers might sometimes tend to use this advantage to extract or mobilize more resources for any international initiative. However, claiming that the liberal concerns have solely been mere instruments serving to consolidate public support behind a foreign policy decision or obtain popular approval is nothing but an overstatement. As the historical record has demonstrated through many crises, the US has often acted as a result of humanitarian considerations. More importantly, the fact that a foreign policy initiative is not a purely liberal endeavor does not mean it stems from a full-fledged realist logic. Many American undertakings, such as the anti-communist containment during the Cold War and the intervention in Kosovo in 1999, illustrated the convergence of liberal concerns and power considerations, de-escalating the realist-idealist tension.

American political culture has played a central role in encouraging a values-centered approach to foreign policy with its inherent idealism and commitment to liberal democratic principles. Without subverting the primacy of systemic stimulus in shaping foreign policy decisions, it has acted as a significant source of inspiration and incited undertakings based on moral concerns. Additionally, public opinion and congressional processes have increased its impact as peripheral societal factors, swinging the pendulum.

Peripheral Societal Elements: Public Opinion and Congressional Processes

Political culture influences the making and conduct of foreign policy through various channels, often in barely discernible ways; chief among these channels are the cognitive processes that allow decision-makers to interpret the outside world before making choices. As their minds are not a *tabula rasa*, all these processes and their policy preferences reflect, to a considerable extent, the impact of the cultural milieu in which they were raised (Hudson, 2005, p. 10). Another way political culture affects foreign policy is by creating a somewhat consistent popular view regarding an issue and using the legislative as the means to make this view matter for decision makers in shaping their agenda and elaborating available policy options. “In politics,” argued

Hofstadter (2008, p. xxxiii), “people not only seek their interests but also express and even in a measure define themselves.” For Americans, this requires a foreign policy reflecting the long-advocated values and principles that have shaped their identity over centuries. Public opinion, broadly defined as “the politically relevant opinions held by ordinary citizens that they express openly” (Patterson, 2015, p. 177), and Congress acts as the secondary societal elements inspiring US behavior abroad and inciting its oscillation.

In societies with an open and democratic state apparatus like the US, public opinion enjoys relatively easy access to decision-making processes. In democracies, particularly, it holds a controlling position within the realm of foreign policy (Risse-Kappen, 1991, p. 491; US Department of State, 1942, pp. 345–346). From a broad perspective, public opinion can affect foreign policy in five different ways. First, the “parameter setting” capability underscores its capacity to limit policy alternatives available to the decision maker. Second, through “centripetal pull,” public opinion compels decision makers to build coalitions at the center to gain support from different factions of the society. Third, public opinion influences Congress, a body that is exquisitely sensitive to constituencies. Fourth, public opinion can impact diplomatic negotiations since diplomats feel the need to know the terms that would be widely accepted at home while on the table. Finally, public opinion becomes influential as substantial foreign policy issues shape voting behavior in presidential elections (Jentleson, 2010, pp. 65–67). Therefore, although it is difficult, if not impossible, for public opinion to dictate a specific policy course, it plays a critical role in determining the principal foreign policy tendency, especially in liberal democratic states.

As far as the US is concerned, public opinion-foreign policy relations is closely linked to the realism-liberalism binary and has a two-dimensional character. On the one hand, liberals insist on engaging public opinion, which they see as a “force for enlightenment,” in dealing with foreign affairs. In turn, the realist stance, characterized by a pessimistic view of human nature, remains considerably skeptical about public involvement in foreign policy (Holsti, 2004, pp. 2–14). For realists, the emotionally-driven nature of public opinion, as well as the incapability of ordinary citizens to grasp the essence of foreign policy issues, i.e., the Almond-Lippmann consensus, makes it a threat to rational decision-making processes (Lippmann, 1993, p. 4;

Almond, 1950, p. 239). Unlike liberals, they refrain from seeing it as a trustworthy shaper of foreign policy.

