

From Moral Discourse to Strategic Calculations: The United States' Human Rights Dilemma

Dr. Ozge Tenlik*

St Clements University

Corresponding Author Dr. Ozge Tenlik St Clements University Article History Received: 12 / 09 / 2025 Accepted: 30 / 09 / 2025 Published: 05 / 10 / 2025	Abstract: U.S. foreign policy has long been constructed upon a tense balance between “universal values” and “national interests.” Human rights have frequently been highlighted as an instrument for Washington to claim moral superiority on the global stage; the promotion of democracy, the protection of freedoms, and the principles of international law have formed the core of American discourse. Yet this rhetoric has often clashed with strategic priorities and geopolitical interests-energy security, military alliances, and economic gains have frequently outweighed human rights. From the Cold War to the post-9/11 era and into today’s competition with China and Russia, the United States has been criticized for reacting strongly to human rights violations in some regions while remaining silent when strategic partnerships were at stake. This article analyzes the historical evolution, theoretical explanations, and practical contradictions of the human rights discourse in U.S. foreign policy. In particular, debates on double standards, the instrumentalization of human rights as a tool of hegemony, and the future configuration of the national interest-universal values balance constitute the core focus of the study. Keywords: U.S. foreign policy, human rights, national interest, double standards, hegemony.
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Introduction

Since its founding, U.S. foreign policy has positioned itself as the bearer of universal values such as “freedom,” “democracy,” and “human rights” (Smith, 2012). Especially after World War II, American political culture placed human rights at the center of the liberal international order, allowing the U.S. to claim global leadership not only through military and economic power but also through moral discourse (Donnelly, 2003). However, these values have often confronted the hard realities of national interest (Mearsheimer, 2001). During the Cold War, human rights discourse was deployed as an ideological weapon against the Soviet Union, yet cooperation with authoritarian regimes at the same time undermined the credibility of this rhetoric (Hunt, 2007). In the 1990s, humanitarian interventions and liberal interventionist policies appeared to place human rights at the center of international relations (Forsythe, 2000). But after the 9/11 attacks, security imperatives once again relegated human rights to the background (Krauthammer, 2004). Today, the United States simultaneously emphasizes value diplomacy through initiatives such as the “Summit for Democracy” (White House, 2021) while prioritizing strategic interests within the framework of great-power competition with China and Russia (Allison, 2017). This dual structure reflects one of the most striking paradoxes of U.S. foreign policy: human rights serve both as a defense of universal values and as a tool for legitimizing national interests (Carothers, 2020). Thus, the contradictions that arise in U.S. foreign policy are not only the product of tensions between normative and strategic elements but also stem from Washington’s ongoing pursuit of global leadership (Ikenberry, 2011). Moreover, the human rights-national interest dilemma is also shaped by domestic politics. Congress, the media, and civil society organizations have at times acted as pressure groups pushing for human rights considerations in foreign policy, yet presidential administrations have often

ignored these demands in cases of strategic importance (Peksen, 2018). For instance, human rights discourse plays a prominent role in election campaigns domestically, but in foreign policy issues such as energy security or the maintenance of military bases, it is frequently sidelined (Smith, 2012). This inconsistency undermines the continuity of U.S. values-based policies and creates credibility problems in the eyes of the international public (Forsythe, 2012). Furthermore, the U.S. claim to global leadership has deepened the contradictions of its human rights discourse. On the one hand, human rights bolster Washington’s “soft power” (Nye, 2004); on the other, they serve as a cover for interest-based policies. When the U.S. defends human rights as universal norms, it risks alienating allies; but when it ignores them altogether, it loses its claim to moral superiority (Carothers & Youngs, 2015). This deadlock has become a persistent dilemma in the making of foreign policy. The evolution toward a multipolar global order has made America’s human rights discourse even more fragile. China, Russia, and other actors accuse the U.S. of double standards, challenging its role as a global norm-setter (Acharya, 2014). Thus, U.S. human rights policies are tested not only by internal inconsistencies but also by counter-narratives of rival powers. In this context, human rights are being redefined not only in terms of values but also within the framework of great-power rivalry (Allison, 2017). Finally, technological advances and digitalization have added new dimensions to the human rights debate in U.S. foreign policy. Issues such as internet freedom, surveillance technologies, and AI-driven security practices extend the traditional human rights-national interest dilemma, confronting Washington with new challenges (Morozov, 2011). Therefore, U.S. human rights discourse is not limited to past ideological conflicts but is also being reshaped by future technological and geopolitical transformations.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the tension between human rights and national interests in U.S. foreign policy, it is crucial to consider the perspectives offered by international relations theories. Realism posits that the primary goal of states is to ensure national security and protect their interests (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). From this perspective, human rights have a place in foreign policy only when they align with strategic objectives. In the case of the U.S., human rights are often sidelined in matters involving strategic alliances or energy security. Military cooperation with Saudi Arabia, energy trade, and collaboration with authoritarian regimes during the Cold War exemplify this realist logic (Mearsheimer, 2001). Accordingly, for realism, America's human rights discourse is a secondary factor overshadowed by pragmatic interest calculations.

