



What is the Role of Human Rights in Strategic Competition?

A Response from Jakub Grygiel

The rivalry between the United States and predatory states such as Russia and China is about power as well as its purpose. The winner of the competition in a region or over a particular state not only advances its power but also extends its vision of how to organize the state, how to set up the economy, and what people can practice in the public square. Joseph Stalin’s claim that “everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach” continues to carry some truth, even though the imposition of an authoritarian system is practically and morally different from the establishment of a democracy. The core point remains: Power is never devoid of some purpose.

Our purpose is profoundly different from that of our geopolitical rivals. At the heart of that difference is the question of the proper role of the state in relation to its citizens. Our republic is a polity of, by, and for the citizens, while for our rivals, the people are subservient to the state. Neither Moscow nor Beijing has a global ideological appeal akin to that of their Communist predecessors, but they are authoritarian regimes that fear their citizens and seek to revise the international order—and undermine the domestic political order—of the American republic and of our allies. That we are fundamentally different is, therefore, not in doubt. Neither is the fact that, despite the relentless national flagellation by the Left, the United States and, more broadly, the Western world continue to represent a superior political and economic system stemming from a long tradition of natural law and legal frameworks, faith and reason, and political order and individual liberty.

The question is whether promoting this purpose through an emphasis on human rights in U.S. foreign policy will be as helpful as it was over

the course of the Cold War with the USSR. The short answer is yes, but with important caveats. Human rights, as commonly conceived now, are often in direct opposition to the constitutional principles of the American republic and the universal aspirations to liberty—and consequently undercut our ability to compete with our geopolitical enemies.

The Strategic Advantage of Natural Rights

There are two main reasons why the United States should, as one of the purposes of its foreign policy, protect natural rights, which are the basic, fundamental rights shielding people from the state (I will address more on the distinction between natural and human rights later). The first reason is that the United States is a republic founded on rights grounded in natural law that justified a rebellion and the creation of a new polity. Fundamental, unalienable rights that protect people from the state are inscribed in our founding documents, especially in the Declaration of Independence. These rights were considered then, as they are now, universal. That is, they are rights given to every person by God (not by the government) and that every state is called to respect. Hence, natural rights are an essential component of how the American republic ought to behave domestically and internationally.

This does not mean, of course, that the United States should be leading and bankrolling every revolt against tyrannical regimes in distant lands. Universal principles do not lose their validity when faced with the unfeasibility of their implementation. Nonetheless, ignoring them completely would be a violation of the political inheritance entrusted to us.

The second reason is practical. Our enemies—from Russia to China to Iran—represent various forms of tyrannies, and pointing out their violations of basic political rights is a useful tool to weaken their hold on power. It puts them on the defensive not just from us, but from their own people. The goal is to clarify that their political orders are based on brute force and fear rather than legitimacy and authority and that they are feared more than they are respected by their own people. Such a utilitarian reason of defending human rights does not diminish the moral standing of the United States; it is simply a benefit of being a republic that preserves liberty.

There are of course hard limits on what such an approach can achieve. Criticizing our rivals, and even punishing them when feasible, for violating natural rights—when they commit genocide, force abortion, or arrest critics, for example—will not necessarily result in China or Russia becoming friendly republics that guarantee

liberty to their people and engage in peaceful relations with us. There is no arc of history that inevitably leads to a convergence of political systems and to global commercial harmony, and we should not overestimate the geopolitical effects of a policy emphasizing basic natural rights. China will not be deterred because we hold the moral high ground; Russia will not stop its predations in Ukraine or the eastern Mediterranean because we oppose Vladimir Putin's violence against his critics. Even assuming that our rivals become democracies at some point in time, it is not a given—*pace* Kant and his democratic peace belief—that geopolitical competition and even war will vanish. Moral superiority is not a strategy of survival or victory, but it can be a valuable tool in great-power competition.

The Necessary Distinctions

There are also important questions that we, as conservatives, should ask ourselves when we advocate for human rights. The core problem is that “human rights” as a term, and thus as a policy, has lost focus and is increasingly defined not by our constitutional tradition but by leftist and postmodern ideological trends. As a result, not only do we end up pursuing policies abroad that are deeply divisive domestically, but we also undermine our ability to compete with our geopolitical rivals.

This leftward tilt is not new. The opposition to the idea of natural rights is ingrained in progressive ideology. It is sufficient to remember Woodrow Wilson, who wrote, “If you want to understand the real Declaration of Independence, do not repeat the preface.” His objection to the preamble of that document arose from the view widely held among liberals that human rights are products of a generous state and not given to man by the Creator. According to such a vision, the purpose of the state—and increasingly of international institutions that claim to be the repositories of “universal values” of a global community—is to supply its citizens with a constantly evolving list of “rights” that are nothing more than particular grievances (as expressed by the rest of the Declaration, which Wilson liked). Such a vision subverts in a profound way the concept of rights, establishing the state as a domestic and international machine of social, economic, and cultural engineering. Rights become a justification for the pervasive intrusion of state power (and of international institutions) rather than a bulwark against state abuse.

In light of this difference in the meaning of human rights, three distinctions are particularly important for our foreign policy and our ability to keep our geopolitical rivals in check.

First, we should separate political rights from cultural, social, and

economic rights. Political rights describe freedoms *from* the state, limiting its power over the lives of the citizens (e.g., freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and the right to a fair trial). They define liberty. Cultural, social, and economic rights are political goals that arise out of different national and ideological settings and require state intervention (e.g., the “rights” to health care, education, leisure time, and work). As Jeane Kirkpatrick called them, these are “letters to Santa Claus,” and as such, they can be as infinite as our desires and must be provided by the state.

