**Headline:** It’s Not Just Ideology: Why the U.S. Is Hard-Wired to Be Hostile to Autocratic Regimes

**Teaser:** The U.S. was born out of ideas and the geopolitical schemes of competing maritime empires, forging a foreign policy approach that dominates its foreign relations today.

By Thomas J. Barfield

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**[Article Body:]**

Considering whether modern states are empires tells us almost nothing useful about either modern states or empires. A better question is what policies and structures pioneered by empires are still employed by states today, and how.

As the 20th century opened, long-established empires still governed the majority of Eurasia’s territory and population, but they all collapsed by the end of World War I. The European and Japanese colonial empires that escaped destruction then dissolved after World War II. After being the world’s dominant polities for two and a half millennia, empires were now extinct. The term empire itself turned pejorative; polemical rather than analytical. But while empires no longer existed, they left an enduring legacy: sets of distinctive templates for organizing very large polities with diverse populations. They also provided different strategic models for projecting power on the world stage.

Although the United States was the first nation designed on abstract principles of governance rather than inherited institutions, it drew on imperial models to realize them. America’s expansive concept of universal citizenship to unite its diverse population was distinctly Roman in origin, one that emerged in no other empire. American foreign policy, by contrast, employed a distinctly non-Roman maritime empire template that sought economic rather than territorial advantages. While the United States inherited its maritime tradition from Great Britain, in the post-1945 era its international policies bore a stronger resemblance to those of imperial Athens. Athens created the world’s first maritime empire (*Arche)* in the 5th century BC by building an alliance system to defend the Greeks against Persian aggression. It then used that base to establish an economic sphere in which it was the dominant player, becoming the region’s largest and richest city-state. In a remarkably similar way, the United States also created a postwar military alliance system designed to protect its members from aggression by the Soviet Union that served as a common multinational trading bloc with the American economy at its center.

**Citizenship in the United States: E Pluribus Unum**

The 18th-century founders of the U.S. were quite familiar with the classical Western history of ancient Greece and Rome. They embraced the principles of democratic governance developed by the Greeks but broke their city-state limitations with the adoption of the Roman imperial model of universal citizenship. As with Rome, American citizenship was designed to transcend existing parochial political identities (in this case America’s original 13 colonies), replacing them with an all-embracing national identity. And again, similar to the Roman Empire, American citizenship would not be restricted by national origin, race, or religion, although such invidious distinctions (particularly race) would play a negative role in the country’s domestic politics. Eager to attract settlers to a land short of labor, the U.S. made the naturalization of foreigners a regular practice and encouraged their immigration to its shores. It automatically conferred citizenship on children born in the country regardless of the status of their parents, precluding the emergence of permanent non-citizen minorities who were residents of a state but without rights in it. The anomaly of allowing a slave population to exist in its Southern states was resolved in a bloody civil war (1861-1865) and subsequent amendments to the Constitution that extended citizenship to all former slaves and their descendants. In 1924, Congress finally passed a law recognizing the country’s original Native American inhabitants as birthright citizens too.

Universal citizenship proved highly effective in uniting a population that had no common origin. The U.S. government was careful never to define “an American” as anything other than a legal category. This was reinforced by the Constitution’s prohibition of any religious tests for serving in public office and vesting rights in individuals rather than communities. It was an imperial way of thinking designed to avoid the religious and ethno-nationalist communal conflicts that plagued Europe. The potential for such conflicts was, and is, never absent in the United States. Existing communities invariably asserted that newer immigrants could never become “real Americans,” only to join with the two generations later to complain about more recent arrivals. In my own city of Boston, the influx of Catholic Irish immigrants provoked violent outrage by Yankee Protestants of English descent. Fifty years later, both English-speaking groups agreed that it was poor non-English speaking Italians and East European Jews who could never become real Americans like themselves. After the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 removed national-origin restrictions, an influx of Asian and Hispanic immigrants provoked renewed concerns that these people would never become real Americans either. Yet by 2018, [14 percent](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/08/20/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/) [of the U.S. population was foreign-born](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/20/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/), close to the record high set in the 1890s, and the once-alien foods they brought with them (from hot dogs to pizza to burritos) became American by popular consumption.

**Sustaining America’s *Arche***

By 1853, the U.S. had taken possession of all the enormous territories between its Atlantic and Pacific coasts; the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867 gave it control of around 10 million square kilometers. Yet despite being one of the largest countries on earth, the United States never viewed itself as a land power. (Even in the 21st century, its demographic and economic centers of gravity remained on the east and west coasts.) Instead, outside of North America, the United States adopted a maritime empire template for its international relations that gave sea power priority over land power, viewed economic hegemony as more desirable than territorial hegemony, and deemed indirect political domination more sustainable than direct political domination when wielding power abroad. By the end of the 19th century, the U.S. would become one of the world’s leading industrial and trading powers, although it had to contend with a domestic tradition of isolationism that was particularly strong after the end of World War I.

The maritime empire template first manifested itself in the 1823 Monroe Doctrine that declared the Americas an exclusive U.S. sphere of influence. This imposed a form of indirect domination by the U.S. over the newly independent states in Latin America and the Caribbean without touching these territories. The three-month Spanish-American War in 1898 was primarily a maritime conflict too. Here, the U.S. Navy fought simultaneously in both the Caribbean and the Pacific, sinking the Spanish fleets based in Cuba and the Philippines and delivering marine expeditionary forces ashore to expel the garrisons defending them.

