Intervention and Regime Change

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Abstract

Regime promotion constitutes a distinct category of foreign intervention that includes any effort by an intervening state or coalition to create, preserve, or alter political institutions or governments within a target state. Although a common tool of statecraft, regime promotion has received relatively little scholarly attention. We discuss foundational and cutting-edge research that addresses three questions: What *causes* states or governments to try to change or preserve domestic institutions of other sovereign states? What *modes* or tools of statecraft do they employ? What are the *consequences* for the intervening power, the target state, or the international system? We conclude with six recommendations for advancing regime promotion research: (i) expand research beyond its United States and great-power focus to consider how regional actors and small states employ regime promotion; (ii) conduct comparative studies of forcible regime promotions with non-forcible and covert means; (iii) isolate the fundamental motivations—domestic and/or systemic—that propel states to attempt regime promotion despite significant costs and risks; (iv) examine further the role of regime-type in regime promotion; (v) increase research into the consequences of regime promotion by emphasizing long-term efficacy as well as the comparative success of non-democratic interveners and democracy promoters; and (vi) focus additional attention on the relation of regime promotion to international hegemony or hierarchy.

INTRODUCTION

For many years social science attended to regime promotion far less than it should have. A common tool of statecraft, with significant consequences, good and ill, for the countries involved and world politics more generally, regime promotion was long an academic orphan. Neither international relations (IR) nor comparative politics embraced it, perhaps because neither could claim it fully. IR in particular little noticed regime promotion because, persuaded by Waltz (1979), many scholars thought that any theory that includes domestic regimes and institutions is reductionist and hence not a theory of *international* politics. A robust literature on international intervention *simpliciter* existed, to be sure, but it said little about interventions

Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences. Edited by Robert Scott and Stephen Kosslyn.
© 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. ISBN 978-1-118-90077-2.

deliberately instigated either to change or preserve the regime of a target state.

One reason why regime promotion is so important relates, ironically, to the reasons why it was for so long neglected: it violates the longstanding, broadly held norm of state sovereignty upon which international law, and much IR research, is built. Two assertions are fundamental to the conventional understanding of sovereignty: (i) states are juridical equals in the international realm, and (ii) external actors are excluded from "authority structures within a given territory" (Krasner, 1999, p. 4). Regime promotion violates both.

It is only since the end of the Cold War, when forcible interventions to promote human rights and democracy—particularly by the United States—have become so controversial around the world, that political science has begun to pay adequate attention to regime promotion. Definitions of *intervention* vary widely according to the scope of individual research projects. For scholars interested primarily in *forcible* regime promotion (e.g., Meernik, 1996; Saunders, 2011), intervention implies boots on the ground, or at least bombers and missiles in the air. Other scholars consider forcible intervention as one terminus on a continuum that may involve soldiers violating borders, but may also include non-violent means (e.g., Bull, 1984; Krasner, 1999, 2011; Lyons & Mastanduno, 1995). Similarly, the meaning of *regime* depends on the individual researcher's unit of analysis. A regime may be a specific ruler (e.g., Saddam Hussein) or a set of institutions (e.g., Baathism or Arab Socialism). We define regime promotion broadly as *any effort by at least one state to establish, preserve, or alter political institutions or leaders within a target state*.

In what follows we discuss the literature—past, present, and future—as it addresses three questions: What explains regime promotion—that is, what *causes* states or governments to try to change or preserve domestic institutions of other sovereign states? What *modes* or tools of statecraft do they employ? What are the *consequences* for the intervening power, the target state, or the international system?

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

A number of scholars have urged greater attention to intervention by noting its frequency and its political and theoretical significance. Lyons and Mastanduno (1995, p. 256) submit that the accelerating pace of interdependence and the end of the Cold War have necessitated and facilitated increased involvement of states in a "range of issues and activities that were traditionally considered domestic and beyond the reach of international society." Onuf (1995) and Rosenau (1995) suggest that the "long period of conceptual stability" of our conventional interpretation of sovereignty may be coming to an end.

Other scholars go further and argue that external intervention has been a common practice since the dawn of the modern states system. For Bull (1984, pp. 182–186), "coercive interference" of states in the domestic affairs of other sovereign states is an "endemic feature" of the international system. For Krasner (1999, pp. 58–68), although "Westphalian sovereignty" has been a durable norm, its effect on state behavior has always been "weak and uneven;" leaders—motivated by a desire to retain power and promote the interests of their constituents—have routinely found it prudent to intervene in the domestic affairs of other sovereign states or even to compromise their own autonomy. Osiander (2001, p. 266) questions not only the efficacy of the non-intervention norm, but also the Westphalian narrative ("myth") itself, pointing out that the actual treaty is "silent on the issue of sovereignty." Our contemporary understanding of sovereignty, he argues, has less to do with a seventeenth-century treaty than with the eagerness of nineteenth-century historians to "anchor the new nationalism in history … " (2001, p. 282).