By conflating these rights, we undermine our ability to compete with rivals, as our experience during the Cold War demonstrates. President Ronald Reagan was clear that putting all these “rights” in the same basket—as President Jimmy Carter had done before him and President Barack Obama did more recently—was a dangerous and unnecessary concession to the Soviet Union and other leftist tyrannies. Authoritarian regimes are often very adept at fulfilling the nonpolitical “rights.” Such regimes usually have no official unemployment, they offer “free” health care, they mandate education, and they manage housing. The fact that these so-called benefits are often of poor quality and despised by the population does not prevent such states from claiming to be at the forefront of “human rights” thus defined.

In fact, there may be an even a deeper contradiction. To pursue some of these goals, the state may violate some political rights because it arrogates to itself the right to decide what is education (violating freedom of speech, for instance), what is health care (violating freedom of religion), or where to build public housing (violating the right to property).

Moreover, when the United States promotes abroad these new “rights”—which are really products of a fashionable ideology du jour—the outcome is that we are seen as the enemy, not as friends. Pushing avant-garde “rights” that are not accepted fully even in the United States and are even less popular in many—perhaps a majority of—countries abroad is an enormous strategic blunder. It creates opportunities for our rivals who can present themselves as defenders of local traditions and religion against a cultural aggressor who seeks postmodern homogeneity. For instance, promoting “Pride Days” in Ukraine at U.S. taxpayers’ expense makes us the enemy of much of what is an overwhelmingly Orthodox country, while Russia can become the friendly protector of tradition and religion. The Ukrainian babushka heading to the Uniate or Orthodox church will be more amenable to accepting Russian domination than this version of American “freedom.”

Second, we should argue for the primacy of culture as the basis of liberty. Liberty is maintained by a set of institutions and separation of power, but these are empty shells if the citizens lack certain habits and virtues. The removal of a dictator, the rearrangement of state institutions, and the implementation of some processes such as elections are insufficient to allow for self-sustaining democratic governance. Democracy and liberty arise out of a culture based on virtues instilled by education and sustained by tradition and religion. As democracies can degenerate because of an educational system that does not instill virtues of responsibility or a deep patriotism, so we must be aware of the difficulty of establishing democratic institutions where the underlying culture necessary to sustain them is absent.

It is strange that the same conservatives who worry about the degeneration of culture undermined by woke ideologies and hollowed by historical lies at home ignore culture when it comes to democracy promotion abroad. The fragility of democratic order, including that of the American republic, revolves around the ability to preserve a core set of principles—a respect for natural rights, an admiration of our forefathers’ sacrifices, or the reverence for eternal self-evident truths—that endure only when inlaid in culture. If our own culture is becoming a brittle foundation for democratic self-governance, we should be aware of the limitations of promoting democracy abroad in places where there is very shallow cultural underpinning for such a political regime. Universality of principles does not mean that they can be implemented universally.

Third, we should be open to various regimes and diverse versions of democracy supporting liberty. It is conceivable to have a monarchy that respects liberty. It is also feasible to have a democratic regime, with separated powers and consent of the governed, that does not share every fluid norm and political goal espoused by some international institution or by a nonexistent “global community.” As mentioned above, democracies are stable and effective when they are grounded in tradition and cultures and are supported by the nation. That is, democracies are best when they are national—rooted in Edmund Burke’s local and particular—rather than reflecting some uniform ideal version. Universality of principles does not mean uniformity of their political application.

Enforcing such uniformity weakens American security, especially when we deal with our democratic allies. They are all different, and we should respect and celebrate their differences and not impose a stilted uniformity on them. We rely on distant allies to be the first responders to threats emanating from Eurasia and to be the ramparts where we compete and fight with our rivals. Frontline allies, such

as Poland and Hungary in Europe or South Korea and Taiwan in Asia, will have variegated versions of democracy. They may differ on constitutional arrangements (e.g., who nominates judges or how governments are formed), what they consider to be essential to their political order (e.g., some will value and protect marriage, family, and life as foundational to their society), how they approach migration (e.g., they may actually build walls to preserve a national identity grounded in the same language and religion), or how they organize their media (e.g., many have state-run mass media).

Criticizing and sanctioning allies for alleged violations of what we may deem as “internationally accepted democratic norms” (itself a very fluid phrase that is redefined at breakneck speed, invariably by the Left) damages our security because it pushes allies and partners to be closer to our rivals than to us. Neither Russia nor China will sanction Hungary or Poland, for instance, for enacting pro-life laws or pro-family policies—not because Moscow or Beijing care particularly about these issues, but because they see them as a way to create wedges in the Western alliance. Those wedges become only deeper when we vociferously criticize and ostracize such allies. We are the cultural aggressors, while our geopolitical rivals, armed with money and economic incentives, become helpful defenders.

In order to be true to our political foundations and compete effectively with our geopolitical rivals, we should carefully preserve the concept and practice of natural rights, which are under attack from both foreign tyrannies afraid of their citizens’ liberty and the domestic avant-garde proliferation of grievances masquerading as rights. There are deep and growing disagreements about the meaning of human rights, and it does not benefit U.S. foreign policy in an age of great-power competition to paper over them. These disagreements are not about the prudential timing of a particular policy but are fundamental and concern both the concept and the implementation of human rights.