Liberal theory, on the other hand, asserts that human rights and democracy are fundamental values for achieving lasting peace in international relations (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Doyle, 1986). The promotion of democracy after the Cold War, norm-setting through international organizations, and humanitarian interventions reflect liberal principles in practice. USAID development programs, the activities of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and initiatives within the UN Human Rights Council have been components of the U.S. effort to build a liberal international order (Carothers, 1999). Yet, the liberal application in U.S. foreign policy has not always been consistent; when normative values clashed with strategic interests, the former were often sidelined (Forsythe, 2012). Constructivist theory argues that state behavior is shaped not only by material interests but also by identity, discourse, and norms (Wendt, 1992; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). For the U.S., framing itself as the "leader of the free world" has made human rights discourse a constitutive element of its foreign policy. Democracy and freedom rhetoric serve as tools for Washington to establish moral superiority vis-à-vis both allies and rivals. However, when this discourse clashes with interests in practice, inconsistencies arise that damage America's international image (Risse, 2000). From this perspective, human rights can be seen as a form of "identity performance" in U.S. foreign policy. Critical theories approach U.S. human rights policy more skeptically. They contend that human rights discourse is often a tool for hegemony and for securing international legitimacy (Cox, 1981; Gill, 1993). The "liberation" rhetoric during the Iraq War masked energy and security interests, while interventions in Latin America justified under the banner of democracy often aimed to preserve geopolitical balance (Chomsky, 1999). In this view, human rights in U.S. foreign policy are less an independent goal than part of strategic instrumentalization. Postcolonial approaches also provide a critical lens on America's human rights discourse. They argue that Western states, particularly the U.S., employ human rights discourse as an ideological and political tool of pressure on the Global South (Said, 1978; Barkawi & Laffey, 2006). From this perspective, human rights are not universal norms but instruments through which Western values are imposed hegemonically. Frequent invocation of human rights in interventions in the Middle East and Africa, for example, has reinforced perceptions of "double standards" in local societies (Acharya, 2014). Postcolonial thought thus interprets U.S. discourse as a continuation of the "civilizing mission" tradition. An additional perspective comes from feminist international relations theory, which highlights how gender dimensions are often overlooked in U.S. human rights discourse (Tickner, 1992).

Although women's rights, education, and gender equality have at times been emphasized, strategic interests have hindered the deepening of these commitments. For instance, while women's rights rhetoric was strongly invoked against the Taliban in Afghanistan, it was largely abandoned after the military withdrawal (Enloe, 2004). This underscores the selectivity of U.S. human rights discourse and its instrumentalization in line with interest calculations. Critical security studies further contribute to understanding the balance between human rights and national interests. They stress how, after 9/11, the U.S. redefined security in ways that relegated human rights (Booth, 2007). Counterterrorism policies, the proliferation of surveillance technologies, and extralegal practices such as Guantanamo revealed how human rights could be sacrificed in the name of national security (Danner, 2004). Thus, while the U.S. champions liberal values, it simultaneously developed practices at home and abroad that contradicted them. Finally, the transformations brought by globalization and the international normative framework enrich the analysis. The universalization of human rights is not solely an American-driven dynamic. Other international actors such as the United Nations, the European Union, and civil society groups have become increasingly influential in norm production (Risse, Ropp & Sikkink, 1999). This has limited the U.S. capacity to shape human rights discourse unilaterally, forcing it to reposition itself within both normative and strategic competition.

