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NEOCONSERVATIVE FOREIGN POLICY: MYTHS AND REALITIES

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to present the tenets of neoconservatism as a doctrine, discuss how it relates to foreign policy and analyze its substance. However, because neoconservative thought is neither linear nor unified, some elements need to be clarified before starting.

U.S. President George W. Bush's administration—which developed a neoconservative policy after 2001—internationally “popularized” the neoconservative perceptions and prescriptions for international affairs and, at the same time, contributed to undermining its credibility. The administration discredited the theory so much that some key figures of neoconservative thought—such as Paul Wolfowitz or Francis Fukuyam—are currently reluctant to define themselves as neoconservatives. The chief problem is that neoconservatism is very often caricatured by its opponents and/or glorified by its defenders, especially because the doctrine is not pure theory but concrete politics. Opponents want to make the theory appear as the cause of all the world's problems and supporters want to adapt it to the desires of public opinion. The sensitivity of the issue and its high degree of politicization do not clarify the theory; on the contrary, they contribute to the development of myths and to the confusion surrounding the theory.

Neoconservatism is constantly evolving and has taken multiple forms throughout the last fifty years. It has shifted from the left side of the political spectrum to the right, from domestic concerns to foreign policy, from the intellectual circles of New York to the power circles of Washington. Like many schools of thought, neoconservatism is not unified and has developed with ups and downs.

Thus, does it make sense to try to find the substance of neoconservative international relations theory—in fact, does a neoconservative doctrine even exist? As previously mentioned, the theory itself has evolved and, consequently, it is important to present the context and to determine the scope of the analysis. In this paper, I am going to focus on foreign policy, so I will pay particular attention to the period from Ronald Reagan's administration to the present day, with an emphasis on current events.

How neoconservatives define themselves is important, but one cannot overlook how they are perceived, especially because this perception is strong and persistent. To this end, I am going to employ the Weber sociological method, which stresses that, beyond simply the message itself, it is important to focus on how that message is perceived—that is, the value-relation. Abiding by this method and using the ideal Weberian type, I am going to first present the different tenets of neoconservatism (even if their practical application is less polarized).

The neoconservatism that I am going to discuss is not a global theory of international relations—i.e., it does not establish global rules dictating how states should act and behave on the international scene. Rather, neoconservatism is a U.S. school of thought that has developed into an international theory. In a certain sense, the theory represents a type of nationalism: a U.S. perspective aiming to defend U.S. interests. This does not mean that we

cannot draw a global theory from neoconservative principles, but it is important to keep in mind that it is essentially a U.S.-centric view.

I will first place neoconservatism in its historical context and briefly analyze its foundations. Afterwards, I will present the principles shaping the views and pursuant lines of action of neoconservatism, which will allow me to consider how it relates to realism. Ultimately, I will show how neoconservatism is evolving rather than dissipating—certain scholars would like the theory to develop into Democratic Realism while others hope for a transition to Wilsonianism Realism.

THE ORIGINS OF NEOCONSERVATISM

Original neoconservatism was born in the 1960s, though it does have some older roots, and was shaped by the reaction against two schools of political thought from the left and the right. On the one hand, neoconservatism was a reaction to liberalism moving leftward in the 1960s. On the other hand, it was a reaction against both the Stalinists in the 1930s and 1940s and the New Left and the Counterculture in the 1960s. According to Justin Vaisse, the theory was born as a reaction to the perception of “un déraillement du libéralisme” (a derailment of liberalism) and to the entire American experience of the Sixties, from the challenging of a culture to the systematic smear campaigns.

FROM DOMESTIC TO FOREIGN POLICY

At the very beginning, neoconservative thought was focused on domestic policy. In the Sixties and in the face of growing New Left and student-protest movements, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson’s administration implemented ambitious social programs that aimed to reduce poverty nationwide and compensate for the injustice of racial segregation. In response to the Johnson Administration programs, The Public Interest review was founded to cast a critical eye on domestic policies. The writers and editors of this review pointed out the excesses of the welfare state and the limits of social engineering. The foreign policy concerns of the neoconservatives were at that time in an embryonic state.

