American Civil Religion, Foreign Policy, and the Challenge of Multipolarity

by Thomas Banchoff, Georgetown University

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This essay explores one aspect of national culture that informs foreign policymaking in the United States – a set of beliefs shared across the political spectrum that orients presidents in their conduct of international affairs. It can be summed up in the proposition that America is called from among the nations to defend and promote freedom and democracy around the world. Within this dominant cultural frame, the pursuit of the material security and economic interests of the United States is inseparable from advancement of its core political values. And those values are held to be universal and to rest on a transcendent and divine foundation. As President Barack Obama put it in his second inaugural address, echoing his predecessors:

What makes us exceptional – what makes us American – is our allegiance to an idea articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Today we continue a never-ending journey to bridge the meaning of those words with the realities of our time. For history tells us that while these truths may be self-evident, they’ve never been self-executing; that while freedom is a gift from God, it must be secured by His people here on Earth.¹

This idea of a global mission was present at the founding of the Republic, when the United States sought to transform the world by its moral and political example. It accompanied the country’s emergence as a world power during the late 19th century and its rise to global preeminence in the wake of two world wars. And it has survived the gradual waning of US hegemony since the 1960s, persisting into the present.

Today, the differential growth of power and the relative decline of US economic and military capabilities raise a critical question: whether and how the sense of mission and moral authority central to the culture of American foreign policy will adapt to a multipolar world in which the US will be compelled to cooperate with rising powers that do not share its political values.

In the case of the United States, the task of adapting an established culture of national policymaking to a multipolar world runs up against a deeply embedded “civil religion,” defined here as core political values and national narratives embedded in state institutions, articulated across the political spectrum, and linked back to the country's dominant religious traditions. In the United States, civil religion has foreign policy effects by wedding government to an international mission that goes beyond the mere pursuit of prosperity and security to incorporate the defense and promotion of sacred national values abroad. After exploring the concept of civil religion and its relevance for cultural approaches to foreign policy, this essay tracks its content, development, and significance for the United States through several historical phases, up through and including today’s emergent multipolar moment.

Civil Religion and National Cultures of Foreign Policy
Civil religion is a vast and contested conceptual terrain. The basic idea, which can be traced back to Plato's *Laws*, is that every political order draws on religion for its legitimation. At least through the early modern period, political elites around the world justified their right to rule and their particular policies by invoking the will of God or the gods or some conception of ultimate cosmic order. The increasing differentiation between religious and political authority from the late Middle Ages onward – a secularization trend that began in Europe but has since spread around the world – never severed the connection between both spheres. The nation states that dominate the world today still link back, in different ways, to religious ideas. Their constitutional orders assert the foundational importance of the rule of law, freedom, equality, and other values. Even in the absence of an established religion, those values are typically linked back to a theistic foundation (for example, America's "one nation under God") or invested with transcendent significance in their own right (for example, France's "sacred rights of man").

Not every approach to civil religion begins with shared commitments to political values. For Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, the concept referred to beliefs about the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and future rewards and punishments that guarantee moral order. Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* addressed religion as beliefs and practices based in civil society that support democratic institutions. Saint Simon, Auguste Comte, and John Stuart Mill developed the concept of a "Religion of Humanity," a kind of faith that civility

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2 At a philosophical level, it is possible to ground, or attempt to ground, ultimate values on reason alone (following rationalists like Immanuel Kant) or to dismiss the need for grounding at all (following pragmatists like Richard Rorty). As an empirical matter, however, political authority seeks to legitimate itself, and the idea of the sacred and the teachings of particular religious traditions remain a key resource.
based on reason and compassion might advance social and political progress.  

Emile Durkheim is the social theorist whose approach is closest to the one advanced here. His *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) did not develop the concept of civil religion explicitly but endowed the concept of religion with a deep social and political significance. For Durkheim, religion was those beliefs and practices that forged group identity. It was not about the supernatural but about the experience of the sacred in community. He famously asked:

> What essential difference is there between an assembly of Christians celebrating the principal dates of the life of Christ, or of Jews remembering the exodus from Egypt or the promulgation of the decalogue, and a reunion of citizens commemorating the promulgation of a new moral or legal system or some great event in the national life?