Historical Background

To understand the position of human rights in U.S. foreign policy, it is essential to look at historical processes. The liberal international order that emerged after World War II made the U.S. one of the founding actors of the United Nations and placed human rights at the center of the international normative system (Lauren, 2011). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, was one of the key documents supported by Washington; thus, the U.S. sought to consolidate its global leadership through moral discourse (Morsink, 1999). However, during this period, human rights largely became an instrument of ideological competition, primarily directed against the Soviet Union (Gaddis, 2005). During the Cold War, discrepancies between U.S. human rights rhetoric and its practices became evident. While the U.S. criticized Soviet repression in Eastern Europe, it simultaneously cooperated with authoritarian regimes in Latin America and supported military coups (Grandin, 2006). The Carter administration (1977-1981) came to prominence with its attempt to place human rights at the center of foreign policy (Schmitz & Walker, 2004), but under Reagan, the discourse was intertwined with anti-Soviet strategies and selectively applied (Carothers, 1991). This period demonstrated that the U.S. approach to human rights was in constant tension with security and interest considerations. In the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, the human rights discourse gained renewed strength. Interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo brought the concept of "humanitarian intervention" to the center of international relations, reinforcing U.S. liberal interventionism (Finnemore, 2003). Democracy promotion and human rights became among the sources of legitimacy for the unipolar order (Ikenberry, 2001). Yet the failure to adequately respond to the Rwandan genocide highlighted criticisms of inconsistency in U.S. human rights policy (Power, 2002). The 9/11 attacks in 2001 marked another turning point in U.S. foreign policy. With the "War on Terror" doctrine, security priorities rose dramatically, and human rights discourse was often relegated to the background (Buzan & Hansen, 2009). While

interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were legitimized with rhetoric about “freedom” and “exporting democracy,” practices such as torture, Guantanamo Bay, and civilian casualties deepened the gulf between U.S. values-based policy and its security practices (Danner, 2004; Sikkink, 2004). Today, the U.S. is once again attempting to bring democracy and human rights to the fore. The Biden administration’s “Summit for Democracy” is seen as an effort to revive values-based foreign policy (White House, 2021). However, competition with China, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and strategic alliances in the Middle East have created a new context in which human rights discourse is constantly tested against national interests (Allison, 2017). U.S. unconditional support for Israel in the Israel-Palestine conflict, the continuation of strategic ties with Saudi Arabia, and the emphasis on democracy in the Taiwan issue are contemporary examples of this contradictory picture (Miller, 2022). Another important dimension of the historical trajectory of U.S. human rights policy is its relationship with international law and institutions. Although the U.S. was one of the strongest founding actors of the United Nations after 1945, it has often been reluctant to sign and ratify human rights treaties (Forsythe, 2012). For instance, its refusal to join the Convention on the Rights of the Child or the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court demonstrates the contradictions between U.S. normative rhetoric and its practical behavior. This reflects Washington’s tendency to defend universal values while simultaneously safeguarding its sovereignty and strategic autonomy. Another aspect of the historical background is the connection between U.S. human rights discourse and its soft power capacity. As Joseph Nye defines, soft power is the ability to persuade through values, culture, and ideas (Nye, 2004). The U.S. sought to spread human rights globally through a wide range of instruments—from Hollywood and media networks to civil society organizations and educational programs. Yet the intertwining of these instruments with political interests weakened the independent legitimacy of the discourse (Schraeder, 2004). Experiences in Latin America and the Middle East revealed the limited and contradictory effectiveness of soft power. Moreover, historical examination shows that different U.S. administrations have balanced human rights and national interests in different ways. While Carter emphasized normative rhetoric, Reagan and Bush prioritized security and power balancing. Clinton placed humanitarian interventions on the agenda; under Obama, the “smart power” strategy attempted to blend human rights with pragmatic interests (Nye, 2011). The Trump administration largely sidelined human rights discourse, while Biden revived values diplomacy (Brands, 2021). This fluctuating trajectory demonstrates that human rights in U.S. foreign policy have not been a permanent principle but a flexible tool shaped by contextual conditions. Finally, the historical background illustrates that the U.S. has employed human rights discourse not only as a foreign policy instrument but also as part of identity construction. The U.S. self-image as the “leader of the free world” provided ideological legitimacy throughout the Cold War and is once again being revived in the context of competition with China and Russia (Dueck, 2020). Yet as this identity construction is tested by practical contradictions, it becomes more fragile, raising critical questions about the future sustainability of America’s global leadership role.