Causes

What motivates states to disregard the sovereignty norm and engage in regime promotion? Bull (1984, p. 2) maintains that vital interests of states often depend critically on "events in the jurisdiction of other states." In the same volume, Hoffmann (1984) notes the inherent tension between the norms of non-intervention and "self-help," both of which are constitutive of our modern understanding of the international system of sovereign states (see also Waltz, 1979). If a state can advance its interests through regime promotion, it is justified in doing so. For Werner (1996), because victor states impose regime change on a defeated enemy routinely, leaders must incorporate that possibility in their decisions to go to war.

Causal explanations for regime promotion often posit an interaction between ideas and material power. We can begin with Thucydides (1982, pp. 193–197 [3.70–3.81]). In the fourth year of the Peloponnesian War, Corinth, an oligarchy allied with oligarchic Sparta, attempted to break the alliance between democratic Corcyra and democratic Athens by repatriating Corcyrean prisoners who were oligarchs. When, as a result, civil war erupted in Corcyra, both Athens and Sparta sent forces, knowing that Corcyra's domestic regime would determine its external alliances. Owen (2002) proceeds from this intuition in his analysis of 198 cases of "forcible domestic institutional promotion" from 1555 to 2000. Because adherents of an ideology feel solidarity with states governed by that ideology, a powerful state can bring or keep a target state within its sphere of influence—and thus enhance its relative power—by promoting its ideology.

A growing body of research focuses on promotion of a specific regime type: liberal democracy. Smith (1994) contends that, without active American promotion, democracy in some parts of the world would not have triumphed and, indeed, may not have survived. Surveying democracy-promoting policies of nearly all American presidents since McKinley, Smith repudiates the realist caricature of “liberal internationalism” (or “Wilsonianism”) as utopian sentimentality and argues that the United States has spread democracy as a means to enhance America’s national security. Contributors to Cox, Ikenberry, and Inoguchi’s (2000) edited volume come from diverse theoretical traditions, yet display remarkable consensus that American democracy promotion has been motivated, at least in part, by the logic that democratic expansion would enhance American prosperity, security, and power.

Modes

As mentioned above, regime promotion need not involve military force. Krasner (1999) distinguishes between *intervention*, in which “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” (Thucydides, 1982, p. 351 [5.89]), and *invitation*, in which states willingly accept—through contracts and conventions—external influence over domestic authority structures. Owen (2002) suggests that regime promotion includes not only the threat and use of force, but also economic inducement (aid or sanctions), subversion, and even rhetoric. Forsythe (1992) observes that the United States has pursued regime promotion, sometimes violently, through an undertheorized tool of statecraft: covert action.

A distinct body of literature considers how states use and extend hegemonic or imperial power to reorder foreign regimes. Ikenberry and Kupchan (1990) argue that hegemons secure compliance with their visions of international order through socialization—catalyzed through material inducement—of the hegemon’s norms among the elite in secondary states. Marxism, dependency theory, and world systems theory take a similar approach but reject the autonomy of territorial state actors. Galtung (1971, p. 82) theorizes a “sophisticated type of dominance” in which the elite of the dominant states (the “center in the Center”) establishes a bridgehead within the elite of the dominated states (the “center in the Periphery”) for the benefit of both and at the expense, primarily, of the “periphery of the Periphery.” Robinson (1996) posits the emergence of a transnational economy and a resulting transnational elite that assures the compliance of the lower classes—upon whose labor global capitalism depends—through promotion of “polyarchy,” an essentially procedural imitation of democracy. Barkawi and Laffey (1999) criticize democratic peace theorists for privileging the territorial state as the unit of analysis while neglecting the Western,

transnational state that leverages force in the periphery to expand imperial order.

Consequences

Most research on the consequences of regime promotion focuses on democracy promotion, and few scholars are sanguine about its efficacy. John Stuart Mill's (1867, p. 174) presumption against intervention proceeds not from ethical calculation, but rather from the intuition that it simply does not work; democracy imposed or conveyed by a third party will be short-lived for a people who "does not value it sufficiently to fight for it." In his edited volume on United States democracy promotion in Latin America, Lowenthal (1991, p. 402) is reminiscent of Mill: "democracy is not an export commodity" but "must be achieved by each nation, largely on its own." Huntington (1984, p. 218) insists that because economic, social, and cultural preconditions are critical for successful democratic transition, "there is little that the United States or any other foreign country can do" to export democracy (see also Hermann & Kegley, 1998).