Apart from the debate over the nature of public opinion, on the other hand, the alternation of public view of US attitude and international role has reflected, throughout history, the oscillation of the foreign policy pendulum. Even though public support behind active engagement in world affairs plummeted at the height of the traumatizing experience of the Vietnam War in the 1970s, it again reached the high-water mark in the ensuing decade. Nevertheless, public preferences favoring internationalism have come to alternate, since then, between a crusader (messianic) view and an accommodationist (exemplarist) approach (Wittkopf et al., 2008, pp. 250–257). Arguably, these two faces of internationalism correspond to the realist-liberal struggle, and thus, the inherent dilemma of US foreign policy (Holsti, 1992, p. 449). Within this context, public opinion stands out as a critical determinant in the face of major foreign policy decisions, like those requiring the use of military force. In such cases, one can observe that the public's attitude varies depending on the principal objective of the operation. Any initiative that aims at thwarting a veritable threat to vital US interests tends to arouse a considerably favorable public view, whereas using force to change the internal structure of another country elicits opposition. An assenting public stance for humanitarian intervention, in turn, tends to fall in-between (Jentleson, 2010, p. 334).

Another significant aspect of the public opinion-foreign policy nexus is the way in which the public's view affects policy. While special interest groups play a central role in directing the influence of public opinion in an organized and effective way, their impact depends primarily on their access to the legislature, Congress, to be US-specific, which is sensitive to the views of its constituencies (Ripsman, 2009, p. 171). Congress, as an intermediary of public opinion, is a potent source of influence on foreign policy. At this point, the crucial question concerns the constitutional power of the legislative body regarding foreign policy-making and the circumstances under which it can use this power effectively. Constitutionally, the prominent place in shaping US foreign policy belongs to the president as chief diplomat and commander-in-chief. The president has been equipped with ample but not unlimited authority concerning substantial foreign

and security policy issues. The US Constitution has established a system of checks and balances by attributing significant powers to Congress to impede presidential adventures, effectively checking “the imperial presidency” (Nogee, 1981, p. 190).

Legislative-executive competition has long been one of the recurrent themes of American political history. The balance of power between the two ends of Pennsylvania Avenue – the White House and Capitol Hill – has always shifted depending on political tides. Early in the Cold War era, the presidency came to enjoy an excessive primacy compared to Congress regarding foreign policy as a result of high threat perception and increasing security concerns. The turning point came with the traumatic consequences of the Vietnam War. Along with the Watergate scandal, the war radically changed legislative-executive relations in favor of Congress, seeking redefinition by imposing limits on executive power and setting the agenda (Hastedt, 2004, p. 100; Spanier, 1981, p. ix), a trend that further accelerated after the Cold War. The relatively secure environment of the post-Cold War period even caused an increase in congressional assertiveness, except during the Gulf War when the high popularity of the elder George Bush resulted in a rally-around-the-flag effect (Lindsay, 2018, pp. 226–227). In the subsequent period up until 2001, Congress had a strong voice in foreign policy. Then, in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the increasing priority of foreign policy generated the return of a deferential Congress (Lindsay, 2018, p. 227). This paved the way for the Bush administration’s engagement in costly adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq; nonetheless, it was ephemeral and, particularly in the face of issues like sending additional troops to Iraq, the assertion of congressional control over foreign policy had reappeared. Congress remained undeferential throughout the presidency of Barack Obama, especially about the closure of the prison in Guantanamo, the Operation Odyssey Dawn in Libya in 2011, and the Syrian question.

Within this context, Congress is not solely a governmental source of foreign policy. Both Houses on Capitol Hill and their foreign policy-related committees are inherently susceptible to public opinion. Therefore, Congress, benefitting from its broad constitutional powers, holds the ability to reflect the public’s view on foreign and security policy issues. Indeed, the impact of public opinion on the legislature goes far beyond the individual electoral support or polls. A certain

number of people organized within an interest group with excessive access in the Capitol can easily affect foreign policy in favor of the idea or interest they represent (Hastedt, 2004, p. 230).