That said, the international context progressively shaped neoconservatism to make it increasingly focused on foreign policy. According to the historian Judith Klinghoffer, this occurred especially during the Vietnam War and the Six-Day War. Obviously, the Cold War was also a determining factor in the theory’s evolution, as illustrated by the nuclear neoconservatism of Albert Wohlstetter. Neoconservative sociologist and former editor of The Public Interest Nathan Glazer wrote in 2005:

I note now an increasing number of books on neoconservatives and foreign policy, bearing titles such as Imperial Dreams: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana, and many other such treatments of neoconservatism are no doubt on the way. But foreign policy was no part of early neoconser-

vatism: Had it been, there would have been additional bases of division among the early neoconservatives. How the term “neoconservatism” morphed from a political tendency that dealt almost entirely with domestic social policy to one that deals almost entirely—indeed, entirely—with foreign policy is an interesting question. . . .

FROM REAGAN TO BUSH

No U.S. president has been purely neoconservative, neither Ronald Reagan nor George W. Bush. “It seems somewhat odd to call either Reagan or Bush a neoconservative,” said Fukuyama. However, Ronald Reagan was probably the first president to have ideological ties with neoconservatives, even if these ties are rarely presented. Reagan’s foreign policy was “clearly distinct from that of Jimmy Carter or the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger team. He believed firmly that the internal character of regimes defines their external behavior and was initially unwilling to compromise with the Soviet Union.” As for George W. Bush, he adopted a neoconservative agenda in 2001 after the September 11th terrorist attacks, but he himself was not a “neoconservative” before this period.

Only since Reagan’s presidency has it become possible to see aspects of neoconservatism in U.S. foreign policy. However, Nathan Galzer puts it, the neoconservative foreign policy was still in development during the Reagan administration. The end of the Cold War in the 1990s was a turning point, which forced the neoconservative school of thought to reshape its foreign policy and become increasingly focused on foreign affairs. The September 11th attacks also contributed to the neoconservatives’ commitment to international affairs. As demonstrated, neoconservatism began as a reaction but later developed into its own line of thought. All the aforementioned events have shaped the neoconservative doctrine and given it a real consistency. Derived from different traditions, neoconservatism—which, again, was initially focused on domestic policy—came to encapsulate an original world approach to foreign policy.

THE TENETS OF NEOCONSERVATISM

For Kenneth Adelman who identifies himself as a neoconservative, the doctrine is “the idea of a tough foreign policy on behalf of morality, the idea of using our power for moral good in the world.” However, neoconservatism seems to encompass much more than this. One of the original tenets of neoconservatism defines the role of the U.S. and the place that it should occupy in the world. The U.S. has to claim and defend an American world order to achieve peace and global stability. In other words, the U.S. has to assume the responsibilities of a superpower.

However, according to neoconservatives, the U.S. is required not only to assume its role of superpower but to reinforce itself as the only power. There are multiple reasons for this: on one hand, this idea probably stems from the fear and skepticism inherited from the

foundations of neoconservatism—a fear of the weakening of the U.S., of the counter-culture, of liberal and Communist ideas. To fight against these forces, it is important for the U.S. to affirm its values and to promote itself—to embrace patriotism. According to the historian Peter Steinfels, “the essential source of [the American’s] anxiety is not military or geopolitical or to be found overseas at all; it is domestic and cultural and ideological.” On the other hand, the drive to be a superpower is linked to a high belief in one’s own values and in the importance of such values (i.e., a high moral confidence). Additionally, there is of course the desire to keep America strong in order to ensure its security.

In 1996, William Kristol and Robert Kagan wrote “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” published in *Foreign Affairs*, which is considered a seminal statement of neoconservative thought. In this article, the two authors are clear about the role that the U.S. should occupy:

What should that role be? Benevolent global hegemony. Having defeated the “evil empire,” the United States enjoys a strategic and ideological predominance. The first objective of U.S. foreign policy should be to preserve and enhance that predominance by strengthening America’s security, supporting its friends, advancing its interests, and standing up for its principles around the world [...]. American hegemony is the only reliable defense against a breakdown of peace and international order. The appropriate goal of American foreign policy, therefore, is to preserve that hegemony as far into the future as possible. To achieve this goal, the United States needs a neo-Reaganite foreign policy of military supremacy and moral confidence.

In short, the first tenet of the neoconservatism is a strong belief that the U.S. needs to remain engaged in international affairs and to strengthen its power.

REGIME TYPE MATTERS: DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Secondly, neoconservatives believe that “the internal character of regimes matters and that the foreign policy must reflect the deepest values of liberal democracies.” Morally and strategically speaking, there are good and bad regimes—democracies are good, and tyrannies are bad. In short, the more democratic regimes there are, the safer the U.S.—and the world—is. In addition, promoting democracy goes hand-in-hand with promoting human rights. The neoconservative Charles Krauthammer is explicit on the superiority of democracy:

Democracies are inherently more friendly to the United States, less belligerent to their neighbors, and generally more inclined to peace. Realists are right that to protect your interests you often have to go around the world bashing bad guys over the head. But that technique, no matter how satisfying, has its limits. At some point, you have to implant something, some-

thing organic and self-developing. And that something is democracy.

