

Values in Foreign Policy: Investigating Ideals and Interests

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This is a fascinating study of a subject, both relevant and elusive. It should provoke reflection. The Introduction asks if there are discrete values that can be described as Asian, and if these exist, are they congruent or in completion with Western values? Eight of the book's 14 chapters examine values in Asia, while the rest look at the West, the US, Europe and the Islamic world.

In a succinct two page forward, Robert Kaplan notes that values can be delusional, self-serving or cynical, but without a belief in its own values, foreign policy is nearly impossible to execute. He notes that Chinese 'harbour no doubts about their centrality' in the world. His trenchant advice: 'The degree to which Indians can engage in internal discussion about what their civilisational values are – and how they can help improve the world – will actually advance India's power and influence.'

How West-centric are the values examined in this book? The Universal Declaration on Human Rights adopted by the UN at its 1945 founding focused on individual rights, the right to self-determination and civil and political rights. Rights to a decent life and economic equity – today the overriding preoccupation for half the world – find no mention. Of the two principal developing states present at the Declaration's framing, China was represented by a KMT regime facing existential challenge; India was immersed in the impending finale to its independence struggle. Consequently, the values of the Global South never became part of a global agenda. The book does not address this omission, which is at the root of many of today's world challenges.

Co-editor James Mayall tackles values in European foreign policy. Examining the influx of refugees and economic migrants into Europe, he notes: 'the official Europeans response...amounted to an insurance policy for their value systems, combining economic assistance to exporting countries to reduce the incentive for people to move abroad, and failing that to establish efficient border posts...' He adds that while Europe practices its 'secular liberal values', it will find it more and more difficult to sustain liberalism abroad while pulling up the drawbridge against the outside world and handling discriminatory pressure against minorities at home.

President Trump inevitably dominates the essay on the US by William Antholis. Trump's America First doctrine swings to the 'furthest end away from universalism across all strands of values and interests'. The real question is not whether the country's democracy establishment can withstand Trump's challenge,

‘but also whether they have the support of democratic publics at home and abroad. That conflict is as old as the republic.’

M Ozkan and K Chatterjee suggest that no single set of values can be identified as exclusively Islamic, or understood as such across the Muslim world. Looking to Turkey and Iran they believe that the political language of Islam in diplomatic activities will expand in the years ahead both as ‘inspiration for policy formulation and the language of legitimacy’. One might ask how that squares with the Islamic world’s silence over China’s current repression of Xinjiang’s Uighurs, though Turkey did speak out for a while?

Co-editor K Srinivasan tackles Indian foreign policy values; ‘lofty ideals give way to parochial pragmatism’. Summarising the evolution of India’s foreign policy, he argues that principles derived from India’s ‘presumed moral superiority’ and unique universalism ‘quickly floundered against the harsh realities of government responsibilities and international politics’. After Nehru’s death ‘only some rhetorically flourishes of an ethical foreign policy survived’. He quotes bombastic statements by leaders on India’s role in the world and its uniqueness, jumping to the conclusion that ‘the nature of its aspirations remains potentially adverse to its greater integration with the global system’. True, at different times, India has taken an ‘outlier’ role (NPT, some phases of WTO decision-making, now RCEP), but the country’s international cooperation track record and participation on global decisions is self-evident. What unrealistic assertions by different leaders on foreign policy values show is an absence of much-needed domestic dialogue.

Japan proclaimed a ‘value oriented diplomacy’ in 2006 under the Abe government, emphasising universal values such as democracy, freedom, human rights, rule of law and market economy. Postwar Japan has mainly espoused these universal values. Yet, ‘Japan as also had the desires to assert its own indigenous values’, even if not articulated in a concrete manner. We see today ‘the stirrings of a more traditionalist national identity. In contrast, the essay on Indonesia (Thailand too, not covered in this book) shows that in some Asian countries values have provided a certain consistency in foreign policy.

A short essay by Professor Zhang Lihua of Tsinghua University gives a boilerplate assertion of how China’s foreign policy is rooted in its ancient culture. She walks us through the basics of Taoism, the Book of Changes, Confucianism, and Huangdi Neijing, to claim that harmony, benevolence, righteousness, etiquette, wisdom, and faithfulness are embodied in China’s governance, each of these reflected in the country’s contemporary actions. It may not be nice to apply a reality check to this essay. When harmony is the desired goal, what does it matter if the methods used to get there are unharmonious?

Seen through a wider lens, foreign policy values will be contextual. When you are at the top of the heap you look for stability and tranquillity. From the bottom,

your perspective orients you to transformative change and equity. We can add the words of chapter author Tadashi Anno: ‘States are likely to espouse those values according to which it is easiest to enhance their self esteem’.

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