Besides the political culture, two other domestic political factors affect, to a significant extent, the oscillation of US foreign policy. They act as substantial constraints in shaping the ultimate decision. Although the role of the American Congress in foreign policy is relatively broad, it turns out to be rather ineffective or limited in the face of strong leadership. Nevertheless, its authority, especially regarding the approval of large-scale military undertakings, can impose strict limits on any executive decision. The inclination of Congress to lean towards one side of the policy spectrum significantly increases the momentum of the pendulum. Public opinion has a similar but less concrete impact on the formation of US foreign policy. While its susceptibility to manipulation makes its involvement somewhat controversial, public opinion's capacity to affect the decision of any elected policymaker renders it a primary guideline for any decision. Thus, both these domestic factors, along with other less substantial ones, have an undeniable but secondary role compared to political culture and external dynamics. They might become decisive when the influence of cultural and external elements appears more or less balanced, pointing in opposite directions. In such cases, domestic political factors become the main forces that swing the pendulum, ending the deadlock in US foreign policy.

DETERMINANTS OF THE US RESPONSE

“The behavior of any human system...results in part from the cumulative weight of past experience and in part from the impact of current stimuli,” noted Rosenau (1980, p. 317), emphasizing the influence of the multiple variables that operate in different settings to inspire the actions of societies. Cultural background and tradition contribute to shaping patterns of behavior, whereas transformation within the external environment largely determines an actor's foreign policy choices. This suggests two distinct trajectories for a state's foreign policy behavior: one that is inspired by history and cultural background and the other that is shaped by present international and domestic conjuncture, which can act either as a constraint or a stimulus for action. The interplay of all these factors accounts for the foreign policy choices of a state.

During the Arab Spring in Egypt, Libya, and Syria, US foreign policy was swayed by external and societal factors to follow a non-linear path that reflected its nuanced approach towards the uprisings. The defining characteristic of the international environment since the Great Recession (2008) has been the return of geopolitical considerations accompanied by power politics and the end of unipolarity (Layne et al., 2012, p. 412; Mead, 2014; Zakaria, 2011). This entailed the re-emergence of the great power rivalry between Moscow and Washington (Cohen, 2015, p. 328; Zakaria, 2011, p. 39). From this perspective, the Arab Spring became key for Russia to assert its firm opposition to the US and prove its re-emergence as a great power to the world. Notwithstanding, during the initial phases of the Arab Spring, at least until the killing of Qaddafi, most international actors, including Russia, viewed the unfolding events as limited social unrest with a low probability of success or as a Western plot to destabilize the region with no potential to bring about any fundamental change (Kozhanov, 2014, p. 94).

The ill-conceived Russian position had inevitably led to a distant strategy in Egypt, leaving the US as the only global power directly involved in the crisis. Therefore, international dynamics were remarkably far from being among the main determinants in shaping the US response towards the uprisings in Egypt. Rather, US strategy was forged by the impact of societal factors constrained by limited strategic interests. This prevailing international permissiveness also persisted during the Libyan crisis, enabling Washington to secure an international mandate to follow its humanitarian instincts; further swinging the pendulum towards *moralpolitik*. However, the influence of the systemic stimulus proved substantial and reached a climax in Syria, where it significantly curbed Washington's moral impulses. Against the long-standing Russian ally, global power realities overshadowed idealism in inspiring US foreign policy.

In turn, the societal dynamics that have nurtured humanitarian concerns were one of the pillars of US foreign policy during the Arab Spring (Haass, 2014, p. 91). Their impact was apparent in the realist-idealist divide along generational lines within the administration. The conflict between commitment to core values and the pursuit of power during the Arab Spring became a fault line separating junior and senior members of the decision-making structure, who advocated idealist and realist policies, respectively (Gates, 2014, p. 504; Obama, 2020,

p. 644; Rhodes, 2018, p. 101). In practice, the absence of a decisive victory for either side generated an ambivalent, even seemingly inconsistent US reaction.

In Egypt and Libya, where the systemic constraints were relatively loose, societal factors seemed more central to Washington's decisions than they were in Syria. As for the uprisings in Egypt, societal factors on the American response were influential insofar as they did not oppose certain strategic interests, such as the security of US allies and geo-economic interests. While the absence of an imminent humanitarian disaster has rendered moral impulses relatively moderate, the course of events that made the fall of the Mubarak regime unequivocally inevitable prevented strategic and domestic political constraints from neutralizing these impulses. Eventually, their struggle gave way to a balanced approach that avoided leading the events. Instead, the US followed the evolution of the process without discrediting concerns with domestic and moral issues. In turn, the high probability of a low-cost success, along with the emergence of an international consensus favoring an interventionist approach, made societal factors the driving force in elaborating the American response in Libya.