U.S. Human Rights Policies (With Sources)

In U.S. foreign policy, human rights discourse has been not only a normative claim but also a field of practice supported by

diplomatic and institutional tools. The international institutions established after World War II provided important platforms for reinforcing America’s global leadership aspirations. Washington consistently brought human rights to the agenda in institutions such as the United Nations, seeking to embed democracy, freedom, and the rule of law into global norms (Lauren, 2011). Yet this normative rhetoric has constantly been tested against strategic interests and often relegated to the background (Forsythe, 2012). The U.S. developed various institutional mechanisms to promote human rights. USAID’s development projects, democracy promotion programs through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and the State Department’s annual Human Rights Reports were significant components of this effort (Carothers, 1999; U.S. Department of State, 2022). Through these tools, the U.S. claimed to support democratization processes, strengthen a free press, and empower civil society. However, these initiatives were also perceived as part of an interventionist agenda, with some countries criticizing them as interference in domestic affairs (Robinson, 1996). Human rights policies within international organizations also revealed U.S. contradictions. Washington frequently emphasized democracy and freedom in platforms such as the UN Human Rights Council, yet it avoided signing or ratifying some key conventions (Schabas, 2001). Its refusal to join the International Criminal Court or to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child weakened its normative claims (Simmons, 2009). This approach reflected Washington’s balancing act between its global leadership aspirations and concerns over sovereignty. U.S. human rights policies have also been shaped by criticisms of “double standards.” While Washington has spoken strongly against China’s policies toward the Uyghurs, repression of opposition in Russia, or violations in Iran, it has been more muted when dealing with strategic allies such as Saudi Arabia (Kaye, 2013). Similar double standards are evident in its stance on Israel’s policies toward Palestinians (Falk, 2014). These patterns reinforce criticisms that the U.S. defends human rights not as universal principles but to the extent that they align with geopolitical calculations. Taken together, these elements reveal a contradictory picture of U.S. human rights policies at the intersection of normative discourse and strategic interests. On the one hand, Washington positions itself as a global norm producer championing human rights; on the other hand, it distances itself from this discourse when its interests demand (Ignatieff, 2005). This duality ensures that human rights remain a persistently contested issue in U.S. foreign policy. One of the most notable features of U.S. human rights policy has been its annual Human Rights Reports. Prepared by the State Department, these reports aim to document rights violations around the world. Yet their objectivity has often been questioned, as they tend to examine U.S. strategic rivals in great detail while addressing allied countries’ practices more superficially. This has reinforced perceptions that the reports function less as “moral references” and more as instruments of Washington’s foreign policy. Another important dimension concerns U.S. engagement with civil society and the media. Human rights promotion has been carried out not only through official institutions but also via international media, academic circles, and NGOs. Think tanks such as Freedom House and international media outlets have been strong actors in supporting U.S. human rights discourse. However, the funding sources and political orientations of these institutions have raised questions about impartiality, at times rendering U.S. values-based policy legitimacy contested. Furthermore, America’s domestic human rights issues frequently contradict its external rhetoric.

Problems such as racism, police violence, immigrant rights, and flaws in the criminal justice system have undermined Washington's credibility as a global advocate for human rights. International criticism, often framed as "solve your own problems first," has contributed to the erosion of consistency in America's global discourse. Finally, U.S. human rights policies have increasingly expanded into the domain of technology and digitalization. Internet freedom, online expression, surveillance technologies, and the security use of artificial intelligence have become central to new-generation human rights debates. While Washington seeks to set global standards in these areas, it has simultaneously faced harsh criticism for mass surveillance practices such as the NSA scandals. These contradictions demonstrate that U.S. human rights discourse is tested not only in traditional diplomatic domains but also in the new challenges of the digital age.