While Durkheim emphasized the emotional and performative dimensions of religion, Robert Bellah, whose 1967 essay "Civil Religion in America" revived the concept, placed more emphasis on its value foundation. "Any coherent and viable society," he argued in 1975, "rests on a common set of moral understandings about good and bad, right and wrong, in the realm of individual and social action." And it is "almost as widely held that these common moral understandings must also in turn rest upon a common set of religious understandings that provide a picture of the universe in terms of which the moral understandings make sense." Bellah explored the problem of legitimation, but his focus remained the societal, not the state level. As he put it, "such moral and religious understandings produce both a basic cultural legitimization

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for a society which is viewed as at least approximately in accord with them, and a standard of judgment for the criticism of a society that is seen as deviating too far from them.\(^5\)

The definition of civil religion here – shared commitments to ultimate values that ground the political community and are linked back to religious traditions – puts state institutions and elite discourse front and center. It begins with the central values embedded in constitutional texts and articulated across the political spectrum, for example freedom, equality, solidarity, and respect for cultural diversity. Those values are often expressed in national narratives that construe a country's history as the triumph of core values through past adversity into a promising future. Core values and narratives are often articulated in electoral and legislative struggles or at ritual occasions, such as transitions from one government to another. They serve to legitimate political institutions and policy projects and to dramatize and demonstrate the unity of the nation.

To count as civil religion, and not just as components of national culture or national identity, core values and their associated narratives must be linked back to a society's dominant religious traditions. Political values must be rooted in religious values (for example, human dignity grounded in God-given nature). And national narratives must intersect with religious narratives (for example, stories of deliverance and redemption). It is not enough to assert that national culture, national identity or nationalism have a quasi-religious quality because they are objects of intense emotional passion. The case for civil religion as a useful concept hangs on a link back to actual religious ideas.

To be relevant to the national culture of foreign policymaking, civil religion must also have an international dimension. It must link national values to an external mission by positing their universal significance as norms for international institutions and interstate diplomacy. When national leaders articulate foreign policies solely in terms of the pursuit of security and prosperity, one cannot claim foreign policy significance for civil religion. Only when they invoke national values linked back to a particular faith tradition can one make a case for the religion/foreign policy connection.

Once the existence of civil religion in national foreign policy discourse has been demonstrated, one can explore its effects through tests of consistency and continuity. Where foreign policy is consistent with core national values and narratives – where states pursue policies consonant with them or seek to embed them in international institutions – the case for the effects of civil religion gains in strength. Where foreign policy is continuous from one government to the next – where leaders of different parties are constrained to articulate and pursue the same values – the case for civil religion's effects becomes plausible. Where leaders pursue policies inconsistent with civil religion or discontinuous with it over time, no persuasive causal connection between civil religion and foreign policy practice can be established.

The following analysis of American civil religion and its impact on the culture of US foreign policy addresses these questions in turn: What are the core values embedded in American constitutional order and political discourse and how do they link back to the dominant faith tradition, Christianity? Do core political values and the national narratives with a Christian inflection inform a particular understanding of international mission? Is foreign policy consistent
with the values and narratives embedded in its civil religion and continuous with them across changes in administration?

**American Civil Religion and Foreign Policy: Historical Intersections**

The central value enshrined in the American constitutional order is individual freedom and its corollary, limited government. The country's founding documents and political discourse celebrate many values besides freedom, including equality and community. But freedom is the most central. Equality is conceived in US law and politics primarily as the equality of free individuals to act with a minimum of government restraint. It is the equality of opportunity to exercise freedom. In the absence of a strong social democratic tradition, equality of economic or social outcomes has mainly negative connotations. Freedom trumps community, too. Community is celebrated – the Constitution begins "We the People" and leaders invoke the unity of the "American people." But the collective is usually conceived as a free association of citizens. The individual with his or her rights tends to come before the group.

