



## Why “Conservative,” Not Liberal, Internationalism?

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*Abstract: There is no broad literature defining conservative internationalism as there is for liberal internationalism and realism. Yet conservative internationalism differs from liberal internationalism and realism in four important ways. First, it seeks a world of limited government or separate sovereign nations not big international institutions. Second, it believes that national security is a function of ideological differences not just relative power or diplomatic misunderstandings. The democratic peace is a much safer world for America than the balance of power or United Nations. Third, it recognizes the need to use force during negotiations, not just after negotiations fail, because authoritarian states will not take negotiations seriously if they can achieve their objectives outside negotiations. And fourth, it advances democracy conservatively by prioritizing regions where strong democracies exist nearby (today Ukraine and Korea) and by using military leverage to reach timely compromises that weaken authoritarian states.*

As John Maynard Keynes famously wrote, “practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some academic scribbler of a few years back.” That surely is the case for presidents and foreign policy. Republican presidents such as Teddy Roosevelt and Richard Nixon generally have employed a realist theory of world affairs, attempting to maintain a balance of power in order to preserve peace. Democratic presidents such as Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt have preferred a liberal internationalist approach, intended to strengthen multilateral institutions in an attempt to replace the balance of power. A few presidents, like Andrew Jackson and perhaps Donald Trump today, practice what might be called a minimal realist or nationalist approach. And some presidents, like Thomas Jefferson and Ronald Reagan, are claimed to be liberal internationalists even though they rejected the strengthening of centralized institutions, either domestic or international.

For some reason (perhaps because most academics are liberals), academics have seldom written about a “conservative” internationalist tradition. There is no broad literature to define this tradition as there is for realism, liberal internationalism,

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and nationalism. For 50 years, I wondered why this was so, even after Ronald Reagan fashioned a foreign policy strategy that explicitly deviated from both realism and liberal internationalism and produced an outcome, the end of the Cold War, that rivaled the achievements of Nixon or Wilson. My book, *Conservative Internationalism*, sets out to fill this gap.<sup>1</sup>

### What is Conservative Internationalism?

*First*, conservative internationalism is “conservative,” favoring limited central government and a robust private sector or civil society. In foreign affairs, that idea translates into a world of strong states not universal global institutions, and of independent national defenses and competitive markets not expert-dominated collective security and globalization. Thomas Jefferson’s view of the world rivals Woodrow Wilson’s vision. Wilson foresaw global institutions eventually replacing national sovereignty. Thomas Jefferson, when contemplating the new states that might emerge in the Louisiana Territory, called them “sister republics” and said, “keep them in the union, if it be for their good, but separate them, if it be better.”<sup>2</sup> For Jefferson, the priority was republicanism not union. Nations remain separate and sovereign, especially when it comes to defense, but share republican virtues of self-government and commerce. Wilson envisioned the League of Nations, Jefferson the democratic peace.

*Second*, conservative internationalism is “internationalist” internationalist in the sense that national security is not only about territorial defense and geopolitical balances, but also about the kind of “political” or “ideological” world in which defense is executed. Defending America is much easier in a world in which democracies proliferate than in one dominated by authoritarian powers. This fact is often overlooked by realists and nationalists who take the world “as it is,” and warn against ideological aims which pursue the world as “we wish it to be.” Yet, consider how much more difficult American defense would be if the world today was like the world in 1914 or 1941. In short, regime type matters, and increasing the number of democracies in the world—however slowly or incrementally—is a fundamental tenet of national security. As my colleague, Mike Barnett, once put it felicitously: “a

<sup>1</sup> Henry R. Nau, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, paperback with new preface 2015). An internationalist literature that is more conservative and places greater emphasis on ideologies than power (realism) or institutions (liberal internationalism) is growing in recent years. See John M. Owen IV, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Mark L. Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789–1989* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Paul D. Miller, *American Power and Liberal Order* (Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2016); and Robert G. Kaufman, *Dangerous Doctrine* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Jefferson to Breckenridge, Aug. 12, 1803, in Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. VIII, pp. 243-244.

community of Saddam Husseins is unlikely to father a secure environment, while a community of Mahatma Gandhis will encourage all to leave their homes unlocked.”<sup>3</sup>