From this quotation, we can deduce that the main unit of analysis for the neoconservatives is the state. Changing the type of a regime guarantees a safer world, and it is through the state that this change may happen. To the realist criticism that regime change is an idealistic concept, Kristol and Kagan respond:

To many the idea of America using its power to promote changes of regime in nations ruled by dictators rings of utopianism. But in fact, it is eminently realistic. There is something perverse in declaring the impossibility of promoting democratic change abroad in light of the record of the past decades.

BENEVOLENT HEGEMONY

The third principle of neoconservatism serves as a matching piece to the first principle, which is that America should stay the only superpower. The U.S. should play the role of a benevolent global hegemon and, if the U.S. does it well, world order and peace will thrive (which is, of course, good for the entire world). This idea is linked to the principle that claims democracy is the ideal form of government. American power has been and could be used for moral purposes, which in turn, good for the world. Additionally, according to neoconservative doctrine, the U.S. should actively promote democracy by showing a greater willingness to use military force to pursue its goals. This activism should make the U.S. move away from abusive, “realistic” prudence. However, what neoconservative activism borrows from realism is its understanding of the importance of power. It is necessary to use force in order to promote and achieve democracy.

SKEPTICISM TOWARD INTERNATIONAL LAW AND INSTITUTIONS

How does this conception of U.S. benevolent hegemony work hand-in-hand with international law and institutions? It does not; the two are contradictory. In fact, the neoconservatives are very skeptical about the legitimacy and effectiveness of international law and institutions to achieve either security or justice. In contrast to the Bullian international society, neoconservatives are hostile to international institutions. The Kyoto protocol or the Iraq War are symbols of this distrust toward international institutions. There are multiple reasons for the distrust: these institutions are ineffective and counter-productive; they are illegitimate; they sometimes act against U.S. interests; they reduce the power and the liberty of the U.S. and thus threaten the entire concept of benevolent hegemony. The fact that the United Nations (UN) approves resolutions condemning the U.S. or Israel, or that a dictatorship such as Libya has a seat on the UN Security Council, reinforces this perception.

A STRONG MILITARY BUDGET

If the U.S. acts as a benevolent hegemony and does not believe in international institutions, a strong military budget is crucial. This is the fifth tenet of neoconservatism. As mentioned previously, the U.S. should show a greater willingness to use military force to pursue its goals. Thus, a consistently strong defense budget that reinforces the power disparity between the U.S. and its would-be challengers is necessary. Because the future is unpredictable and America may face many kinds of conflicts, the country has to be ready to act. As Thomas Donnelly says: “The United States must retain sufficient forces able to rapidly deploy and win multiple simultaneous large-scale wars.”

Many of the tenets previously mentioned—a strong America, an attention to regime type going hand-in-hand with the promotion of democracy and of human rights, a U.S. role of benevolent hegemony, a skepticism toward international law and institutions, and a strong military budget—were and still are shared by other important groups in American political life. However, all these elements combined into one package represent a unique and original approach: the neoconservative doctrine.

NEOCONSERVATISM AND REALISM

Realism in its different forms—“old” realism, classical realism or neorealism—is one of the primary ideological opponents of neoconservatism, and adherents to the two schools of thought continually engage in debates. One of Paul Wolfowitz’s main targets is realism, as espoused in a recent article in Foreign Policy. However, even if these two doctrines are composed of different tenets, they share still others. In a recent Foreign Policy article on Paul Wolfowitz—entitled “Is Wolfowitz for Real?”—or even in Fukuyama’s book After the Neocons, one can observe this ambiguous relationship between neoconservatism and realism. Even if the two schools of thought reject each other, the neoconservatives seem very attached to a desire to integrate realism as a part of their thought. This ambiguity appears in contrasting parts of the two doctrines: the tendency of one towards morality and the other towards prudence; and the different attitudes towards power, international law and institutions, and regime change.

MORAL ACTION VERSUS PRUDENCE

Realists believe that moral principles should not be integrated into international politics; to defend its interests, a country has to deal primarily with reality. To a lesser extent, this idea holds true for classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau—they understand the importance of morality, ideals and of moral significance of political action, but they believe that interests and prudence should prevail in order to protect specific interests. Morality does not apply to the political sphere, and universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in the abstract; the circumstances of time and place must be considered.

