

The Structural Alliance Between Domestic Civil Society and Foreign Rival States

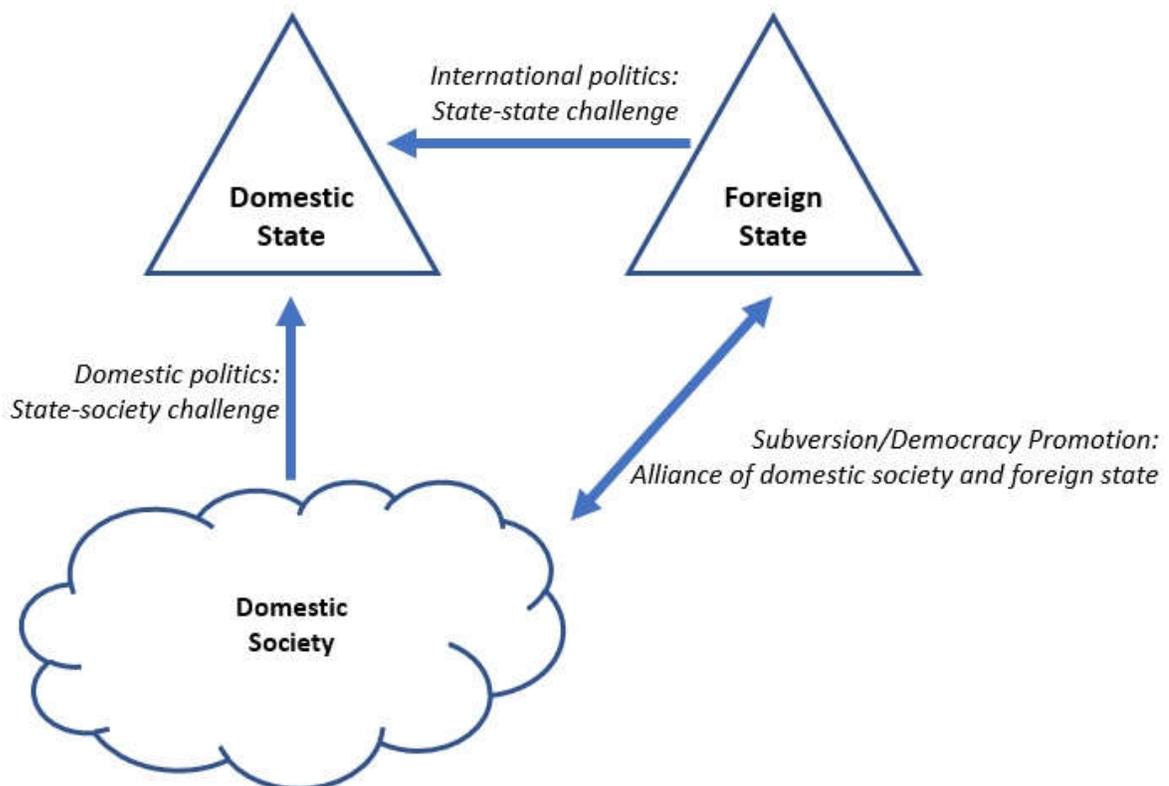
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The two domains of politics are domestic politics and international politics. In their simplest forms, domestic politics involves two actors, civil society and the domestic state, and international politics involves two actors, one (domestic) state vs. another (foreign) state. When we consider domestic and international politics together, there are three actors, in two diadic relationships: the domestic state - domestic civil society diad and the domestic state- foreign state diad.

Relations among these actors are structured in predictable ways. The domestic state is challenged by the other two actors: domestically by the civil society, which seeks to reduce the autonomy of the domestic state, and internationally by the foreign state, which seeks to weaken the domestic state. From this it follows that these two challengers have a common interest: both civil society and foreign states seek the weakening of the domestic state.

Thus there is a third diad: domestic civil society and the foreign state. These two actors have a structurally-defined common interest. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Structure of Politics



From the perspective of a foreign state, civil society offers a back-door to the domestic state. A foreign state can provide “support to resistance” (Irwin, 2019), subverting the domestic state by supporting civil society. This is a potential avenue for political warfare or (kinetic) resistance.

From the perspective of civil society, a foreign rival state may be a source of support for domestic social movements. Domestic civil society may benefit from foreign “democracy promotion” programs that contribute to a more open, democratic society.

These two situations – subversion and democracy promotion – may be indistinguishable. Democracy promotion may be subversive, weakening the state and making both state and society vulnerable to foreign attack. Subversion may be pursued through democracy promotion (Irwin, 2019; “Democracy Promotion Regime Change”, esp. pp. 175-178.) This view has been called “hybrid warfare” (Gerasimov, 2016/2013).

On the other hand, subversion may really promote democracy. This is most evident when the subversion is information-based, as in the case of cross-border news and information. For example, Dudziak (2011) argues that the US federal government was motivated to end segregation in the American South in part because of Soviet critiques of racism. Likewise, the 2016 hacking of the Democratic National Committee, which was attributed to Russia, was illegal, but it exposed malfeasance in the American political system that was then corrected. In 2004 Russia’s RT was the only news service that carried the debate between the Green Party and the Libertarian Party presidential candidates, a debate that gave voice to diverse perspectives in American society. From a domestic (public policy) perspective, all three of these episodes were beneficial to US democracy, even if all three are examples of foreign subversion.

Episodes that Russia calls subversive may have also benefited Russian society. Exposure of doping at the Sochi Olympics led to reforms in athletics administration. Release of the Panama Papers may have discouraged corruption.

Thus from a domestic perspective foreign subversion may be beneficial. Information operations by foreign states may supplement domestic investigative reporting; states are motivated to hunt for and expose malfeasance by their target states, as seen in both the (alleged) Russian exposure of the DNC and the (alleged) US exposure of Russian doping. Unlike domestic media outlets, foreign states are reliably independent of domestic states and so are harder to silence. Finally, foreign states arguably have an incentive to be truthful: in order to nurture and protect their credibility over long periods of time, they have an incentive to not disseminate egregious lies that can be exposed to discredit them. In summary, it is not impossible that inter-state competition could benefit domestic politics.

The main domestic threat from such foreign subversion may be not that democracy is undermined but rather that democracy is empowered to the point of domestic ungovernability. A broadening of public debate may ultimately cause social division. Exposure of malfeasance may ultimately delegitimize institutions. More research is needed to conceptualize a metric by which democracy promotion can be distinguished from subversive over-democratization.

References

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