The central value of individual freedom set down in America's founding document, the Declaration of Independence (1776), is explicitly linked in the text to a religious foundation: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration's author, drew on the link between individual freedom and divine providence in the liberal Protestantism and Enlightenment deism of John Locke. Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government* (1690) began with the ideal of free individuals in a state of nature who, endowed with reason by God, appropriate property and form groups to
advance their economic and social well-being. The highest level group – the state – emerges out of a social contract, through which free individuals guided by the light of reason trade certain limits on their freedoms for the security of limited government.

Another current of Christian thought, the Puritanism that took root in 17th century New England, has also traditionally served to ground the emphasis on individual freedom as a foundational American value. The emphasis on individual salvation in Calvinism and the development of the idea of freedom of conscience by the reformer Roger Williams were critical contributions. And the Puritan tradition of invoking biblical imagery to interpret the American experiment – for example the deliverance from slavery in the Book of Exodus and the New Jerusalem of the Book of Revelation as parallels with the escape from the oppression of the old world into the freedom of the new – have helped to fuse biblical and political narratives of liberty in American history.

One can track the career of the value of individual freedom and its divinely ordained quality in American political discourse through history and up to the present. The celebration of individual liberty as a gift of God to be safeguarded through American political institutions has persisted through centuries of dramatic social, cultural, economic, and political transformation, including slavery, civil war, industrialization, massive immigration, depression, and our postwar consumer society. The idea of America as "God's own country" or "One nation under God" has increasingly been articulated in a non-denominational fashion, enabling the assimilation of Catholicism into the American mainstream, the emergence of a more inclusive "Judeo-Christian" identity after 1945 and efforts to construct an "Abrahamic" identity in our own day.
A couple of lesser-known examples provide insight into conceptual continuity amid changes in language and style. At his inaugural address in 1829, Andrew Jackson said:

A firm reliance on the goodness of that Power whose providence mercifully protected our national infancy, and has since upheld our liberties in various vicissitudes, encourages me to offer up my ardent supplications that He will continue to make our beloved country the object of His divine care and gracious benediction.6

Dwight Eisenhower's inaugural address in 1953 addressed the same theme in a different idiom:

At such a time in history, we who are free must proclaim anew our faith. This faith is the abiding creed of our fathers. It is our faith in the deathless dignity of man, governed by eternal moral and natural laws. This faith defines our full view of life. It establishes, beyond debate, those gifts of the Creator that are man's inalienable rights.7

A concluding passage from Barack Obama's 2009 inaugural address illustrates basic lines of continuity in presidential discourse about the divine foundation of individual rights and freedom:

Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations.8

*Foreign policy dimension*

The foreign policy dimension of American civil religion can be traced back as far as a seminal sermon by John Winthrop in 1630. The leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony evoked the metaphor of a "city on a hill and a light among nations" – a quotation from the Sermon on the Mount – to describe the universal significance of the new political experiment on America's shores. US presidents beginning with George Washington saw

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the country's core values and their institutional expression as blazing a pioneering path for all humanity. As Washington put it in his 1796 farewell address:

> Observe good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all. Religion and morality enjoin this conduct; and can it be, that good policy does not equally enjoin it – It will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and at no distant period, a great nation, to give to mankind the magnificent and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence.\(^9\)

Winthrop’s concrete biblical image of a city on a hill and a light among nations, first evoked in 1630, persisted almost four centuries later, as president-elect John Kennedy gave a famous "City upon a Hill" speech in 1961.\(^10\) And Ronald Reagan used the term "Shining City on a Hill" prominently in his 1984 election campaign and again in his farewell address.\(^11\)

In the late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) centuries, as the United States grew in power and influence, Washington's modest emphasis on providing a model for all humanity was increasingly transformed into a continental and then global mission to spread American ideals, and freedom in particular, beyond its borders. Individual liberty as the core of American civil religion found foreign policy expression in the concept of Manifest Destiny, Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points (1918), and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Four Freedoms (1941). With America's rise to superpower status since World War II, US presidents have construed divine will, the spread of freedom around the world, and the interests of the United States as one and the same historical movement.