The Balance between National Interest And Human Rights

The tension between human rights and national interests in U.S. foreign policy becomes most visible in concrete crises and strategic relationships. While Washington claims to defend the values of democracy and freedom on a global scale, it can relegate these values to the background when geopolitical interests are at stake. This directly affects both the U.S. claim to global leadership and the credibility of its normative discourse (Forsythe, 2012; Carothers & Youngs, 2015). Energy security is among the most prominent areas where national interests supersede human rights. The U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia is a typical example of this contradiction. Systematic human rights violations in Saudi Arabia have often been overlooked by Washington; considerations of oil supply, regional balance, and Iran-focused strategic calculations have taken precedence (Gause, 2014). The limited and largely symbolic U.S. response to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi starkly illustrates how interests can trump human rights (Kaye, 2019). A similar pattern is evident in relations with Israel. The U.S. has frequently ignored human rights violations against Palestinians; military and diplomatic support for Israel has been prioritized due to strategic alliances in the Middle East and the influence of strong domestic lobbying (Falk, 2014; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). This stance has been one of the primary grounds for accusations of "double standards" against Washington. Relations with China reflect the contemporary manifestations of the national interest-human rights balance. While the U.S. has strongly criticized Beijing's policies toward Uyghurs and the restrictions on democratic rights in Hong Kong, economic interdependence prevents Washington from severing trade ties (Nathan & Scobell, 2012). This contradiction shows how America's values diplomacy is tested by economic interests (Sutter, 2021). A similar duality appears with Russia. Although the U.S. harshly criticizes Moscow for silencing opposition and restricting freedom of expression, energy policy, arms control agreements, and geopolitical balances limit the scope of this discourse (Stent, 2019). The war in Ukraine provides a current example of how human rights rhetoric converges with national security calculations (Allison, 2017). All these cases indicate that the U.S. is in a constant search for balance between human rights and national interest. More often than not, this balance is struck in favor of strategic interests rather than normative values, weakening America's claim to be a "defender of universal rights" on the global stage (Ignatieff, 2005). One of the most significant long-term consequences of this tension is a crisis of legitimacy. When the U.S. defends human rights as universal values, it seeks moral superiority; yet when it retreats from this

stance in the face of conflicting interests, its normative credibility erodes. This strengthens perceptions among both allies and rivals that Washington applies "double standards," thereby harming its claim to global leadership (Donnelly, 2003). Rival actors such as China and Russia frequently point to instances where the U.S. abandons its human rights rhetoric when it conflicts with strategic calculations, framing this as evidence of the hypocrisy of the Western-led order. Another dimension concerns the reflection of this balance in U.S. domestic politics. Although congressional debates, media narratives, and public pressure at times elevate the visibility of human rights in foreign policy, presidential administrations have generally prioritized pragmatic interests. This foreign-domestic policy duality shows that America's human rights discourse is fragile not only internationally but also domestically (Forsythe, 2018). Actors who champion human rights at home often raise their voices during election periods, while in practice strategic interests predominate. Moreover, the difficulty the U.S. faces in balancing national interest and human rights carries serious implications for its long-term global image. While America was defined as the "leader of the free world" after World War II, this image has become more contested today. The interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, practices at Guantanamo, and alliances in the Middle East have cast a shadow over U.S. moral superiority (Ignatieff, 2005). Although Washington seeks to revive rhetoric on democracy and freedom today, global public opinion no longer sees these claims as independent of interest calculations. Finally, the rise of a multipolar order suggests that this balance will become even more complex in the future. China, Russia, and regional powers continuously bring up contradictions in U.S. human rights policy in their diplomatic narratives. This tests not only Washington's normative discourse but also its capacity to act as an architect of global order (Acharya, 2014). Hence, the tension in the U.S. human rights-national interest balance will remain a critical topic in the international system of the future, not merely a matter of the present.