*Third*, conservative internationalism believes that diplomacy works best when it is “armed.” This contention follows not because conservatives are militarist while liberals are cooperative, but because nondemocracies use force congenitally and, if democracies negotiate unarmed, nondemocracies will achieve their objectives by arms outside negotiations. As Frederick the Great once said, “negotiations without arms are music without instruments.”<sup>4</sup> For conservative internationalism, the use of military force does not disrupt diplomacy; it makes the adversary take negotiations seriously. By contrast, liberal internationalism sees force as a “last resort” after negotiations fail and then only with multilateral consent. When the Soviet Union deployed missiles in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and waged proxy wars in Africa and Central America, liberal internationalists prioritized arms control (SALT I and II). That made “détente,” as Reagan saw it, “a one-way street.”<sup>5</sup> The Soviet Union became serious and reduced arms through negotiations only after the United States and Western allies boosted defense spending, deployed their own missiles in Western Europe, and backstopped freedom fighters in proxy wars.

*Fourth*, conservative internationalism sets “priorities” and seeks “compromises,” recognizing that the pursuit of freedom through armed diplomacy, however incremental, raises the stakes. It prioritizes freedom where freedom counts the most, namely on the borders of Europe and Asia where strong free nations and markets already exist. And it uses diplomacy to discipline the use of force. The objective is to lock-in incremental gains in priority areas, not to seek to spread freedom everywhere at once. Reagan offered the Soviet Union off ramps as well as road blocks—an end to the arms race and participation in the information revolution—and he prioritized freedom in Central Europe, not in Lebanon or Afghanistan. He accepted compromises only after he was convinced that those compromises would lead to greater freedom.<sup>6</sup>

So, conservative internationalism means fighting for freedom incrementally by leveraging diplomacy with force to achieve a decentralized world of separate and sovereign nations that champion individual freedom and live together under limited government, the democratic peace. When it comes to the importance of regime type for national defense, both conservative and liberal internationalists part company with realism and nationalism. And on the need for force to leverage diplomacy and the end goal of strong nations not international institutions, conservative internationalism parts company with liberal internationalism.

<sup>3</sup> Michael N. Barnett, “Identity and Alliances in the Middle East,” in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 407.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in William Fiddian Reddaway, *Frederick the Great and the Rise of Prussia* (New York: Putnam & Sons, 1904), p. 132.

<sup>5</sup> Reagan used this phrase, President’s News Conference, Jan. 29, 1981, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=44101>.

<sup>6</sup> Reagan did not reach this conclusion until spring 1988. See Mark L. Haas, “The United States and the End of the Cold War,” *International Organization* 61, 1 (2007), pp. 145-179.

Let us take a closer look at each of the four aspects of conservative internationalism.

### What is Conservative?

There are many ways to differentiate conservatives from liberals and most of them are politically charged. Some are just downright partisan.

The fairest way to start is with the proposition that both conservatives and liberals care about the American experiment; that is they all support the quest for liberty and equality, freedom and justice.



Louis Hartz

As Louis Hartz wrote in *The Liberal Tradition in America*, all Americans are liberals.<sup>7</sup> He meant classical liberals who advocate individual liberty, as laid out in the Declaration of Independence, and “republican” institutions, as provided by the checks and balances of the Constitution. There are no pre-Enlightenment conservatives in America who believe in authoritarianism, monarchy, aristocracy, class, or clericalism. For that reason, America—unlike Europe—has never had a significant fascist, communist, or even confessional (that is, religious) party.

Where American conservatives and liberals differ, however, is on the priority they give to liberty vs. equality. When there is a trade-off, liberals are more willing to accept restraints on liberty to achieve greater equality; conservatives are more willing to accept greater inequality to preserve more liberty. Both views are justified and necessary because, as Aristotle told us long ago, there are two types of inequality: one, when equal people are treated unequally—that is the liberal concern—and two, when unequal people are treated equally—that is the conservative concern.

