

# Transcript of Episode 12, “Liberal Values, Material Interests, and the Inconsistencies of U.S. Democracy Promotion”

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[Note: This is a rough transcript of the audio recording, based on digital transcription and human review.]

[00:00:00] **Music:** One, two, three, go.

**Morgan:** Hello, and welcome to *International Security's* Off the Page. On today's episode, we are talking about the tension between material interests and ideals in American foreign policy making, and more generally the inconsistencies of Western democracy promotion.

I'm Morgan Kaplan, the Executive Editor of *International Security*. We'll be speaking with Dr. Arman Grigoryan, the author of the recent IS article “Selective Wilsonianism: Material Interests and the West's Support for Democracy.” And a little later, we'll go off the page with Dr. Sarah Sewall, a nonresident senior fellow here at the Belfer Center, a professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and the former Under [00:01:00] Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights.

**Benn:** [Belfercenter.org/offthepage](https://www.belfercenter.org/offthepage) is where you can find past episodes as well as supplemental reading materials. It is also where you can subscribe to Off the Page on your favorite podcast platform.

**Morgan:** Arman Grigoryan is an associate professor in the international relations department at Lehigh University. Joining us now we have Dr. Arman Grigoryan, who's written a fantastic article for *International Security* called “Selective Wilsonianism: Material Interests and the West's Support for Democracy.” Arman, welcome to the show.

**Arman:** Thank you, Morgan.

**Morgan:** Arman, tell us a little bit about what is selective Wilsonianism.

**Arman:** Selective Wilsonianism is the selective application of Wilsonian idealism to certain foreign policies. And I argue [00:02:00] that sometimes these ideas and the Wilsonian ideology is applied only in cases where there are also parallel material, strategic, or geopolitical interests. When these interests and Wilsonian ideals pull in the same direction, the United States acts as a Wilsonian state. In fact, something similar can be said about European states as well, Western European states. When these interests diverge or when material interests and strategic interests diverge from Wilsonian ideals, then Wilsonian ideals lose.

**Morgan:** So, what exactly are these Wilsonian ideals in practice?

**Arman:** Wilsonian ideals as defined by Woodrow Wilson himself, well, Wilsonianism as an ideology had three pillars. One was the spread of democracy. The other was support for human rights. The third one was support for free commerce. All three [00:03:00] combined into the Wilsonian ideology. And a lot of people have argued, many historians and political scientists, that the United States has been a state whose foreign policy has been based on this Wilsonian ideology since the beginning of the 20th century, or at least since the presidency of Woodrow Wilson.

**Morgan:** And so how does this argument challenge the conventional wisdom that's out there about how the United States and the West behave internationally with regards to democracy promotion?

**Arman:** The conventional wisdom, both among policymakers and among many academics, is that commitment to democracy and commitment to Wilsonian ideals is an important driver of U.S. foreign policy, as well as the foreign policies of major European democracies. Now, in fact, there are some like Tony Smith who have argued—in fact, Tony Smith opens his book with that statement, that support for democracy, or [as] he quotes Woodrow Wilson's phrase [00:04:00] “making the world safe for democracy,” has been the highest aim or highest political priority for U.S. foreign policy throughout the twentieth century.

Now, if it was just the liberals who are making this argument or liberal ideationalists who were making that argument, that would be a problem enough, or that would be enough for challenging it. What makes this even more interesting is that there is a long-standing realist tradition of criticizing a lot of failed policies as driven by “liberal delusions,” to borrow a phrase from John Mearsheimer. And there was in fact, a lot of criticism of the Ukraine policy as a policy driven by liberal delusions. Now, even though these arguments are usually the criticisms of policies that seem to be, you know, in line with liberalism, I think there are major concessions to the liberal argument in that realists, who traditionally have been skeptical of any arguments or any theories that explain foreign policy behavior by [00:05:00] commitment to ideas. In fact, they have had a long tradition of criticizing certain policies as driven by ideas, even if they have been critical of them. In fact, in my case, that has been a more important incentive for writing this paper than the liberal argument itself.

**Morgan:** What examples can you give of this selective Wilsonianism, of these kinds of paradoxes of places where you would expect the United States to intervene in some sort of pro-democracy way, but it doesn't, and vice versa?