Yet, some scholars maintain that, under specific circumstances, democracy promotion can achieve significant virtuous results. Meernik (1996) concludes that while the majority of cases of US military intervention have *not* produced democratic reform, target states are more likely to experience some democratic growth when democracy promotion was an ex ante goal of the intervention. Hermann and Kegley (1998) and Peceny (1999) support Meernik's conclusion that American military interventions can advance liberalization in a target state, but, significantly, only in those cases in which political reform in the target state was an objective of the intervention. US interventions for other purposes produced increased autocracy in the target (Herman & Kegley, 1998, p. 98).

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Causes

As more scholars have turned their attention to regime promotion over the past decade, new methods have been employed and new questions have emerged. Noting the spatial and temporal clustering of transitions from autocratic to democratic regimes (and vice versa), Cederman and Gleditsch (2004) contend that external factors—the character and type of neighboring regimes—are critical for explaining regime transitions. A non-democratic state in a region of democracies is likely to experience democratic transition while democracy is unlikely to in an undemocratic neighborhood. Gleditsch

and Ward (2006) also consider the effects of "democratic diffusion" and conclude that, while *forcible* regime promotion has not been an important source of democratic transition, neighboring states do accelerate such transitions by enhancing the power of democratic reformers and institutions in target states vis-à-vis their autocratic rivals. Leeson and Dean (2009) acknowledge the validity of democratic diffusion, but challenge its relative significance. Employing a quantitative design fashioned to capture spatial (geographic) variation, the authors find the likelihood of democratic transition is only marginally increased by the existence of democratic neighbors.

Owen (2010) expands his previous research by asking when spatio-temporal clusters of regime promotion are more likely to occur, who orchestrates them, and how they end. Forcible regime promotions tend to cluster during periods of transnational ideological polarization, when elites are divided along ideological lines, and transnational ideological networks emerge intent on promoting their favored regime. States ally with these networks to improve the regional balance of power and to strengthen their domestic hold on power. The long struggle continues until the superior performance of an exemplary state reveals a winning regime type.

Saunders (2011) approaches regime promotion through the individual level of analysis. American presidents' causal beliefs regarding the origins of threats shape their assessments of the efficacy of intervention. "Internally focused leaders" who believe that an adversary's domestic order is the ultimate source of threat are more likely to intervene to transform domestic institutions. "Externally focused leaders" perceive threats as emerging from an adversary's foreign policy decisions alone and, therefore aim to resolve international crises "without explicit intention to alter domestic institutions within the target state" (2011, p. 22).

Modes

Krasner (2011) expands on Krasner (1999) by exploiting Barnett and Duvall's (2005) taxonomy of power. In addition to "compulsory power"—primarily military force—states also employ "institutional power" (indirect control of weaker states through international institutions that reflect the preferences of the powerful), "structural power" (asserting power through mutually constituted identities), and "productive power" (shaping the interests and identities of another state's domestic institutions through discursive practices that legitimize certain forms of domestic arrangements and delegitimize others). States use all of these types of power to mold other states' domestic institutions and practices. In our conclusion we note the need for more research into these various modes of intervention.

Consequences

The 2003 United States invasion of Iraq inspired innovative contributions to the democracy promotion literature. Although Pickering and Peceny (2006, p. 556) find that US- and particularly UN-led interventions are somewhat more likely to result in liberal reforms, they conclude that "liberal intervention does not appear to be a prominent explanatory variable in post-1945 democratization." Enterline and Greig (2005) find little support for the proposition that externally imposed democracy can serve as a "beacon of hope" to dissidents in the target state's neighbors. But "brightly burning" beacons—states that deeply institutionalize their externally imposed democratic norms—do tend to decrease the likelihood of war and to stimulate prosperity in neighbors, while those "burning dimly" *increase* the likelihood of regional conflict, undermine prosperity, and depress democratic contagion. Goldsmith (2008) asserts that on those exceptional occasions in which regime promotion succeeds in imposing democracy, target states typically achieve only *partial* democracies, which, according to a significant body of research, are uniquely *un*stable and prone to various pathologies.

Edelstein (2008) considers when and under what circumstances military occupations succeed or fail. He codes only seven of 26 occupations since 1815 as "successes." Lengthy occupations incite nationalism in the target and sap public support in the occupier. In each of the seven successful occupations, the occupier was able to overcome resistance in the occupied state and apathy at home because occupier and occupied faced a common threat. When perceived as a lesser evil, occupiers can sustain their occupation through cooperative rather than coercive means.