Alongside a public attitude shaped in conformity with the administration's policies in each case, congressional opposition was moderate, if not weak. The American public's view of the Egyptian uprisings was formed by an underestimation of their potential ramifications as, according to a Pew poll conducted in February 2011, a considerable majority of the population (58%) believed the events would not create much of an effect on the US (36%) or gave no response (22%). Similarly, (57%) approved the administration's approach (*No Consensus on How Egypt Protests Will Affect U.S.*, 2011). As there was no looming intervention or a costly venture over the horizon, Americans have generally granted Washington a free hand in shaping and implementing a cautious approach. This was bound to follow developments on the ground. Although the Libyan intervention generated low popular support (27%) compared to other similar initiatives, outright opposition remained relatively moderate as a result of humanitarian concerns and the above-mentioned enabling factors (Allen, 2011; Avlon, 2011; "Everyone's a Critic," 2011; *Public Wary of Military Intervention in Libya*, 2011). Overall, in both cases, American public opinion largely favored a limited degree of engagement. While encouraging the

cautious and reluctant stance embraced by the Obama administration in Egypt, public opinion emboldened congressional opposition in Libya and contributed to restraining decision-makers from making a substantial commitment to military action. However, humanitarian considerations were not completely deferred to secondary strategic concerns or moderate congressional opposition, swinging US foreign policy, in varying degrees, towards *moralpolitik*. On the contrary, an American intervention in Syria was highly unpopular (with nearly 60% of Americans opposing), and even in the case of the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, the interventionist policy was approved only by 25% of Americans as 46% maintained an anti-interventionist position (Wroughton, 2013). Given this domestic climate, the prospect of a military undertaking in Syria on any grounds was improbable, if not impossible. Nevertheless, if internal factors accounted for Washington's reticence in Syria, international dynamics had pushed it further towards retrenchment.

US foreign policy towards Egypt, Libya, and Syria moved back and forth between a values-based approach and a realist strategy. Numerous multi-level factors shaped its course, and only an assessment of their degree of impact revealed the genuine source of this pendular pattern. In Egypt and Libya, the cultural dynamics – humanitarian concerns – and opportunities presented by a permissive international environment led Washington in a relatively moralistic direction. The influence of domestic factors – the congressional process and public opinion – remained relatively modest. However, in Syria, it was primarily the systemic stimulus – with little influence from cultural factors and considerable support from domestic elements – that swung the pendulum towards *realpolitik*. As a result of President Obama's unwavering pragmatism, the administration sought to advance US interests in the region without making any concessions to core values (Lilli, 2016, p. 220). However, the ambivalent US strategy ultimately failed to wholly accomplish either, undermining US credibility and leadership on the global stage.

US Response to the Arab Spring

The US has been tied to the Middle East by geopolitical interests – including energy, great power rivalry with Russia, and perhaps most importantly, relations with its allies in the region. Apart from these factors, the Arab Spring has also had an ideational aspect that required

a favorable US stance in the name of principles Washington has long advocated (Gelvin, 2012, p. 166). Combined with the harsh realities of international politics, the ideational aspect of the pro-democracy revolts had made a decisive US stance towards the Arab Spring in one way or another, inevitable. As they generated an inextricable foreign policy dilemma, the revolts across the Arab world put the Middle East, once again, at the heart of Washington's policy agenda in the middle of a period when "pivot to Asia" seemed to constitute its main preoccupation within the realm of foreign policy. Yet, not every upheaval had aroused equal interest in Washington. Beginning in Tunisia, the Arab Spring revolts spread like wildfire across the Middle East. The protests in some countries incited direct US engagement – diplomatic or physical – whereas others engendered nothing more than a rhetorical initiative. The possible effect of the protests on American interests and the global balance of power played a significant role in determining US attitude. For instance, Egypt, as a central actor in the fragile Camp David peace and one of the largest recipients of US foreign aid, turned out to be the first critical test for Washington (McFaul, 2018, p. 205). Overall, once engaged, the US response to the Arab Spring in Egypt, Libya, and Syria remained ambivalent, its oscillation unequivocal.