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Some prominent examples: At the outset of the Cold War, President Harry Truman told Congress in his State of the Union address in 1947 that "The spirit of the American people can set the course of world history." He continued: "If we maintain and strengthen our cherished ideals, and if we share our great bounty with war-stricken people over the world, then the faith of our citizens in freedom and democracy will be spread over the whole earth and free men everywhere will share our devotion to those ideals." In a similar vein, John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address maintained that "the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe – the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God."

Since World War II and up to today, a narrative linking the advance of freedom, divine providence, and America's role in the world has informed US foreign policy. The effects of civil religion on specific policies are, however, difficult to demonstrate. They are most plausible where the articulation of foundational values is consistent with diplomatic practice. The construction of the postwar human rights regime is perhaps the clearest example. The preamble to the UN Charter of 1945, drafted when US global influence was at its height, invoked "faith in fundamental human rights" and "in the dignity and worth of the human person." The catalogue of rights drafted under Eleanor Roosevelt's leadership and published in the Universal Declaration of 1948 deepened the emphasis on rights of the individual. Article 1 stated: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and

should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.\textsuperscript{15} The religious freedom provisions of Article 18 were a strong reflection of the US emphasis on individual liberty: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."\textsuperscript{16}

During the decades that followed, US diplomacy resisted international efforts to enshrine economic and social rights alongside political ones and to elevate cultural and group rights alongside those of individuals – with mixed success. The US has not ratified the 1966 Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, for example. On the issue of religious freedom, too, American diplomacy has endured some setbacks. The UN's 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination weakened the formulations of the Universal Declaration; it refers only to the right to have, not to change one's religion. Subsequent US efforts to monitor religious freedom in other countries in bilateral relations, mandated by Congress with the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, have met with objections from China, India, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other targeted countries, who have asserted the principle of national sovereignty – and the group rights of religious communities to defend themselves against proselytism of any kind – over and against the US focus on religious liberty.

The failure of the United States fully to institutionalize an individualist and freedom-centered approach to human rights at the level of the UN system illustrates the limits of US power and influence, not any inconsistency between its core values and its foreign

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
policy. A greater problem for an argument about the effects of civil religion on foreign policy is the US legacy of siding with dictatorships to advance economic and security interests. Through the Cold War, the US government supported autocrats in Latin America, Europe, and around the world in its struggle with the Soviet Union. And at least until recently, it has supported dictators in the Arab world in the interest of geopolitical stability and reliable oil supplies. To much of the world, and to domestic critics, this often appears to be hypocrisy. For US policymakers and their defenders, however, it is necessary pragmatism. Only by ensuring the survival and prosperity of the United States in the short and medium term, they argue, can one promote global freedom and democracy in the long term. The existence of inconsistency, in this view, does not undermine the prescriptive force of foundational values that have shaped the overall direction of US foreign policy. It grows out of the difficulty of applying them in practice.

A continuity test provides a second way to evaluate the impact of civil religion on foreign policy. Where values and narratives are widely articulated across the political spectrum, one should expect them to constrain new foreign policy departures over time. The fate of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's *Realpolitik*, a self-conscious effort to temper the missionary impulse in US foreign policy with careful attention to the balance of power, represents one example. By the 1976 campaign, his détente policy was an object of general political opprobrium. Gerald Ford's Republican and Democratic challengers that year, Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, both repudiated realist power politics in favor of more idealistic alternatives rooted, respectively, in anti-communism and human rights. A quarter century later, the attacks of September 11 sparked a subsequent rearticulation of
core themes of American civil religion. The terrorists, President George W. Bush argued, had attacked American freedoms; the War on Terror was fundamentally about values. His administration justified US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq both as wars of self-defense and as efforts to implant God-given freedoms abroad. As he put it in his 2003 State of the Union address: "We Americans have faith in ourselves, but not in ourselves alone. We do not claim to know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life and all of history."  