**Arman:** Well, the trigger for the article was actually precisely such a case of selective application of Wilsonianism. In 2008, there was a mass democratic movement in Armenia, which did not trigger much interest, support, or solidarity in the West. In fact, if anything, the Western attitudes were quite detached and sometimes even hostile, whereas five years after that, there was a movement in Ukraine, a similar movement in another post-Soviet republic where the [00:06:00] West mobilized fully to support the mass movement. In fact, one could argue that the Western support was instrumental for achieving the change of power, the change of regime in Ukraine.

Of course, in Ukraine, the policy was justified in Wilsonian terms. And again, even realists argued that this is a policy that is driven by Wilsonian idealism and is the wrong policy. The puzzle that I was interested in was, well, if Wilsonianism was instrumental in driving the U.S. and Western European foreign policies in Ukraine, then why wasn't the same policy or the same ideational commitment, not triggered in the case of Armenia? To repackage it in terms of the realist criticism, why weren't the same Western delusions about democracy and Wilsonianism not operative in the case of Armenia?

And, you know, my argument was that in fact, the difference cannot be explained in Wilsonian terms. I go to great lengths [00:07:00] explaining why in the article. The real difference was the Armenian movement had no geopolitical content or commitment. It was purely a movement for restoring the constitutional order in the country, whereas the Ukrainian movement was explicitly geopolitical in its aspirations, i.e. it was trying to pull Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and bring it closer to the West.

**Morgan:** What is the biggest policy takeaway of your argument?

**Arman:** One thing that I can say is, you know, awareness that sometimes these policies are indeed couched in ideational terms, but they are not driven by ideas. It is always a good idea to try and look [at] what else may be going on when a policy is justified in ideational and ideological or idealistic terms. It's always good to be skeptical about that stuff. If there is a policy prescription, maybe it's that very general prescription.

**Morgan:** Great. [00:08:00] Well, Arman, I have one more question for you. And that is, are you ready?

**Arman:** Okay.

**Morgan:** To go off the page.

**Arman:** Okay.

**Benn:** If you enjoy listening to Off the Page, you'll enjoy reading our quarterly journal, *International Security*, which is edited and sponsored by the Belfer Center at Harvard Kennedy School and published by the MIT Press. To learn more about the journal, please check out [belfercenter.org/is](http://belfercenter.org/is).

**Morgan:** Sarah Sewall is a Senior Fellow at the Belfer Center and the Speyer Distinguished Scholar and Professor at Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies. She's also the Executive Vice President for Policy at Inqtel, and she was previously the Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights from 2014 to 2017. Well, joining us now, we have Dr. Sarah Sewall. [00:09:00] Thanks for joining the show today.

**Sarah:** My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

**Morgan:** The first question we thought we'd ask is, given your experience both as a scholar and as a practitioner in these issues, what was your general impression of Dr. Grigoryan's article?

**Sarah:** The article is a very useful case study in contrasting some of the key variables that shape the behavior of nations and policymakers vis-a-vis superficially similar challenges, and it also, I think, helpfully positions the question about why nations behave the way they do, what is the role of ideas versus material interests in a broader context as well?

I'm of the opinion that, having served in government, the interesting thing to me is always the actual decision-making that goes into the policy choices. It's a teaser in some sense because the analysis points out how very different it is and makes a very [00:10:00] plausible thesis about the reason for those differences. I'm curious about the next level in terms of asking the actors that were part of that decision-making process, is that how they viewed those choices? Is that how they justified them in their own minds? Because I'm always interested in the sort of consoling narratives that policymakers employ to justify what might seem to be non-choices in the actual world.

**Morgan:** So, Dr. Sewall, in your experience, what is the tension between material interests in also liberal ideals in how the United States engages with policy abroad? And, you know, we're lucky to have you because you were the Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights. I know from your work [that] you focused a lot on civilian immunity and civilian safety in conflicts. But did you see in your work, this kind of tension between these two sides of interests, whether it's material versus, you know, actual promotion of rights?