For Machiavelli (1532/1998), because regime change is a practical (non-ideological) option for a prince wishing to hold his conquests, regime change always entails installing an oligarchic government that must be entirely beholden to the prince. More recently, Bueno de Mesquita and Downs (2006) use selectorate theory (Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, & Smith, 2004) to show that both autocratic *and* democratic interveners lack incentives to install democratic regimes in target states. An autocracy in the target state, relieved of the burden of providing public goods to a broad selectorate, is likely to remain responsive to the intervener who installed and maintain it in power. Boix (2011) argues that democratic interveners face a dilemma. While a democratic hegemon may have an ideological and moral commitment to democracy, its incentive structure is identical to that of an authoritarian hegemon: authoritarian clients can more reliably execute the will of the patron.

Although most scholars agree that regime promotion has not advanced democratization, Lo, Hashimoto, and Reiter (2008) theorize a beneficial role

for regime promotion in war termination. Data from 1914 to 2001 suggest that peace lasts longer when at least one state is the target of regime change. However, while the target may be less likely to engage in *interstate* war, Peic and Reiter (2011) conclude that regime promotion makes the onset of *intrastate* violence more likely. Not only do leaders and institutions imposed by external actors face internal crises of legitimacy, but also, inasmuch as regime promotions are likely to follow interstate wars that tend to "wreck state power," newly established regimes are less capable of providing public goods (increasing the likelihood of insurgency) and of combating or deterring insurgencies.

Finally, scholars continue to explore the implications of regime promotion for state sovereignty and hence IR theory. Donnelly (2006) observes that the concept of sovereign equality that is central to the Westphalian order (as discussed above) belies the fact that formal inequalities—the special rights of great powers, the restricted rights of "outlaw" states, the wide-ranging practices of "semi-sovereignty" that characterize relationships between strong and weak states—are rife in the international system. As a result, "hierarchy in anarchy is not only possible but is … historically common." Lake (2009) argues that there are degrees of hierarchy among states in which weaker states may cede varying levels of authority (the "right to rule") to dominant states in a kind of social contract in which the dominant state provides order in exchange for the weaker state's conferral of legitimacy.

Glanville (2010) casts doubt on the conventional wisdom that founding international-legal texts conceive of sovereignty as absolute freedom from external interference. Even theorists such as Bodin, Vattel, and Hobbes—who champion extraordinary power for the sovereign—define clear limits to sovereign power; the ruler who cannot protect his subjects from harm or violates divine or natural law forfeits sovereign authority and privilege.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

We see six important areas for the advancement of regime promotion scholarship. First, regime promotion research seems to validate Hoffmann's (1977) observation that IR is an "American social science." Regime promotion literature focuses too heavily on American actions and democracy promotion, primarily an American concern. Regime promotion has a much richer and more diverse history as a tool of statecraft. States were intervening to sustain or topple governments of other states long before America's founding. Intervening powers have promoted not only democracy, but also oligarchy, absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy, autocracy, Catholicism, Islamism, various flavors of Protestantism, republicanism,

secularism, fascism, and communism. The rich historical record presents an under-exploited opportunity for comparative research.

Certainly one justification for the current United States- or great-power-centric research agenda is that regime promotion seems to be the exclusive province of global powers playing "The Great Game" of geopolitics. Yet, a cursory survey of modern history makes clear that great-power status is no prerequisite for regime promotion. Contenders for *regional* hegemony have frequently relied on regime promotion to shape spheres of influence and dominance. In the Middle East, for example, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have promoted friendly (or compliant) regimes in the Gulf and Mediterranean Levant. As we write this essay, the future of Syria's Alawite-Baathist regime remains contested. Iran and Russia, recognizing that maintenance of their regional influence is at stake, have openly and determinedly supported the Assad regime, primarily through diplomatic and material means, over emphatic international protests. Likewise, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which stand to benefit from the loss of Iranian influence should Assad fall, have taken an active role (of unclear extent) in favor of regime change.

Even small states that can make no credible claim to regional hegemony have engaged in regime promotion to deal with troubling neighbors. In 1978 Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia put an end to the Khmer Rouge regime. The following year, Tanzania forced Uganda's Idi Amin from power. In short, the scope of regime promotion research should extend below the great-power threshold.