Logically, therefore, conservatives see the greatest threats to liberty primarily coming from centralized institutions that treat unequal people equally and prescribe

<sup>7</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955).

one-size-fits-all solutions that restrict choice. They worry about the executive or administrative state—that is, an unconstitutional “fourth branch” of government made up of unaccountable bureaucrats, experts and judges—and prefer to leave most decisions to local and civil society institutions where equal opportunity does not preclude natural inequalities based on differences in ambition, effort, and talent.

Liberals, on the other hand, see the greatest threats to liberty arising from a private sector that treats equal people unequally and restricts opportunity, leading to poverty, racial discrimination, and corporate monopolies. They favor an activist central state that regulates the private sector and redistributes resources, insuring greater justice in outcomes as well as opportunity.

These differences have existed since the beginning of the Republic. Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists worried about the unruly mobs that refused to pay their whiskey taxes (dispatching an army to suppress them). Thomas Jefferson and the Republicans worried about an oppressive government that passed the Alien and Sedition Acts (imprisoning Republican journalists for merely criticizing the government).

In a republic, this is a healthy competition that tracks threats to liberty from both the public and private sectors.

### **What is Internationalist?**

Domestic differences between conservatives and liberals lead to significant and healthy differences in foreign policy.

First, because of their greater faith in government and experts, liberals believe that persistent diplomacy in international institutions will eventually temper and narrow differences between authoritarian and democratic regimes. They are willing to concede equality to authoritarian states in international institutions in order to pull them toward the “liberal” international order. The idea, as John Ikenberry writes, is to capture authoritarian states in an “iron cage of multilateral rules, standards, safeguards and dispute resolution procedures”<sup>8</sup> and eventually to domesticate and indeed democratize their politics. What is needed in this process is time, patience, and the realization that history is on freedom’s side.

Conservatives, by contrast, believe that ideological differences may be too great to allow diplomatic outcomes that favor freedom. Treating authoritarian states equally in international institutions may only legitimize these regimes. In December 1945, Secretary of State James Brynes warned President Harry Truman that ideological differences with the Soviet Union made UN agreements unlikely and potentially threatening to freedom in Central Europe.<sup>9</sup> Truman recognized fairly quickly that these differences would not be resolved by diplomatic compromises, but

<sup>8</sup> G. John Ikenberry, Thomas J. Knock, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and Tony Smith, *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> See Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 16.

would need to be litigated through deterrence and a competition between two ways of life. That was the vision he laid out in the Truman Doctrine.

### **What is Armed Diplomacy?**

Conservative internationalism expects that, in this ideological competition, the role of force will be more important than liberal internationalism assumes. The reason is that authoritarian states use force at home to sustain their rule and are more likely than democratic states to use it abroad to advance their foreign policy interests.<sup>10</sup> In short, authoritarian states can be expected to use force while they negotiate.

Thus, conservative internationalism arms diplomacy during negotiations with authoritarian states.<sup>11</sup> The purpose is not to scuttle negotiations, but to counter uses of force by authoritarian states outside negotiations in order to get them to take seriously the discussions inside negotiations. By contrast, liberal internationalism seeks to avoid the use of force during diplomacy regarding it as a “last resort” to be deployed only after diplomacy and economic sanctions have failed and then, for many, only with multilateral consent. President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry differed on this issue in Syria.<sup>12</sup> As the civil war heated up in that country, Kerry repeatedly counseled Obama to intervene militarily to counter the gains that Bashar al-Assad and his Russian and Iranian backers were making on the ground. The objective, Kerry said, was not to overthrow Assad, but to encourage him and his backers to take the peace negotiations seriously. As long as they had the upper hand on the battlefield, Kerry pointed out, they had no incentive to negotiate. Obama steadfastly resisted these requests. He believed that the use of force during negotiations would simply increase distrust and lead to a slippery slope of escalating force. In fact, Obama predicted that Russia’s intervention would end up in a quagmire.

Both arguments are logical. The slippery slope is a real issue; it exposes conservative internationalist thinking to overreach and liberal internationalist thinking to appeasement. To escape this trap, conservative internationalism sets priorities and seeks compromises.

### **Setting Priorities**

Conservative internationalism does not “support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of

<sup>10</sup> The literature on the democratic peace supports this expectation.