**Sarah:** Thanks for [00:11:00] that. I think that if you asked my husband about my tenure at the State Department, he would tell you that that was one of the reasons why I found the job very challenging. The conversation about work is that if you're in what is the most senior role within the State Department charged with responsibility for essential values and you're working in a sea of persons that define their roles and their objectives from a very different set of perspectives — the regional bureaus are seeing their role as being responsible for maintaining good relationships with the region and the economics folks are seeing their role as facilitating commerce and advancing American business interests overseas — just the bureaucratic apparatus in many ways mimics (in the form of persons) the kinds of tensions that academic work describes in the conduct of foreign policy. [00:12:00]

So they're very real. And what's interesting to me is that the folks that work on from a more interest-based perspective delight in the fact that they are occasionally able to find policy positions in which there is no tension between the ideals that America purports to uphold and the policies that we're pursuing, but that, I think, is often not possible.

And I think what makes the process of policymaking internally disruptive is when there is discordance between what the stories we tell ourselves about what the nation promotes and believes in and advances overseas and what we're actually able to do. Now, I describe that in a value-free context because I don't believe it's reasonable to expect any nation to pick, you know, X value and consistently supported it any cost across the globe. And policymaking itself is highly [00:13:00] contextual. It depends on the individuals. It depends on the timing. It depends on what else is going on in the world. It depends on the anticipated costs of a given action, the anticipated benefits, you know. It's a complex equation, but the

tension that you described is absolutely real and inhabits the work and the daily experience of anyone serving in a foreign policy capacity.

**Arman:** One of the things that I always worry about when I talk to people who have read my article is that they will get the impression that my article is a criticism of the United States and United States foreign policy or the foreign policies of European democracy. Undoubtedly, there is an element of that and an element of certainly poking at the process and certain inconsistencies between the rhetoric and the actual policies. But that is not my main target, and it has never been my main target.

My main target is the academic conversation of it. And in fact, what has triggered the article was [00:14:00] not even the liberal narrative, which seems to be in my crosshairs in the article. The main trigger was a lot of the realist statements, which were essentially concessions that ideals are driving us foreign policy, even if really sort of criticizing the applications of these ideas. In particular, John Mearsheimer's article in *Foreign Affairs* after the Ukrainian events convinced me that I have to write this article because if are conceding this point that United States foreign policy is primarily driven or, or significantly driven by ideals at the moment instead of material interests, something has to be done about it.

**Sarah:** I don't know anyone who serves in government who shares the purported concerns of John Mearsheimer, that values are crowding out interests in American foreign policy. I think it does depend on the community in which you live to judge the need for riposte in that context. I mean, I think more often than not, [00:15:00] the contention that ideas drive us is something that needs to be unpacked, as you do, Arman, in your article to some degree by asking what people mean when they claim that values are driving the United States.

A really great example of that is democracy. Another great example of that is human rights, and they're interconnected. I lived this reality all the time. The United States has always been a nation that had a rather selective view of human rights. Did that mean that its view of human rights was not valuable and that the promotion of human rights when it was advanced was not valuable? No, but does it mean that the question about the value of human rights and what we mean by human rights should be examined? Absolutely. And you only have to look at the role that this administration is [playing], the effort that they've undertaken to try to further minimize the definition of human rights that the United [00:16:00] States supports.

If under Cold War and communism, the United States was perceived to value political and civil rights rather than economic and social rights, which, you know, the UN Declaration of Human Rights sort of put it all in one basket. And we pulled part of it. You know, now we have Pompeo's commission claiming that really what we're concerned about are sort of religious freedom and collapse, telescoping down into an ever-narrowing special interest view of what a human right constitutes. And so I think there's the broad debate that you're talking about, Arman, which is, you know, are, are realists attributing to values an unjustifiable influence on the conduct of U.S. foreign policy? Then, I think within that, there's the question of what do we mean by those values? You begin to unpack that as you look at different forms of democratization and look at the U.S. record of support for authoritarian government and the ways in which we promote democracy.

**Morgan:** I feel like I've had this conversation a lot with people over the last several years, which is, [00:17:00] you know, even if the United States and European countries are essentially making foreign policy decisions, of course, based on a balancing of material interests and the interests of democracy promotion or liberal rights, it's still important at least to have (1) the actual balancing of having democratic ideals in the considerations of foreign policy. But also there's something about just having the language of human rights, having the language of democracy, even if it's not fully part of the foreign policy, that it still holds some value and that there's something actually to be lost when we drop, you know, so to speak, using the language. I mean, is that something that, that you have thought about as well, or have encountered in your discussions with people along these issues?