Neoconservatives are much more dogmatic. Moral principles should not be put aside; rather, they play a leading role and must be integrated into foreign policy strategy. A strong America should be an America with asserted principles—this is partly the idea of benevolent hegemony. Neoconservatives believe in the principles of democracy and human rights but, more than that, they believe these principles will protect America and should be the framework for American foreign policy. The neoconservative willingness to promote democracy stems from the belief that America can only be safe in a democratic world.

De facto neoconservatives are much more liberal than realists. According to Irving Kristol's famous definition, a neoconservative is "a liberal who has been mugged by reality." In other words, the reality of the world curtails the optimistic aspirations of political liberalism. The neoconservatives believe in liberal democratic principles, such as the main one outlined by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson at the end of his Fourteen Points: "It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak."

Even if a focus on U.S. interests is a tenet of both doctrines—realism and neoconservatism—the moral actions and the moral predominance claimed by neoconservatives conflict with the prudence of realists. The realist Stephen Walt underlines the lack of prudence of neoconservatives in the Iraq War:

As the debate over the Iraq War revealed, the real issue is whether the United States and its democratic allies should be trying to spread these ideals at the point of a gun, or sacrificing other important interests in order to advance them. Realists oppose such efforts for at least four reasons. First, promoting regime change via military force costs lots of lives, money and prestige. . . . Second, realists are wary of idealistic wars of choice because they invariably force policymakers to engage in threat-inflation and deception in order to stampede the public into supporting actions that they would otherwise oppose. . . . Third, as Wolfowitz acknowledges, even the peaceful promotion of democracy sometimes confronts genuine tradeoffs. . . . Fourth, realists are skeptical about the ability of even well-intentioned outsiders to conduct large-scale social engineering in societies they don't understand, because our track record here is abysmal.

THE IMPORTANCE OF POWER

Whatever their disagreement on prudence versus moral action, neoconservatives and realists agree on the importance of power, especially in order to achieve moral objectives. Fukuyama highlights this when he says "there is a realist dimension to neoconservative foreign policy, which lies in the understanding that power is often necessary to achieve moral purposes." That said, the two schools of thought differ greatly as to how this power should be used.

The necessity of power is indirectly tied to another point of agreement between the two schools: skepticism toward international law and institutions.

DISTRUST OF INTERNATIONAL LAW AND INSTITUTIONS

I have presented the reasons for neoconservatives' skepticism toward international law and institutions. This line of reasoning is shared by realists, who consider the state as the main global unit and the international arena as a "jungle,"—i.e., a place of struggle and "an inherently competitive realm where states compete for advantage and where security is sometimes precarious." The consequences of this belief is that international law and institutions are viewed by realists, as well as by neoconservatives, as inefficient and possessing little influence. This distrust is combined with a reluctant multilateralism. Moreover, multilateralism or collaboration with international institutions must fit with U.S. interests. Neoconservatives Kristol and Kagan consider international institutions to be tools:

America influenced both the external and internal behavior of other countries through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Through the United Nations, it maintained sanctions on rogue states such as Libya, Iran, and Iraq. Through aid programs, the United States tried to shore up friendly democratic regimes in developing nations. The enormous web of the global economic system, with the United States at the center, combined with the pervasive influence of American ideas and culture, allowed Americans to wield influence in many other ways of which they were entirely unconscious. . . . And America's allies are in a better position than those who are not its allies.

REGIME CHANGE

Even if most realists consider the state the main unit of international politics, they "also understand that no system is perfect, and that even well-intentioned democracies sometimes do foolish and cruel things." Moreover, realists understood before neoconservatives did the presence and the weight of non-state groups, such as terrorist organizations or "giant corporations." Thus, realists do not consider the strong promotion of or the fight for regime change to be a satisfying option. Paul Wolfowitz, in his *Foreign Policy* article "Think Again: Realism," argues that the purpose of the U.S. realistic foreign policy should be to manage relations between states rather than to alter the nature of states. As a neoconservative, though, Wolfowitz further clarifies that altering the regime is also very important.

Realists are not, in theory, fundamentally against promoting regime change. However, they believe that the problems with this action are the cost and the small probability of success. Due to the fact that prudence is one of the key components of realism, such an aim is far too ambitious and "unrealistic" for a realist. Reaching a compromise with the regime

in question is much more feasible. In certain situations, promoting regime change could be supported by realists—but this does not mean that promoting regime change is a principle of realism. This is why realists are strongly opposed to the neoconservative proclivity to promote regime change.