However, this maritime empire template did not assume global significance until after World War II when the U.S. abandoned its previous isolationism and replaced Great Britain as the West’s dominant power. Its only rival was the Soviet Union. The Soviets followed a typical imperial land power template by taking direct control of all the countries they occupied in Eastern and Central Europe and using proxy regimes to incorporate them into their command economy. By contrast, the U.S. employed an indirect maritime strategy that would have been familiar to the ancient Athenians: seek economic rather than territorial hegemony through an alliance system that protected its member states from aggression and allowed their economies to grow rapidly. Unlike the maritime Athenian Empire, however, the U.S. also possessed a large and self-sustaining domestic economy in North America that could bankroll its high defense spending without extorting payments from its allies, as Athens had unpopularly done.

The U.S. was not interested in recreating a closed trading system with subject colonies like that of the dissolving maritime British Empire. That required both considerable expense and local administrations to maintain. (It also generated anti-colonial political movements, of which the American Revolution had been one of the first.) Instead, the U.S. constructed a postwar international system from which it benefited militarily and economically. The system also benefited its allies enough to make it self-sustaining. The American *arche* consisted of overlapping networks of military and economic alliances that spanned the globe. The military alliances were designed to provide protection against possible Soviet aggression through mutual defense treaties, including the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Western Europe, and bilateral agreements with Japan (1951 and 1960) and Korea (1953) in northeast Asia. These were the linchpins of a system that allowed the stationing of American forces within these sovereign nations, and were part of a much vaster system of secondary alliances that even 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union included 800 military bases of various types in 70 countries. Connected by sea and air routes, this network allowed the U.S. to project its power worldwide without maintaining excessively large numbers of troops abroad. Its success in the aftermath of World War II was based on turning former enemies, Germany and Japan, into close allies and major economic powers after installing democratically run governments in these countries and financing their reconstruction.

Buttressed by new global multilateral institutions such as the World Bank (1944), the International Monetary Fund (1945), and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (1947), the U.S. supported the creation of the European Common Market (which eventually became the European Union). This was less a matter of altruism and had more to do with the employment of a maritime empire strategy that viewed the emergence of stronger allied partners as a net plus rather than potential rivals. In an improvement on ancient Athens’s approach, the U.S. relied as much on the self-interest of its members to keep the system functioning as it did on its own power. This dual military/economic network would see off the Soviet Union in 1991 and maintain itself afterward. Its success as a strategy was best appreciated by contrasting it with failed U.S. policies that veered from the maritime empire template and drew the country into counterproductive land wars in Vietnam and Iraq.

In one important area, the U.S. broke with the maritime empire template that had created cosmopolitan economies while retaining insular ruling elites in Athens, Venice, Holland, and Great Britain. Universal citizenship, immigration, and capitalist economic disruption combined to produce a political system in the U.S. where the elites who set the U.S. policy eventually reflected the diversity of the population, albeit with a considerable lag time. That diversity was also reflected in America’s soft power influence that was rivaled historically only by Athens in ancient Greece because, beginning in the mid-20th century, the U.S. became the place to be for those producing cultural and scientific innovations. Part of the attraction was its rich economy, secure private property rights, and freedom of expression, but the U.S. also benefited from the arrival of refugee artists, scholars, and scientists fleeing persecution or prejudice in their own homelands. This put the U.S. at the forefront of many fields that the country otherwise would have been unlikely to develop (or develop as quickly) without them. Whether in Hollywood, New York, or Silicon Valley, the ability to attract talented people who became American citizens by choice was an element that was missing in even the most economically cosmopolitan maritime empires of the past. The U.S. was certainly the first to make culture itself a profitable export.

Does understanding which tools a contemporary world power like the U.S. borrowed from extinct empires translate into understanding its global relations today? Yes, because these were grounded in a set of largely unarticulated economic and cultural principles that to them seemed natural and required no explanation and, hence, are often overlooked. For example, in a world where autocracy was the norm, maritime empires (except for Portugal, which was founded by a king) were distinguished by their representative governments. Athens was a democracy, Carthage, Venice, and Holland were republics, and Britain was governed by a parliament. This was a structure in which the state encouraged the accumulation of private wealth and protected it from arbitrary confiscation. Both elements were attractive to the 18th-century founders of the U.S., who combined the limited role of government and respect for private property espoused by [John Locke](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke/) along with an open economy championed by [Adam Smith](https://www.adamsmith.org/the-wealth-of-nations).

The hostility toward autocratic regimes like the former Soviet Union (or Russia today) and the People’s Republic of China displayed by the U.S. is thus better explained by its maritime empire heritage rather than any ideological differences. Autocratic regimes in today’s world seek to achieve stability by creating an equilibrium in which they are dominant—a conservative characteristic of the past empires on which they are modeled. Maritime empires, by contrast, thrived on change. They displayed a higher tolerance for risk and had a propensity to upset existing economic norms—attributes well adapted to modern capitalist economies where no steady-state equilibrium has yet emerged. That, combined with maritime empires’ preferences for alliance building and networks of influence, rather than direct domination, is the international framework in which the U.S. is most comfortable but is also one whose ancient origins have rarely been fully appreciated.