**Arman:** Since I have not been a practitioner. I don't know if I can answer that question properly, but I have thought about it a lot as I was writing the article or even before writing the article, whether discourses [00:18:00], certain discourses of foreign policy are mere rationalizations, or there is something more to them, whether they have any cause of relevance. No, I don't doubt, in fact, a lot of people do come to believe in the certain ideals that form these discourses in the ideas that people cite to justify these policies. So they are not mere justification sometimes, and people do come to believe them. I don't have any doubt about that.

I think the acid test for the causal relevance of these ideas is precisely when they come into conflict with something else. When they are consistent with material interests, that is not a good test as to whether these ideas are really driving the policies. And I think that has been one of the most important concerns driving the logic of my paper and the logic of my argument, which is, you know, if we're going to measure and gauge the influence, the importance of ideas and ideals in foreign policymaking, [00:19:00] we have to pick our cases very carefully, and we certainly cannot pick the cases where these ideas and the material interests have been pulling in the same direction. The only relevant tests are when pursuing these ideals are costly.

**Sarah:** I think that there's a lot of truth to that, Arman. I used to teach a course at the Kennedy School called "Values and Interests in American Foreign Policy." And one of my greatest joys was having several of my students from different epochs of my experience at the school come work for me in the undersecretariat. In that class, the fundamental point was that there is always, almost always tension. The fact that you can't uphold the values all of the time doesn't mean that the values A don't have meaning or B don't make a difference. And so, to me, the question is never a binary one, because the actual analysis of the conduct of foreign policy is, as I said, a function of so many different factors.

I mean, one of the [00:20:00] cases that I used in the course was, you know, how did we, the United States, become a huge proponent of providing HIV/AIDS aid across the world. And, you know, it came from a Republican administration. It came about because of personal interventions to the president. It was coming from the right and met the left in a place where the left would support it because it was more values based, even though it was then, you know, sort of whittled into the abstinence program that represented a different sort of

strain of understanding of the rights and morality and the ideas around HIV/AIDS. It's complicated.

The beauty of having the notion in your head that you are moral or that you as a nation support democracy, or that you as an administration support human rights, is that it provides the fodder for an argument internally, externally within your domestic constituency, and internationally with your friends and [00:21:00] your frenemies about how far you're willing to go, about how you interpret those values, about what you are prepared to do. And it creates a tension. If you didn't have that tension, you wouldn't be able to move incrementally in ways that seem unexpected. And so often, you know, there are people who argue, like Larry Wilkerson, who argue that part of the reason why, for example, the Bush administration, the first Bush administration, intervened in Somalia was because they were feeling unbearable tension about being criticized for not intervening to stop the genocide occurring in Bosnia.

That speaks to the importance of that argument. It speaks to the importance of values, but it doesn't explain Somalia in and of itself. It's contextual. And, you know, to your point, Arman, about, about things being counterproductive, it was an ideological aspect of this as well. When you think, for example, about the U.S. push to have elections in Iraq, a Shia-dominated [00:22:00] state that had been run by a repressive regime, and you ask yourself, what's likely to be the outcome of that from a material interests point of view, you see that that is not necessarily an interest-supporting outcome to focus on democratic elections in that context. And yet we did. Is that because the administration was so focused on democracy from a values perspective? Was that actually a blinding of interests because of an ideological affinity to an argument? Or was the argument a self-serving or rationalizing argument for the intervention itself, which was perceived to lack legitimacy in the international context? Right. It's just, it's extremely complicated. But I think my point is that if we didn't have the purported commitments that we have to democracy or human rights or whatever it is to these values, you would lose important leverage and argumentation within the policy making [00:23:00] process. But it doesn't mean that you can explain and everything simply through a binary values-interests proposition.

**Arman:** If I may ask a question about the elections, the decision to hold elections in Iraq, you're pointing out a very interesting case, in fact. I've wondered about that as well as I've wondered about the case of the elections in Palestine which brought Hamas to power, which also was supported by the United States and other democracies even though it seemed from the get go that the PLO was not likely to win those elections. What exactly they were hoping to achieve by those elections is not clear. And it does seem if you think about it, it does seem quite puzzling as to why they would push for those elections.

Now in Iraq, the question I have is what do you think were the alternatives to holding elections that were almost certain to bring the Shias to power?