The most salient characteristic of US policy towards these countries was the pragmatism embodied in its country-by-country approach. Washington, seeking to strike a delicate balance between its core values and its material interests, developed a strategy based on the accurate assumption that it must see each protest with different lenses (Anderson, 2011, p. 3). The self-evident complexity of the Arab Spring and its far-reaching ramifications necessarily precluded the adaptation of a monolithic, holistic, and doctrinaire strategy towards emerging threats. Accordingly, the Obama administration pursued *ad hoc* strategies elaborated for the specific context of each uprising (Lilli, 2016, p. 220). The administration's pragmatism embellished with principles was crystallized by its initial attempts to attach its support to the governments instead of heeding the calls for liberal democracy (Abrams, 2017, p. 86). Only after the fall of the Tunisian regime did the US act, rather hesitantly, to support the protesters despite the pervasive uncertainty as to their ideological predilection and their plans for the future (Cohen, 2015, p. 337).

The eruption of the uprising in Egypt triggered a significant quandary for US foreign policy, pushing Washington to face "the Islamist

dilemma” (Hamid, 2011, p. 40). Since the Islamists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, were the most potent political actor to seize power after Hosni Mubarak, the US was initially stuck between supporting the cause of democracy and supporting its old friend, who had acted as a bulwark between the Islamists and power for over three decades (Freudenstein, 2011, p. 68). Reluctant to lead, Washington opted for a reactionary strategy based on observing the evolution of events before throwing its support behind any side. Meanwhile, the US did not refrain from publicly calling for reform, even though it avoided taking concrete incentives. The apparent ambivalence of US foreign policy stemmed from the influence of two contradictory factors. On the one hand, because of its commitment to core American values, the administration had difficulties in not wholeheartedly supporting the pro-democracy demonstrators. On the other hand, given the long-established good relations with the pro-US autocrat, Mubarak, and the security guarantee he had provided for Israel and other American interests, rapidly abandoning him could be harmful not only for those interests but also for US credibility in the eyes of other non-democratic allies. Ultimately, while seeking to find the best solution in its quest for a viable foreign policy decision, the officials in the Obama administration found themselves surfing the tide (Forsythe, 2011, p. 786). What marked the American response to the Egyptian uprising was “reluctant realism” (David, 2015) and pragmatism of President Obama. To avoid being on the wrong side of history, the Obama administration preferred a cautious, if not hesitant, approach before taking decisive steps publicly. The crucial factor that caused this ambivalent US attitude was the lack of a credible and less threatening alternative for a post-Mubarak government. Yet US hesitation could not prevent an Islamist takeover in Egypt, the unintended and undesired consequence of US foreign policy oscillating between core principles and security interests. Washington’s unwillingness to work with an Islamist government that had a non-democratic agenda was obvious in its tacit welcome of the 2013 coup and acceptance of the controversial results of the 2014 and 2018 elections. Washington, thus, chose “the lesser of two evils” to avoid the worst-case scenario after Mubarak’s fall.

The crisis in Libya presented a wholly different picture, and accordingly, the US response was relatively more forward-leaning and coherent. Imbued with humanitarian concerns, Washington’s stance in the face of revolts against the Qaddafi regime were characterized

by a multilateralist vision with core American values at its heart and strategic interests that seemed to converge with ideational ones. What made the Libyan uprising markedly different compared to Egypt was a weak state structure, a military with limited capacity, and the bloodthirsty rhetoric of a dictator who chose brutal suppression and mercilessness to end the anti-regime protests (McFaul, 2018, p. 221). Apart from Qaddafi's threatening attitude endangering not only innocent civilians but also stability in the region and the impetus of the Arab Spring revolts, another particularity of the Libyan case was the absence of crucial American interests at stake (Fitzgerald & Ryan, 2014, p. 96). Therefore, the Libyan crisis presented a significant opportunity for the US to demonstrate its commitment to the human rights cause and save the lives of thousands of innocent civilians while advancing its non-vital strategic interests. All these factors, along with a permissive international environment characterized by Russian and Chinese abstentions within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), set the stage for a humanitarian intervention under NATO's auspices, which in turn marked a significant turning point for the American response to the Arab Spring. Unlike in Egypt, the US, this time, followed its moral priorities with an international mandate, demonstrating its commitment to its core values. A resolute stance in Libya followed US ambivalence in Egypt, drastically swinging the pendulum further towards *moralpolitik*.