Our second recommendation concerns consequences of regime promotion. As shown above, scholars have carried out many studies of the efficacy of *forcible* regime promotion. In most cases, the implicit baseline for comparison has been non-intervention. An alternative approach would compare the efficacy of forcible regime promotion with that of various types of *non-forcible* promotion. Krasner's (2011) employment of the Barnett and Duvall (2005) taxonomy is useful here. Most of the studies of regime promotion discussed above consider only what these scholars would call compulsory power—primarily military force. Under what conditions do interveners employ other modes of power—institutional, structural, or productive—to preserve or change a target state's regime? Why would a state attempting regime change choose sanctions over soldiers? Why would it marshal world opinion rather than its military forces? How effective are various modes in various circumstances?

The role of covert action in regime promotion raises especially intriguing questions for future research. While covert action may involve violence, it generally occupies a middle ground between forcible and non-forcible regime promotion. Beyond Forsythe's (1992) important treatment of covert

action, much remains to be said about why states employ hidden over open means and the conditions under which covert means are likely to secure the desired outcome.

A formidable obstacle to research on covert action is an inherent selection bias. Because covert operations are necessarily highly classified and generally compartmentalized, historians and social scientists are likely to have access only to covert operations gone bad, while successful operations often—how often is not clear—remain in the shadows, hidden from academic scrutiny. While this obstacle may be insuperable for researchers interested in large-N quantitative analysis, detailed case studies of both failures and those successes that have somehow become public knowledge could expand our understanding of why, how, and when states will pursue regime promotion.

Third, there is still a great deal we do not know about the incentives for and against regime promotion. Preserving a friendly but flagging regime can entail considerable costs. Toppling a hostile regime demands not only an intervener's treasure, but most likely its blood as well. The commitment of state resources required to set up a sustainable new regime—one both favorable to the interests of the intervener and enjoying sufficient domestic legitimacy to maintain power—are virtually incalculable (Edelstein, 2008).

Explaining why some states engage in regime promotion despite these seemingly prohibitive costs should start with a fundamental question: are intervention decisions driven primarily by domestic variables or systemic (i.e., international) factors? If the former, we should expect to see domestic or transnational interest groups—pro-democracy, human rights, economic interests, and so on—who not only demand action from the governments of would-be interveners, but who also are powerful enough to threaten credibly the political survival of leaders who fail to act. If it is instead the international system that is creating incentives for states to engage in regime promotion, researchers must be able to show that a would-be intervening state perceives, with rational justification, that it can advance its international position by transforming an autocracy into a liberal democracy, a secular state into a theocracy, and so on.

Probing interveners' motivations raises our fourth question: Why do interveners sometimes promote a regime other than their own? United States promotions of authoritarianism—Iran 1953, Guatemala 1954, Chile 1973—and refusals to promote democracy in various countries are notorious. As discussed above, Bueno de Mesquita and Downs (2006) and Boix (2011) offer an explanation: *no* states have sufficient incentives to install democratic regimes. But then why would a democratic intervener (like the United States) ever attempt to promote democracy in a conquered state (West Germany and Japan after the Second World War or Afghanistan and Iraq

more recently)? The real puzzle is: why has the type of regime promoted by the United States varied across time and space (Owen & Poznansky, 2014)? Other countries have exhibited similar variation; during the Chinese civil war Stalin's Soviet Union sometimes extended aid to Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalists rather than Mao Zedong's Communists.

Our fifth question is: to what extent have international outcomes matched intervener intentions? The literature is rich on the prospects of democratization through regime promotion, but democratization does not address the universe of intended outcomes. Have interveners that sought to impose fascist or theocratic regimes, for example, had more success than democracy promoters? Additionally, extant research concentrates on short-term outcomes. We recommend further research into the long-term prospects of externally imposed regimes. Do they continue to serve the interests of the intervener? Under what conditions do they overcome the challenges of domestic legitimacy and institutional disarray that Peic and Reiter (2011) describe? When do they collapse under the weight of insurgencies or external threats?

Sixth, and finally, is the question of regime promotion's relation to international hegemony or hierarchy. Notwithstanding that smaller powers sometimes engage in the practice, most interveners are great powers, and, as we show above, much research suggests that great powers intervene in order to preserve or extend their international influence and power. Furthermore, great powers sometimes counter-intervene in target states—that is, when one state attempts regime promotion, a rival state tries a counter-regime promotion in the same target—suggesting that relative power may be at stake when a target state's domestic regime is in doubt (Owen, 2010). Recent work on international hierarchy (e.g., Krasner, 1999; Lake, 2009) has pointed toward regime promotion as one practice that sustains and constitutes inequality among states. The frequency of regime promotion may be telling us still more about the limits not only of state sovereignty but of the utility of conceiving of the international system as anarchical.

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