**Sarah:** What's great about that question is that it points us to the sort of complications in any calculation, right? [00:24:00] Alternatives could have been the continued de facto, trusteeship and occupation by the United States. They could have been a UN trusteeship. They could have been a regional power custody-ship. In other words, I think there were

alternatives to democracy, but since the administration had justified the argument, the intervention itself, as bringing democracy to the Middle East, they had sort of foreclosed those arguments. And that's an interesting point about how you can end up being sort of trapped in your own rhetoric about justifying one set of decisions that may lead you to try to be consistent in that rhetoric in ways that could counter your material interests. I think there's a predominance of an argument that the interests win, but it can have sort of these perverse effects in the context of specific decision-making sort of trees with branches and sequels.

**Morgan:** There's one issue that we could discuss, which is the concept of democracy itself in the realm of foreign policy and democracy [00:25:00] promotion and to what extent it's a contested term in terms of what it actually comprises. And so the question I kind of have for both of you is first, what are the internal debates within U.S. foreign policy on what democracy promotion actually means, right? Like what specific policies comprise of this, and where do people disagree? But I think second, and most importantly, is how does democracy promotion from the perspective of the West actually differ from what ideals or types of rights that people in other countries are actually fighting for or protesting for? Where's the tension between what the U.S. and the West believes is part of a democracy promotion system versus how others perceive it?

**Sarah:** Great question. Let me offer sort of two different vignettes from my time at State. One of the tasks that I found myself carrying out on behalf of the U.S. government was dialogue in the Democratic Republic of Congo with the [00:26:00] president, who was refusing to step down from office. And the democracy promotion was procedural at one level in the sense that I was trying to help convince the president, [Joseph] Kabila, that there would be consequences if he didn't allow for elections. But we were simultaneously very concerned about stability and violence and human rights abuse being instigated by the government, if not carried out by the government. In trying to thread that needle, and in conversations with opposition groups who were hopelessly fractured and could not agree on sort of a common program, the question becomes — because the pro-democracy groups are both criticizing the violence by the government and criticizing the lack of elections, and the incumbent argument is we're going to have more instability if we have elections — this issue internally. They had their own [00:27:00] debate about what are the values that a democracy should be upholding and what are the costs and risks attendant on insisting on a movement to promote democracy, very real and very superficial and in great tension.

Another example of how the questions about what democracy means and what you're willing to sort of countenance by way of the broader package of rights and risks around it would have been in Guatemala where the, you know, the United States had worked under the Obama administration for a long period of time to try to bring more accountability and transparency to the exercise of democratic governance by a very corrupt regime in Guatemala. And there, there were elections that were held with a candidate that purported to be anti-corruption and was unknown to the electorate as a [00:28:00] politician, but who was supported by elements that were known to be anti-democratic and part of the corruption mess that the international community was seeking to clean up. And so the U.S.

role in trying to adjudicate between unearthing the rock underneath the superficial democratic system while supporting the democratic system just becomes very complicated.

All I'm trying to say in answer to the question is that there are definitions, you know, questions about democracy and, and I'd love to talk a little bit about how we're dealing with democracy in the United States, where increasingly people are asking, you know, is an Electoral College democratic and is the Senate filibuster democratic? What does the voter suppression mean in the context of democracy? And what does it mean when the president is telling people to vote twice? You know, all that stuff about our domestic situation, but internationally, just the question, how do you promote a democratic [00:29:00] process even when there are tensions within promoting the democratic process that run afoul of other values or goals that you think are important?

**Arman:** So I think one of the main problems with how the United States defines democracy— I mean, it's, it's not, it's not a new phenomenon. In fact, it's not a new problem. This has been a problem for the United States since the early days of the Cold War, when the United States was consciously trying to come up with an ideological alternative that could rival the attraction of the Soviet model and the attraction of its economically liberating ideology, at least attractive to a lot of people in the Third World or in the developing world and in the parts of the world that were colonized by Western empires. So from the very beginning, there was this sort of tension and understanding that the United States has to have an alternative concept of [00:30:00] democracy, which focused mostly on civil rights, limited government, and property rights. But over time, this was presented as the only universal definition of democracy while any other, you know, liberating ideology, left-wing conceptions of democracy were dismissed as socialist or communist. Right? So the United States had always been suspicious of struggles, democratic struggles, anti-authoritarian struggles in the Third World that relied mostly on ideologies focusing on economic liberation.