Barack Obama, Multilateralism, and the Persistence of American Civil Religion

Not surprisingly, Barack Obama articulated the main lines of American civil religion during his first presidential campaign in 2008, calling America “the last, best hope on Earth.” As noted above, his inaugural address, like Kennedy's, construed America's freedom-centered constitutional order as an expression of universal, divinely sanctioned values. Even his much-cited June 2009 Cairo Speech, pitched as a break with Bush’s unilateral approach to the Muslim world, underscored the ultimate identification between American and universal values: "I believe that America holds within her the truth that regardless of race, religion, or station in life, all of us share common aspirations – to live in peace and security; to get an education and to work with

dignity; to love our families, our communities, and our God. These things we share. This is the hope of all humanity."19

Within the context of this overall continuity, Obama struck some new tones as part of a turn away from Bush’s unilateralism and seeming embrace of a more multipolar global order. He sought to work more closely with allies in efforts to wind down US engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq, and initially downplayed human rights in relations with China. When asked by a reporter in April 2009 whether he subscribed "to the school of American exceptionalism that sees America as uniquely qualified to lead the world," Obama equivocated. "I believe in American exceptionalism," he said, "just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism." While "enormously proud of my country and its role and history in the world," he recognized that "we're not always going to be right, or that other people may have good ideas, or that in order for us to work collectively, all parties have to compromise and that includes us."20

This nuanced approach, in tension with the thrust of American civil religion with its emphasis on the unique US role in the world, generated political problems for Obama at home. In the run-up to the 2012 presidential contest, Republican leaders accused him of breaking with the hallowed tradition of American exceptionalism. In 2010, Mitt Romney published a book with the unmistakable title: No Apology: The Case for American Greatness. Obama's "reorientation away

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from a celebration of American exceptionalism," he wrote, was "misguided and bankrupt."\footnote{Mitt Romney, \textit{No Apology: The Case for American Greatness} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2010), 263.}

Along similar lines, Sarah Palin claimed in 2012 that Obama "doesn't believe in American exceptionalism at all. He seems to think it is just a kind of irrational prejudice in favour of our way of life."\footnote{Sarah Palin, \textit{America by Heart: Reflections on Family, Faith, and Flag} (New York: Harper, 2010), 69.}

While he did not reorient his foreign policy under this criticism, Obama did subsequently mitigate his emphasis on multilateralism. His September 2010 address to the UN General Assembly, for example, struck a much different tone than his speech of the previous year, including a stronger emphasis on American leadership and human rights. And his 2011 State of the Union speech, coming shortly before the declaration of his candidacy for reelection, invoked American civil religion and the idea of American exceptionalism, even if he avoided the term. "We believe that in a country where every race and faith and point of view can be found, we are still bound together as one people," he declared. Americans "share common hopes and a common creed" as part of what "sets us apart as a nation." He also referenced "the leadership that has made America not just a place on a map, but the light to the world" – an evocation of John Winthrop’s City on a Hill metaphor.\footnote{Barack Obama, “State of the Union,” http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/25/remarks-president-state-union-address (2011).}

During Obama’s second term, international crises and domestic pressures further complicated efforts to evolve a more multilateral approach to foreign policy. In his second inaugural address, in January 2103, he struck an optimistic chord about the state of the world and capacity of America to partner with others to shape it for the better. “A decade of war is now ending,” he
said to applause. “America’s possibilities are limitless, for we possess all the qualities that this world without boundaries demands: youth and drive; diversity and openness; an endless capacity for risk and a gift for reinvention.” Later in the address, he suggested the importance of a new style of leadership, through reliance on international institutions and alliances, as more appropriate to a multipolar world: “America will remain the anchor of strong alliances in every corner of the globe,” he declared. “And we will renew those institutions that extend our capacity to manage crisis abroad, for no one has a greater stake in a peaceful world than its most powerful nation.”

