

U.S. Interests and Universal Goods

Lincoln A. Mitchell

June 11, 2011

During the Cold War, both the Soviet Union and the U.S. sought to create and use multi-lateral organizations to serve their interests and to use the language of universal values and goods to frame the pursuit of their national goals. The United Nations was, for example, in many cases a diplomatic battleground between the two superpowers. Organizations like NATO were multi-lateral, but largely served the interest of the U.S. Similarly, ideas like freedom and democracy were used by the U.S. to put a more palatable face on what were otherwise proxy fights with the USSR, while the USSR used the language of peace and cooperation between nations for the same purpose.

This was an important strategy during the Cold War which the U.S. pursued very effectively. It made it possible for leaders, including those of key western European allies as well as those in the Cold War battlegrounds of Asia, South America and Africa to support or share the U.S. position in the conflict without being seen by their own people as being under direct control of the U.S. It also created a climate where the U.S. could generate support for its positions by mobilizing people around shared values such as freedom or democracy. Obviously, this approach was frequently hypocritical, occasionally disastrous and never perfect, but over the course of almost half a century it was more effective than similar efforts made by the USSR.

Since the Cold War, circumstances have turned this strategy on its head. Whereas thirty years ago the U.S. was able to mobilize many countries to help achieve American goals by often falsely appealing to universal values, today the U.S. gets pulled into pursuit of universal or abstract goods by often false appeals to American interests. There are nonetheless often good reasons why the U.S. should pursue these goods. Sometimes, the moral dimension is too big to ignore; and sometimes the universal good and American interests are in alignment. However, the notion that these two things are always in alignment is not credible, but remains an underlying assumption held by many in the foreign policy leadership of the U.S.

During the Cold War, the U.S. viewed, and referred to itself, as the “leader of the free world.” This formulation was far more empowering than simply being one of two superpowers vying for world domination. The U.S. sought to present its leadership role as being in the name of freedom, rather than just the U.S. Since the Cold War, this frame has been a problem for the U.S. because rather than being empowering, it forced the U.S. to take on more responsibilities around the world.

Current examples of this include the reaction to the Arab Spring in general and events in Libya specifically. If Egypt, Tunisia and other countries in the North Africa were to successfully transition to democracies, it would be a tremendous gain for humanity as more people would be free of oppression, and obviously an even greater gain for the

people of those countries who would directly benefit from greater freedom, stronger rule of law and no longer having to fear capricious and oppressive governments. The extent to which it would be in the specific interest of the U.S., particularly given the resources it would take to help make this happen, is far less clear. A similar case can be made for both Libya and Syria where intervening to stop the killing of innocent people including those demonstrating for more freedom, serves an obvious moral purpose, but is less directly linked to U.S. interests.

In both these cases, and numerous others from the recent past, the U.S. has sought to do the right thing from a moral standpoint but has cloaked it in national interest so as to better present it to American citizens. Some have sought to resolve by claiming that because the U.S. has a unique moral role in the world, doing the right thing for humanity is always in the interests of the U.S. This is, however, not plausible and too frequently makes it difficult to seriously consider what may or may not be in the interests of the U.S.

More critically, it leads the U.S. down a path of always intervening and therefore inevitably overextending itself militarily and financially. If resolving any human rights crisis is in the interest of the U.S., then failing to do this, is always counter to the interests of the U.S. This view ensures an interventionist policy, but also ensures that an already budget strapped country is going to continue to intervene until it is too broke and weak to make any meaningful decisions on its own. Given both the increasingly limited ability of the U.S. to directly affect outcomes, and the cost the U.S. must undertake to pursue these goals, it is imperative, although perhaps unfortunate or even tragic, that the U.S. be able to make rational case-by-case decisions about where and how it will become involved in various human rights related issues. The assumption that every one of these cases is *prima facie* of great national interest to the U.S. makes this impossible and is ultimately very disempowering for the U.S.