Contemporary Debates

The balance between human rights and national interests in U.S. foreign policy remains intensely debated today. Upon taking office, the Biden administration declared a foreign policy centered on the "contest between democracies and authoritarian regimes," convening the "Summit for Democracy" in 2021 (White House, 2021). This initiative was interpreted as a sign that human rights and democratic values would once again be prioritized. Yet the rhetoric was soon tested by geopolitical interests; energy security, economic competition with China, and strategic alliances in the Middle East exposed the limits of values-based diplomacy. Relations with China constitute one of the most striking aspects of contemporary debates. The U.S. has strongly criticized human rights violations such as the internment camps in Xinjiang and the curtailment of democratic rights in Hong Kong (Nathan & Scobell, 2012). At the same time, economic interdependence and global supply chains prevent Washington from applying unrestrained pressure (Sutter, 2021). Thus, the tension between human rights rhetoric and economic interests has become a core contradiction in U.S.-China relations. A similar framework applies to relations with Russia. The suppression of opposition, restrictions on freedom of expression, and aggressive policies toward Ukraine have led the U.S. to foreground human rights discourse (Stent, 2019). The Biden administration has framed the Ukraine war as a struggle "between democracies and autocracies," thereby integrating human rights with security strategies (Allison, 2017). Yet here, too,

interests take precedence; Europe's energy balance, NATO's security priorities, and broader geopolitical calculations limit the application of human rights as an independent principle. Middle East policy is one of the most rigorous tests of the U.S. human rights-national interest balance. Washington's unconditional support for Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has often resulted in Palestinian rights claims being overlooked (Falk, 2014). Likewise, the continuation of close relations with Saudi Arabia, driven by energy security and Iran-focused strategies, pushes the human rights agenda into the background (Gause, 2014). This demonstrates how elastic values diplomacy can become when confronted with regional interest calculations. Finally, digitalization and technology policy add a new dimension to contemporary debates. Internet freedom, online expression, AI-enabled surveillance systems, and the conduct of large technology companies have moved to the center of human rights discussions. Although the U.S. advocates an "open internet" and "democratic digitalization" in contrast to actors such as China and Russia, NSA scandals and mass surveillance practices render Washington's credibility contentious (Morozov, 2011). Thus, human rights rhetoric is tested not only in traditional diplomatic arenas but also amid the new challenges of the digital age. Today's U.S. human rights discourse is also directly linked to its claim to global leadership. By foregrounding democracy and freedoms, Washington seeks to consolidate the Western bloc; however, the inconsistent application of this rhetoric is frequently highlighted by rival powers. Citing U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan or its unconditional support for Israel, China and Russia argue that Washington defends universal values only when doing so aligns with its interests (Acharya, 2014). This weakens the U.S. role as a "norm-setter" and encourages the search for alternative orders within the international system. Another point of debate is the influence of U.S. domestic opinion on foreign policy. As public sensitivity to human rights violations increases, administrations are compelled to highlight this rhetoric. Yet when energy prices, security concerns, and economic interests rise to the fore, the same public tends to support more pragmatic policies (Forsythe, 2018). This duality shows that the human rights-national interest balance in U.S. foreign policy is constantly redefined not only internationally but also within the domestic political context. Moreover, the contemporary multipolar order renders America's human rights discourse more fragile. During the Cold War, a bipolar structure enabled Washington to present itself as the "leader of the free world." Today, China's rise, Russia's aggressive policies, and the more independent stances of regional powers weaken U.S. normative rhetoric and make it more contestable in a competitive environment (Stent, 2019). These developments may further transform U.S. human rights diplomacy into a "tool of competition." Lastly, current U.S. human rights policies are increasingly being tested by new global agendas such as technology and climate change. Contradictions in areas of digital surveillance, artificial intelligence, and freedom of expression—combined with insufficient measures against the climate crisis—render Washington's universal-values discourse even more contentious (Morozov, 2011). In this context, the U.S. must redefine the human rights-national interest balance not only in classic geopolitical domains but also in emerging issues that shape the future of global society.