By 2014, this optimistic vision had all but vanished under the pressure of multiple crises – in Ukraine, Israel and Gaza, Syria, and especially in Iraq, where the Islamic State of the Levant (ISIL) moved to fill the power vacuum left by the withdrawal of US armed forces. In rallying the American people for a military response to the ISIL threat in a September 2014 televised address, Obama reiterated some of the key themes of American civil religion. He characterized his military and diplomatic strategy to isolate and destroy ISIL as “American leadership at its best: We stand with people who fight for their own freedom, and we rally other nations on behalf of our common security and common humanity.” And he pitched the US-led campaign against ISIL as an extension of America’s foundational political values:

As Americans, we welcome our responsibility to lead. From Europe to Asia, from the far reaches of Africa to war-torn capitals of the Middle East, we stand for freedom, for justice, for dignity. These are values that have guided our nation since its founding. That is the difference we make in the world. And our own safety, our own security, depends upon our willingness to do what it takes to defend this nation and uphold the values that we stand for – timeless ideals that

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will endure long after those who offer only hate and destruction have been vanquished from the Earth.\textsuperscript{25}

The impassioned connection between the campaign to defeat ISIL and the core values of American civil religion went unnoticed in national commentary on the president’s speech. The overlap of national interests and timeless and universal ideals is axiomatic in American political culture and rarely attracts notice in American politics. The same is true of the idea that the US is called from among the nations to lead. Obama, like his predecessors, is constrained by, and makes use of, a culture of foreign policymaking with deep roots in American civil religion.

**Conclusion: American Civil Religion, Multipolarity, and Global Governance**

Civil religion is by no means the sole component of the national culture of US policymaking or the main driver of American foreign policy in practice. US leaders have always pursued both interests and ideals in response to international threats and opportunities. Nevertheless, a deep commitment to individual freedom as a foundational value, anchored in both an Enlightenment deist and Protestant biblical tradition, has informed the broad arc of American foreign policy since the founding of the Republic. The conviction that the worldwide spread of liberty, the direction of divine providence, and the international mission of the United States are part of one and the same historical movement remains an object of broad consensus across the political spectrum. In the postwar period, it has shaped US policy on human rights in particular, and constrained foreign policy departures in a pragmatic and multilateral direction.

More than six decades after World War II, the United States remains the world's leading power in both military and economic terms. But by any measure its relative power has declined. The

contemporary rise of China, India, and the European Union augurs a more multipolar world in which the United States will face pressure to engage other world powers as equals in different domains. As the 21st century progresses, a culture of American foreign policymaking that draws on the country’s civil religion will confront a world in which the United States can only lead effectively in collaboration with others and in multilateral forums. A lot will hang on whether and how Americans and their leaders can adapt deeply held beliefs about the US mission and a divine calling to leadership to the realities of a changing balance of international power.

Questions of international institutions and global governance will likely prove most critical. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States was the driving force behind the formation of the United Nations and its affiliated institutions. Over the intervening decades, as US power has diminished in relative terms, the capacity of the United States to determine that institutional evolution has declined as well. Examples include the extension of the human rights regime into new social areas, including the rights of women, children, and indigenous peoples; calls for the reform of the UN Security Council; and challenges to US (and European) dominance of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Over the past several years, the role of China and Russia, and their allies, in opposing US policy with respect to the Syrian civil war and the Iranian nuclear program has been a great source of frustration to US policymakers.

In contrast to the ideological battles over international institutions during the Cold War, these struggles revolve less around the respective strength of opposing blocs than around the shape of global governance and the political values that should underpin it, including: national sovereignty v. universal human rights; civil and political rights v. cultural and social rights;
multiparty democracy v. political autocracy; national equality v. institutional hierarchies (in the Security Council, World Bank, and IMF). Amid a shifting balance of power, it is unlikely that the United States will be able to maintain a dominant position across these governance issues. It will often find itself on the defensive and face pressure to compromise. To the extent that compromise involves acknowledging other powers as equals and other political values as worthy of respect and recognition, such adjustments will prove difficult politically and psychologically.

To the extent that it involves movement towards a law-governed international system – a far-off prospect, but one that cannot be ruled out – it will place tremendous pressure on the dominant culture of US foreign policymaking, with its emphasis on US autonomy and moral authority.

Given the tensions that exist and are bound to grow around questions of global governance, US leaders would be well advised to be proactive in embracing a more collaborative and multilateral approach to international institutions. There is still time to adapt the national culture of policymaking in the direction of an American leadership style with and not over others.

For more information, please contact the Berkley Center, berkleycenter@georgetown.edu.