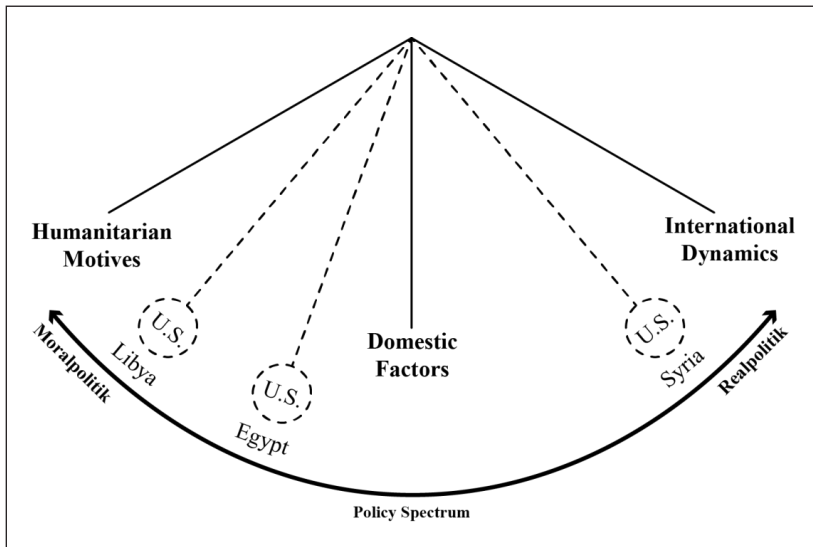
US foreign policy took a radical turn in Syria, where events quickly turned into a protracted civil war, posing a wrenching dilemma for the Obama administration. The encouraging experience in Libya had created optimism regarding similar humanitarian initiatives; yet, Syria's relatively well-established state structure, strong military, and powerful allies, along with the coalescence of both regional and international factors, exerted a strong pull towards a non-interventionist path (Clinton, 2014, pp. 388–389; Fitzgerald & Ryan, 2014, p. 109). This dilemma marked the American response to the Syrian crisis and dramatically affected the global balance of power, as well as interstate relations across the Middle East.

Shortly after the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, the geopolitical ambitions of global powers surfaced (Malashenko, 2013, p. 14). The international character of the Syrian crisis created more room for external involvement and further complicated the national struggle, which became not just a violent civil war but a geopolitical struggle

with the US and its allies on one side and Russia, China, and Iran on the other. Moreover, this “globalization” of the Syrian crisis emboldened Turkey, the Gulf countries, and other regional actors to engage, each seeking to advance their own interests. This complex environment, combined with President Obama’s inclination towards multilateralism and retrenchment, contributed to the formation of Washington’s strategy of restraint. American policymakers, seeking to avoid a profound engagement, struggled to balance ideal and strategic national interests. Ultimately, they opted for retrenchment in Syria, giving limited support to the opposition forces (Dueck, 2015, p. 84). While humanitarian motives were constrained by international dynamics, Washington’s will, and most importantly its capability, was limited by the relative decline in US power. Under these circumstances, every alternative foreign policy path seemed to lead to an impasse (Clinton, 2014, p. 389), as apparently, the US did not possess the necessary policy tools to prevent human suffering or put an end to the brutal rule of the Assad family in Syria. Thus, its proactive stance in Libya was not the sign of a permanent shift; rather, it was an opportunity for the US to advance both its ideational and strategic interests.