Critique and Limitations

The human rights discourse in U.S. foreign policy has long been the target of intense criticism. One of the most frequently

voiced critiques concerns Washington's double standards. While the U.S. harshly condemns violations in rival states, it often overlooks similar abuses committed by strategic allies. This strengthens the perception in international public opinion that human rights are not a universal principle but an instrument employed insofar as they align with interests (Mearsheimer, 2001; Falk, 2014). Another critique is the frequent instrumentalization of U.S. human rights rhetoric. The "liberation" narrative during the Iraq intervention has been shown to mask energy and security interests, while interventions in Latin America in the name of democracy have, in practice, aimed to preserve geopolitical balances (Chomsky, 1999; Robinson, 1996). In this context, human rights have been assessed less as an independent normative objective than as part of a strategy for establishing hegemony. A further limitation of the U.S. human rights discourse lies in problems of consistency and continuity. The normative approach that came to the fore under the Carter administration was sacrificed to security priorities during the Reagan years; humanitarian interventions were emphasized under Clinton, whereas post-9/11 security concerns dominated under Bush. The Trump administration largely relegated this discourse, while the Biden administration has sought to bring it back to the forefront (Schmitz & Walker, 2004; Brands, 2021). This fluctuating trajectory indicates that human rights function not as a permanent principle in U.S. foreign policy but as a tool shaped by prevailing circumstances. The limitations of U.S. human rights policy also manifest in the field of international law. Although Washington is party to many human rights treaties, it has avoided signing or ratifying some critical instruments. Its refusal to join the International Criminal Court or to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child suggests that concerns over national sovereignty are placed above normative values (Simmons, 2009). This approach weakens the U.S. claim to be a global norm entrepreneur on human rights. Finally, the U.S. human rights discourse presents a contradictory picture when measured against its domestic issues. Problems such as racism, police violence, immigrant rights, and the criminal justice system have undermined America's credibility as a global advocate of human rights. International audiences frequently point out that the values Washington defends abroad are not consistently applied at home, rendering its claims to moral superiority contentious (Forsythe, 2018; Donnelly, 2003). Another dimension of the critique relates to the rise of a multipolar international order. While the U.S. could position itself as the leader of the free world during the Cold War, the ascent of China, Russia, and regional powers today has weakened the unilateral dominance of this discourse. These actors continuously highlight U.S. double standards on diplomatic platforms, challenging Washington's moral standing (Acharya, 2014). Accordingly, human rights rhetoric has shifted from being a pillar of legitimacy in a unipolar order to a contested instrument in great-power rivalry. Moreover, U.S. human rights discourse is frequently criticized by civil society and the media. International human rights organizations report selectivity in Washington's policies and note that violations in certain countries are overlooked. The American media also periodically brings these contradictions to the fore, sparking public debate. Yet these critiques often have short-term effects; administrations continue to sideline human rights rhetoric in areas where strategic interests are threatened. This shows that, despite democratic public pressure, the U.S. values-based policy struggles to achieve continuity. Another important criticism concerns the erosion of soft-power capacity. For many years, the U.S. leveraged human rights discourse as part

of its cultural and ideological appeal, exerting global influence through Hollywood, media, and academia (Nye, 2004). In recent years, however-particularly after the Iraq and Afghanistan interventions-mounting criticisms have worn down American soft power. Human rights rhetoric is now perceived less as a means of persuading broad audiences and more as a strategic tool intertwined with Washington's geopolitical interests. This limits the U.S. capacity to generate legitimacy on a global scale. Lastly, the limitations of U.S. human rights policies have become more pronounced as global challenges have diversified. In new domains such as climate change, migration crises, and digitalization, Washington's leadership claims are questioned due to inconsistent practices. While the U.S. asserts its defense of human rights in these areas, it simultaneously prioritizes economic interests or security concerns in its own policies. These contradictions indicate that the U.S. will struggle to maintain the legitimacy of its human rights discourse not only in retrospect but also on the global agenda of the future.