<sup>11</sup> Armed diplomacy here means three uses of military force during negotiations that go beyond economic sanctions, but stop short of outright military intervention. These include: buildup of defenses and their deployment, use of proxy forces, and trade-off of arms within negotiations.

<sup>12</sup> For the details here, see an interview with President Obama by Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

ending tyranny in our world.”<sup>13</sup> Rather, it cares about the plight of freedom (human rights, democracy, etc.) in some countries more than in others. Specifically, it defends and, to the extent possible, extends freedom on the major borders of existing free countries. In more remote regions where few democracies exist, it is concerned primarily with threats, not with democracy promotion.

This means a greater concern for democracy on the major frontiers of freedom in Europe and Asia than in the Middle East or Southwest Asia. Today, the ideological hotspots on these borders are Ukraine and Korea. In these conflicts, conservative internationalism recommends that the United States holds out for democracy over the long haul, as it did during the Cold War. This approach is both necessary and possible. It is necessary because the consequences of losing freedom on these borders are far greater than in Iraq or Afghanistan. Think of the difficulties for freedom in Europe caused already by Russia’s interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria (refugees). And it is possible because the costs of fighting for freedom on these borders are less, given the strong presence nearby of democratic alliances and capitalist markets.

In remote regions such as the Middle East and Southwest Asia, conservative internationalism recommends that the United States downplay democracy promotion. Deal with threats, such as the Taliban and ISIS, but, except for training and advice, do not station large forces or spend massive sums of money in these regions to transplant democracy. Above all, do nothing to weaken existing democracies in these regions like Israel or India.

## **Compromise**

Conservative internationalism uses military leverage to achieve compromises that incrementally favor freedom. This stance represents an important difference with realists who also seek compromise, but only to secure the status quo and with some neoconservatives who seek total victory and no compromise at all.

In short, while conservative internationalism arms diplomacy with force, it never uses force without follow-up diplomacy, that is, without simultaneously offering a compromise or diplomatic off ramp for adversaries. A key element of this strategy is to cash in military gains for compromise at the moment when those gains are most significant.

James K. Polk was a genius at combining force and diplomacy. He kept diplomatic envoys in play throughout the war with Mexico, initially to avoid war and then to find off ramps to end the war without a long occupation. He succeeded. After conquering the entire country, American troops left Mexico within six months. George H.W. Bush also successfully leveraged military force in the First Persian Gulf War to launch the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference and the Oslo Accords that

<sup>13</sup> George W. Bush, Inaugural Address, Jan. 20, 2005, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4460172>.

followed indirectly from Madrid. His son, George W. Bush, however, missed similar opportunities to leverage military success in the Second Persian Gulf War. He did not take up in 2003 an Iranian offer to negotiate its nuclear program and waited until November 2007 to launch a wider Middle East Peace Initiative, four-and-a-half years after the invasion and after his military leverage had waned enough to require a second military surge in Iraq.

How do we know when a compromise favors freedom or the status quo? It is not always easy. But negotiations in Ukraine offer an example. A conservative internationalist compromise would uphold the right for Ukraine to join NATO and the European Union someday, just as the West upheld that right for a divided Germany during the Cold War. A realist compromise would call for a buffer or bridge state, a Ukraine neither east nor west but neutral or both.<sup>14</sup>

### Conservative Internationalism Summed Up

Thus, an internationalism that expands freedom conservatively means in sum the following:

- Upholding the importance of regime type and not just territorial defense in national security policy
- Recognizing the need to use force during negotiations to get authoritarian states to take negotiations seriously
- Setting priorities and using gains from armed diplomacy to secure compromises that weaken or at least do not legitimate authoritarian states
- Aiming for a world of “sister republics” that remain separate and sovereign but share republican or democratic values and bind together through robust volunteer markets and civil society exchanges

In the end, conservative internationalism embraces the *goals* of liberal internationalism (reforming the international system, not settling for the status quo), the *means* of realism (use force during negotiations, not as a last resort) and the *purpose* of nationalism (a world of sovereign, but free nations, not global international institutions).



<sup>14</sup> Henry Kissinger, “To settle the Ukraine issue, start at the end,” *The Washington Post*, March 5, 2015.