I think there is a long history and genealogy of this problem. And now also it's often my impression that the United States tends to emphasize civil rights, certain rights connected to identity politics in the United States, whereas in many parts of the world where the work of democracy promotion is being done, a lot of people are interested in economic liberation. A lot of [00:31:00] people are interested in struggles against corrupt elites and authoritarian governments. And a lot of these arguments about, you know, a lot of these content of what Americans see as democracy does not resonate quite well with those populations. And I am wondering what Dr. Sewell, uh, thinks about these comments of mine and whether she has encountered anything like that in her work.

**Sarah:** The notion that the U.S. has focused on a different set of rights, I think, is a 100% correct. I do think that the U.S. owned the concept of democracy in the context of the Cold War, and I don't want to spend a lot of time on that, but the earlier manifestations of blatant U.S. violations or contradictions in our democracy promotion, such as, you know, a coup in Guatemala were clearly consistent with the analysis that Arman has just provided, where it was not the process of democracy that we were supporting. It was the outcomes of someone who was democratically elected.

And [00:32:00] there, I think there was, you know, fear of nationalization of U.S. industry, et cetera, but that's not always the case. And it's very interesting to remember that the U.S. view about Algeria's elections and the refusal to countenance an ideological outcome there that was not about economic ideology, it was very much about sort of religious ideology and what that would mean for U.S. security interests. There's a case where we simply opposed who would win. It stands in stark contrast, you know, to the conversation that we had about thinking through what the majority would look like in Iraq, for example. I think one of the prime criteria seeks that the U.S. conduct foreign policy is open to, is, are we supportive of procedural democracy? And if so, what does that mean? How does our own process stack up against what we think of as democratic process externally? How much of it is simply, you know, the Fareed Zakaria [00:33:00] point about illiberal democracy and what we don't want to have happen is have people that we think we don't like elected to power, whether that's in an Eastern European context, like what's happening in Poland or Hungary, or whether that's in the context of an Algeria, we are internally inconsistent on that point quite apart from what we think of as being the modicum of process fairness that we would consider to constitute the democratic floor. And so I think there are many different ways to critique the U.S. conduct of foreign policy vis-a-vis democracy. I think there's a multitude of ways to attack it. I think from the perspective of citizens, the question is we rather have that discourse? Would we rather have that claim and have it as a stick within which to force an argument down into these deeper levels, or would we rather not have the pretense at all, be free of the hypocrisy, but not have the space to make the normative arguments about the [00:34:00] role of ideas mattering in U.S. foreign policy?

**Morgan:** So that's a fantastic point. And I think it also allows us to touch briefly on what may be kind of one of the bigger, more public movements happening right now. I'm reminded of your point of this idea of democratic process, which is the current protests and opposition movement within Belarus. I'm curious, you know, both of you, what has been your or reaction or your view so far on how the West has engaged with this movement. Is it surprising that there's been as much attention or as little attention as there has been? How does this kind of tie into to our discussion here about these tensions of what democracy promotion actually means for the United States and the West?

**Arman:** I am hesitant to make very confident claims about what's happening in Belarus and how the Western governments and Western organizations reacted [00:35:00] to it because I don't know enough about this case. I haven't studied it closely enough, but just the impression I got from reading *The Economist* and *the New York Times* and, and just following the news, it seems like my argument has passed these tests. Now what happened in Belarus was a revolt essentially against falsified elections. And this was a movement and mass movement that, just like the mass moment in Armenia in 2008, had no geopolitical content whatsoever. It was not anti-Russian. It was not explicitly pro-Western or pro anything. It was about removing [Aleksandr] Lukashenko from power. And it's undeniable that for the first several days, these movement essentially was treated with indifference. There wasn't much interest. And in fact, articles appeared later. I think there was one in *The Economist* pointing this out, that the Western governments and the Western institutions did not pay sufficient attention to what was [00:36:00] happening in Belarus.