Discussion

The tension between human rights and national interests in U.S. foreign policy is not merely a periodic contradiction but a structural reality. As realism predicts, a state's primary goals are national security and the protection of interests. The relegation of human rights in U.S. relations with countries such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, and China confirms this perspective (Mearsheimer, 2001). On the other hand, the liberal emphasis on human rights and democracy has been reflected in institution-building, humanitarian interventions, and democracy-promotion policies, especially in the post-Cold War era (Carothers, 1999). Yet the selective application of these policies shows that liberal values are prioritized primarily when they align with interests. Constructivism focuses on identity formation, emphasizing that the U.S. defines itself as the "leader of the free world" and foregrounds human rights as a constitutive element of this identity (Wendt, 1992). However, practical inconsistencies weaken the credibility of this identity narrative and render America's role as a global norm entrepreneur contested. Critical theories and postcolonial approaches argue that U.S. human rights discourse is often instrumentalized for hegemony and legitimacy (Chomsky, 1999; Said, 1978)-a diagnosis observable in cases such as the Iraq intervention and coups in Latin America. The historical background corroborates these debates. While normative discourse gained strength under Carter, security priorities dominated under Reagan; humanitarian interventions came to the fore under Clinton, and post-9/11 security concerns sidelined human rights under Bush (Schmitz & Walker, 2004). During the Obama years, a search for balance emerged through a "smart power" strategy; the Trump administration largely abandoned the discourse; and the Biden administration has sought to re-prioritize democracy and human rights while claiming leadership amid a multipolar competitive environment (Brands, 2021). These oscillations indicate that human rights in U.S. foreign policy are not a stable principle but a variable instrument. Contemporary debates reveal that this balance is increasingly fragile. The U.S. criticizes China's policies toward the Uyghurs and Russia's aggression in Ukraine from a human rights perspective, while remaining silent in the face of violations by its Middle Eastern allies (Falk, 2014; Stent, 2019). Additionally, the freedom-security dilemma emerging in the context of digitalization and new technologies extends the human rights-national interest tension beyond traditional diplomatic arenas (Morozov, 2011). This suggests that the U.S. human rights discourse will be tested

not only in foreign policy but also in the new normative struggles shaping the global order. In sum, a common thread in these debates is that human rights discourse in U.S. foreign policy serves as both an idealistic goal and a strategic instrument. This duality simultaneously strengthens and constrains Washington's capacity to generate legitimacy in the international system. The fundamental challenge the U.S. faces is maintaining the credibility of this discourse while continuing to defend human rights as a universal value, even as interest-driven practices risk undermining it.

Conclusion

The tension between human rights and national interests in U.S. foreign policy has persisted as an enduring dilemma throughout history. While Washington, as a leading actor in the construction of the liberal international order, has championed human rights as carriers of universal values, in practice these values have frequently been subordinated to strategic interests. This has made the disjunction between rhetoric and practice a permanent subject of controversy. The theoretical framework reveals multiple dimensions of this tension. Realism underscores the primacy of national interests; liberalism contends that human rights are essential for peace; constructivism highlights the constitutive role of this discourse in U.S. identity; and critical and postcolonial approaches argue that human rights are often used as instruments of hegemony. This diversity demonstrates that the human rights-national interest dilemma in U.S. foreign policy is multidimensional not only in practice but also at the theoretical level. Historically, these fluctuations have taken different forms across administrations. Normative rhetoric gained strength under Carter; security priorities came to the fore under Reagan; humanitarian interventions were debated under Clinton; and post-9/11 security concerns dominated under Bush. The Obama administration sought balance through a "smart power" strategy, the Trump administration largely pushed human rights discourse into the background, and the Biden administration has attempted to revive it. These shifts show that human rights are less a stable principle than a contextual instrument in U.S. foreign policy. Current debates indicate that this dilemma has grown even more complex. Competition with rival powers such as China and Russia, strategic alliances in the Middle East, the war in Ukraine, and new agendas such as digitalization both reinforce and test Washington's human rights rhetoric. While the U.S. emphasizes a narrative of "competition between democracies and autocracies," the pressure of strategic interests undermines the consistency of that narrative. In conclusion, the human rights-national interest balance in U.S. foreign policy can be described as a persistent paradox. This paradox affects both America's claim to global leadership and the credibility of its defense of universal values. As a more multipolar order consolidates, and as new global challenges-such as rights violations stemming from digitalization and the climate crisis-intensify, this dilemma will deepen further. The U.S. ability to sustain global legitimacy will depend not only on its strategic interests but also on its capacity to defend universal values more consistently and comprehensively.

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