ARE THEY SO DIFFERENT?

David J. Rothkopf describes Paul Wolfowitz as “a neocon in realist’s clothing.” This places into question the real difference between the two doctrines. Are realism and neoconservatism really so different? Rothkopf further argues that if the debate between neoconservatives and realists is so fierce, it is because the real differences between the two schools of thought are minimal. He considers that mainstream U.S. academic foreign-policy circles “believe in very similar things and thus are defined by their minimal differences, and by what they do in practice, which is often driven more by the arithmetic of momentary politics and possibilities than the calculus of policy.”

But to say that realism is like neoconservatism does not seem correct. To a certain extent, neoconservatism contains an amount of idealism because ideals and morality are present in its foreign policy. If neoconservatism wears “realist’s clothing,” which could be true, it is because the reality is not black or white. One can use an ideal type—as Weber does—to understand the chaos of social reality. However, reality is not similar to an ideal type or a pure theory. Reality is complex and thus is neither purely realistic nor “neoconservative” nor idealistic. A U.S. president does not embrace a single doctrine but a combination of different ones. The reality of foreign policy and international relations is composed of tinges and accentuations of different thoughts. Nowadays, realism has a strong foothold in foreign policy. Consequently, it is normal to find some principles of realism in neoconservatism, and vice versa. However, neoconservatism has its own specificities (like an amount of idealism), which is not Kantian but more a type of ethnocentric democratic idealism.

TOWARD A WILSONIANISM REALISM OR A DEMOCRATIC REALISM?

Because neoconservatism has become a toxic word, it tends to be reshaped by its adherents. However, the question remains: is this a real change of neoconservative doctrine or just a strategic redefinition?

WILSONIANISM REALISM

Francis Fukuyama, who has advocated for and shaped neoconservative thought for many years, “has concluded that neoconservatism, as both a political symbol and a body of thought, has evolved into something that [he] can no longer support.” Fukuyama advocates a move towards Realistic Wilsonianism. For Fukuyama, “such a policy would take seriously the idealistic part of the old neoconservative agenda but take a fresh look at development,

international institutions, and a host of issues that conservatives, neo- and paleo-, seldom took seriously.” Democratic promotion is still a strong part of this realistic Wilsonian program, given that Fukuyama believes the U.S. should support democracy even it is not in its direct national interest. However, Fukuyama contends that soft power mechanisms should be favored over hard power ones—according to this argument, over-militarization is excessive. Furthermore, Fukuyama emphasizes the importance of legitimacy; hence the need for more multilateralism and international institutions. According to Fukuyama, in order to defend U.S. interests and ideals, “durable political frameworks through long-term cooperation with like-minded nations” are necessary along with international legitimacy, which can be achieved through international institutions. In other words, Realistic Wilsonianism is a thought, in Fukuyama’s words, that “recognizes the importance to world order of what goes on inside states and that better matches the available tools to the achievement of democratic ends.”

Is Fukuyama’s neoconservatism more Wilsonian than the “old” neoconservatism? Not really. On April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson declared to Congress:

A steadfast concert for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations. No autocratic government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants. . . . The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind.

Wilson’s words were as valid for the “old” neoconservatism as for the new Wilsonian realism. Concerning international institutions, however, it is not evident that either Fukuyama or the “old” neoconservatives are Wilsonian. What Fukuyama proposes is nothing more than a softer approach to neoconservatism with a new name.

A DEMOCRATIC REALISM

The political commentator Charles Krauthammer calls for Democratic Realism, which is a new form of neoconservatism that he does not call neoconservatism but Democratic Globalism. Democratic Globalism “must be tempered in its universalistic aspirations and rhetoric. . . . It must be targeted, focused and limited.” The axiom of this Democratic Realism is:

We will support democracy everywhere, but we will commit blood and treasure only in places where there is a strategic necessity—meaning, places central to the larger war against the existential enemy, the enemy that poses

a global mortal threat to freedom.

For Krauthammer, the departure from neoconservatism is not related to the reticence “to plant the flag of democracy everywhere” —Krauthammer himself refused to intervene in the affairs of countries from the Congo to Burma to Liberia—but lies in the need for the criteria of whether or not to impose democracy on other countries to be more clearly articulated. In short, Krauthammer’s Democratic Realism is an adjustment of the neoconservative doctrine—practically nothing is different apart from some subtleties. It is most likely due to these minor differences that Paul Wolfowitz redefined his neoconservatism as Democratic Realism.