Now, the tide seems to be changing because Lukashenko has made a strategic decision, both seeking Moscow's help for crushing this movement. One other point I was going to make, not only there was no geopolitical content to the movement in Belarus, it is also true, however obnoxious Lukashenko is, he had been quite a difficult partner, let's put it that way, for Moscow. At times, he had created tremendous amounts of tension with Russia and with the Kremlin. All those things may have contributed to the relative indifference to what was happening in Belarus initially. And as I said now, because Lukashenko seems to have decided that he's going to seek Moscow's helping in crushing these movements, there is more active criticism or threats of sanctions, et cetera, et cetera. So this may eventually— well, I don't know if it will become a case will geopolitical interest again trump [00:37:00] ideals, I don't want to frame it that way, but certainly since there was no geopolitical interest in the beginning, there was relatively indifference to what was happening in Belarus, especially when you compare it to the reaction that followed the Ukrainian events in 2013.

**Sarah:** No, I don't think we can underestimate the other sort of odd intervening factors here that I wish I knew more about, but I think the broad point, which is that where U.S. interests are aligned with calls for democracy, the U.S. is more likely to consider supporting the cause for democracy. I think that's the point of the article. I think it's pretty clear. And I think the question then is sort of, what does that mean? Where is the margin for decision and action? I think the Trump administration has been much more ambivalent about its geopolitical interests vis-a-vis Russia than I would argue any preceding administration since the end of World War II. And so, you [00:38:00] know, I do think the U.S. has interests here now that it's been joined with Russia, essentially appearing to threaten another invasion if necessary. I mean, that's significant. And so the real question is, what are the tools that you have to do anything about it? And what do you know about the movement? What would the alternative be? All that kind of analysis needs to be going on behind the scenes.

I think what has surprised me is that if you imagine Ronald Reagan in this situation, he would have wanted to exploit it geopolitically from the get-go. I do think it's interesting that we have an administration that is so conflicted, it would appear, about its relationship to Russia this moment. And I think it's probably bad luck for the protesters that there is this circumspection within this particular U.S. administration, because normally it would have been a sort of no-brainer.

**Morgan:** Well, Dr. Sewall, we like to end every podcast by asking our special guest what [00:39:00] advice they'd have for individuals who are just starting their academic or their policy careers based on your years of experience in both realms.

**Sarah:** I was fortunate enough to be a student of Joe Nye's. When I was an undergraduate, I took classes at the Kennedy School and at the time, and I think, you know, for a long time, Professor Nye was known, apart from soft power, especially for being a proponent of thinking about the ethical aspects of foreign policy. He was also known as a proponent of thinking about the relevance of academic work to the policy world. I think I took both of those, all three of those teachings to heart as I moved forward in my career. What I personally am most interested in as somebody who's moved between these worlds is where are they connected? Where are the important questions in terms of the shaping of the

world? Where can academic inquiry inform them and help us navigate them better? It took me a long [00:40:00] time to find a set of questions that I thought, you know, sort of merited at a plunge into a PhD to answer them and ended up being fundamentally about the role of constructivist ideas, vis-a-vis material interests. And my PhD was basically about, well, when they match, you're, you're more likely to see ideas stick, which I think is, is exactly the point of Arman's article.

But in terms of advice, I think the question is, what moves you? Where can you find a way to bring academic inquiry to be relevant to the world? Similarly, if you're practicing foreign policy, what can you do that helps teach the sort of the next generation, what the right questions are, how to move the needle? My belief is that people have to sample worlds and sample problems and sort of find a puzzle that they want to try to answer and then find the medium or the discipline or the career route that will help you answer that [00:41:00] puzzle. Because I think the biggest risk that we have either as economics or as practitioners, is that it sort of becomes about us in our career as opposed to our impact. Helping really focus on what problem you want to tackle is a great antidote to either of those temptations that can afflict those worlds.

**Morgan:** Fantastic. That's great advice. I want to take this moment to thank both of you, Dr. Sewall and Dr. Grigoryan for engaging in such a fantastic conversation today. Thank you both for joining the show.

**Sarah:** Thank you for having me.

**Julie:** Off the Page is a production of *International Security*, a quarterly journal edited and sponsored by the Belfer Center at Harvard Kennedy School and published by the MIT Press. Our program is produced and edited by Morgan Kaplan, the Executive Editor of *International Security*. The associate producer and technical director is Ben Craig; digital communications by me, Julie Balise; production support by Carly Demetre.

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