Figure 1

US Foreign Policy Pendulum during the Arab Spring



The Arab Spring offered a historic opportunity for the US to fulfill its long-stated promise and prove its commitment to the advocacy of fundamental human rights. Nevertheless, it was easier said than done. Though seemingly morally right, unconditional American support for pro-democracy forces in the region was considered threatening to strategic US interests, especially at a moment when the only certainty about the outcome of the events was uncertainty (Forsythe & McMahon, 2016, p. 33; Mason, 2014, p. 51). Aside from its non-doctrinaire nature, another intrinsic characteristic of US foreign policy throughout the process was the persistent “fear of worse,” that is to say, the fear of an extremist Islamist takeover of governments in countries that have faced revolutionary movements. That was, in fact, what happened in Egypt and what was thought to be imminent in Syria. As part of its inherent foreign policy dilemma, this fear forced Washington to favor maintaining the *status quo* as these groups gained ground, but its support to autocratic regimes, given its long-standing commitment to liberal ideals, caused trouble at home and abroad. The quandary was actually no different than the one that occurred during the Cold War that forced the US to tolerate many non-Marxist autocracies, i.e., “friendly tyrants” (Garfinkle & Pipes, 1991). In the post-9/11 era, Islamism replaced communism, but the fear remained the same, introducing caution and hesitance into US foreign policy and causing it to appear inconsistent or ambiguous to many. Rather than a revolutionary change in the region, the US hoped for a peaceful reformation process that would respond to the demonstrators’ demands and trigger an orderly political transition (McFaul, 2018: 210). Eventually, given the fluctuations of its foreign policy, the US had, except in the case of Libya, little decisive influence on the Arab Spring and subsequent regional developments (Cohen, 2015, p. 338; Henriksen, 2017, p. 20), undermining its image of strength and credibility, as well as its self-proclaimed moral posture.

CONCLUSION

As stated by Rosenau (1980, p. 368), “foreign policy does not occur in a vacuum. Nor does it arise exclusively out of the demands that originate within societies.” Therefore, analyzing any actor’s foreign policy by focusing solely on domestic structures and processes or international stimulus inevitably results in misleading conclusions. Any foreign policy approach substituting domestic factors for systemic

influences or vice-versa is bound to reach one-sided consequences. In turn, an analysis that does not ignore the impact of various variables from different levels on foreign policy behavior would potentially be as comprehensive as it would be accurate.

The primary objective of this article was to explore the extent to which the persistent pendulum of US foreign policy was apparent and influential in the American response to the Arab Spring. As was observed in Egypt, Libya, and Syria, the pendular behavioral pattern played a central role in shaping Washington's reaction to the uprisings. Understanding the oscillation is crucial to comprehend the evolution of US foreign policy throughout the Arab Spring process. Caught between supporting pro-democracy demonstrators and safeguarding its strategic interests and long-standing relationships with regional actors, Washington espoused overall an ambivalent approach.

At the root of this stance was the interplay of societal and international factors. The varying impact of these factors, acting as filters that process foreign policy inputs through a multilayered funnel, accounts for the fluctuating US strategy towards the Arab Spring, as well as the unceasing oscillation of US foreign policy between *moralpolitik* and *realpolitik*. The endless struggle between external and societal elements gets even more complicated with the involvement of substantial domestic constraints. What was interpreted by many as inconsistency in US foreign policy towards the uprisings was, indeed, the illustration of its pendular behavioral pattern. While the influence of humanitarian concerns and domestic factors played a crucial role in forging a values-based approach in Egypt and Libya, systemic pressures later mitigated their impact in Syria, pushing the US towards a peripheral position. The Arab Spring was, thus, another international phenomenon paving the way for the inescapable dilemma of US foreign policy to affect the American reaction.

Finally, these factors exert influence to varying degrees, operating in a hierarchical setting. External factors, especially when they contradict moral requirements, assume the primary role in inspiring Washington's foreign policy decisions and outweigh the influence of idealist impulses. The dictates of the international environment have long played a central role in shaping America's foreign policy, being central to the question of whether "vital national interests" are imperiled when idealist instincts seem to prevail on a given foreign

policy issue. Amoral national interest, signifying a pull towards *realpolitik*, has appeared as the antidote, counterbalancing the moralist vision and excessively limiting humanitarian undertakings. Pressing issues such as great power rivalry, power considerations, or weakening American superiority have substantially constrained US foreign policy. The perennial pendular character of US foreign policy, therefore, results from the unending struggle between the often incompatible liberal values and strategic interests, which seek to shape the country's behavior abroad.

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