WHAT WILL THE FUTURE BRING (OR, WHAT WILL THE FUTURE OF NEOCONSERVATISM BE)?

The nuances that make neoconservatism differ from other doctrines are clear. In theory, the differences seem to be substantial, but in reality they are much less significant. Neoconservatism holds some similar points to many other American political doctrines: the importance of U.S. predominance, certain basic liberal principles, and a minimum degree of realism. When these doctrines manifest themselves in real-life situations, the actual differences are slight, despite academics’ game of differentiation.

It is hard to say if neoconservatism will become obsolete, continue to exist as is, or change (and, if so, what form it will take). Two contradictory phenomena—persistence and evolution of the doctrine—are working together and probably contain the answer. On one hand, the pure and tough neoconservative doctrine is no longer tenable. Change is in motion and is also highly necessary to ensure the survival of neoconservatism. Fukuyama and Wolfowitz’s comprehension of this change explains their “innovative” Wilsonianism Realism and Democratic Realism.

On the other hand, many aspects of neoconservative thought will probably remain unchanged because they are uniquely American. Neoconservatism perhaps represents the pinnacle of American thought over the second half of the twentieth century. In other words, neoconservative foreign policy is the most representative—a liberal pro-democratic form of soft imperialism and a belief in American exceptionalism—of American foreign policy throughout the second half of the twentieth century. More generally, the U.S. believes in strong liberal principles, which have shaped its identity and its foreign policy. As President Wilson’s Fourteen Points program put it:

Unless this principle be made its foundation no part of the structure of international justice can stand. The people of the United States could act upon no other principle; and to the vindication of this principle they are ready to devote their lives, their honor, and everything they possess.

Thus, neoconservatism can be seen as an expression of a strong liberal belief by the most

powerful nation in the world. This belief cannot change in a day; thus, neoconservatism is likely to persist in some form.

These two combined trends indicate that, in the future, neoconservatism will either continue to evolve or will cease to be. The current international context—of failed pro-democratic policies, asymmetric strategies of terrorist groups or dangerous states, environmental problems, and the rise of big powers such as China and India—confirm the impossibility of the subsistence of the “old” neoconservative view.

CONCLUSION

Neoconservatism has changed over the last fifty years—initially a reaction, it eventually became a specific doctrine with substantial tenets. It has progressively shifted from a leftist school of thought preoccupied by domestic problems to a right-centered doctrine focused on foreign affairs. Since Ronald Reagan presidency, neoconservatism has become stronger, and experienced its ups and down until it reached its zenith under the Bush presidency.

Again, American neoconservatism can be defined by five main principles: a strong America, an attention to regime type that goes hand-in-hand with the promotion of democracy and human rights, benevolent hegemony on the part of the U.S., a skepticism toward international law and institutions, and a strong military budget. All of these elements combined represent a unique and original approach to foreign policy.

However, the reality of neoconservatism is more complex and less unified. It maintains an ambivalent relationship with realism. Members of the two schools of thought differ in their stances on moral action, prudence and regime change, but they concur on the importance of power and on skepticism toward international law and institutions.

This link between the two doctrines makes one question whether they are actually distinct. Today, American foreign policy contains an irreducible amount of realism as well as a belief in liberalism. Thus, neoconservatism is embedded in a framework that prevents any simplification. Neoconservatism mixes both realism and liberalism in a specific way—in fact, perhaps neoconservatism is just a specific form of the mainstream American foreign policy approach.

Currently, neoconservatism is changing because of the international context and the hostility of public opinion towards the theory. Fukuyama’s Wilsonianism Realism and Krauthammer’s or Wolfowitz’s Democratic Realism propose two different ways to slightly change the “old” neoconservatism. The “old” neoconservatism—under the Bush presidency—is probably already obsolete. It is taking on new forms, at least on the surface, but to rephrase the Rothkopf formula, it might just constitute “old neocons in new neocons’ clothing.”

The 1960s, the Cold War and its conclusion, and the September 11th attacks have been major turning points for neoconservatism. The next several years will be a watershed for the U.S. foreign policy approach—and thus for neoconservatism. There are two reasons for this: first, the rise of India and China will challenge American power more and more; and second, global environmental concerns and danger will alter the traditional foreign policy

path. U.S. leadership, the notion of benevolent hegemony, the distrust of international law and institutions and the conception of democracy will all be challenged and cross-examined in the years to come, and something new will be created.

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