

THE REVENGE OF IDEOLOGY

The Hidden Forces Reshaping Global Power

JAKE SOTIRIADIS



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ISBN: 9798263567156

First Edition: 2025

Published by Senior Intelligence Advisors (SIA) Press

--For Emily, Alexander, and Dominic.

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Foreword

Why do nations sometimes act in ways that appear, from the outside, to be self-defeating? Jake Sotiriadis offers a compelling answer in this important book. Through his concept of Ideological Power Networks, he provides a framework for understanding one of the most confounding aspects of contemporary international relations: why smart nations increasingly make decisions that seem, to external observers, fundamentally irrational.

I've spent considerable time thinking and writing about the future of global security, including how a great power war might unfold. What makes Sotiriadis's contribution unique is that he doesn't just warn about future conflicts—he explains the hidden mechanisms that make such conflicts more likely. His framework reveals how nations can become captured by their own ideological constructs, creating a form of strategic blindness that traditional deterrence cannot address.

Jake brings a rare combination of operational experience and intellectual rigor to this challenge. Having served at the tactical edge of intelligence operations, from NSA to the Pentagon, he understands how intelligence is collected and analyzed. But more importantly, through his pioneering work establishing the Intelligence Community's futures research capability at the National Intelligence University, he understands why our analytical frameworks often fail to predict significant geopolitical shifts.

The three real-world examples he examines—China, Russia, and Turkey—represent different models of how ideological networks can reshape state behavior. Each demonstrates how internal ideological evolution can dramatically alter a nation's strategic calculations, often in ways that confound traditional allies and partners. These aren't simply stories about strongman

leaders or authoritarian systems, but rich examples of how entire societies can be reorganized around new interpretations of national interest and identity.

What should concern us most is Sotiriadis's demonstration that democratic societies are equally vulnerable to these dynamics. His unflinching examination of America's post-9/11 strategic choices—and the ideological certainties that drove them—provides a sobering reminder that no political system has a monopoly on strategic wisdom or folly. We too can become prisoners of our own narratives.

Throughout my career, from commanding ships at sea to leading academic institutions, I've learned that the most dangerous moments come when we think we understand our adversaries' motivations but actually don't. The framework presented in this book offers a remedy to that danger. It provides a systematic way to understand how other nations perceive their interests, even when those perceptions seem bizarre or self-destructive from our vantage point.

For military leaders planning future operations, for diplomats trying to prevent conflicts, and for policymakers crafting strategy in an increasingly unpredictable world, Sotiriadis's insights are invaluable. He helps us understand not just what our competitors and adversaries are doing, but why they believe their actions make sense—even when those actions appear to violate every principle of rational statecraft.

I see daily how traditional frameworks for understanding global risk are failing to keep pace with reality. Business leaders are blindsided by geopolitical shifts they didn't see coming. Policymakers are surprised by allies' decisions that seem to come from nowhere. Military planners prepare for conflicts based on assumptions about adversary behavior that prove completely wrong.

This book offers a better way forward. Not perfect prediction—that's impossible in our complex world—but better comprehension of the forces shaping state behavior. In an era where strategic surprise has become the norm rather than the exception, that comprehension is invaluable.

Jake Sotiriadis has given us a new lens through which to view an increasingly chaotic world. More importantly, he's shown us that what looks like chaos often has an underlying logic—we just need to know where to look for it.

Admiral James Stavridis, USN (ret.)

August 2025

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Introduction

The contemporary era constantly proclaims itself as post-ideological, but this denial of ideology only provides the ultimate proof that we are more than ever embedded in ideology.

— Slavoj Žižek

First as Tragedy, Then as Farce

Western analysts expected Russia's economy to collapse within months of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine under unprecedented sanctions. Instead, Russia's GDP fell by about 2.1 percent, while Vladimir Putin's approval soared to over 80%. Orthodox priests blessed tanks rolling toward Kyiv as Russian society rallied around a narrative of sacred civilizational struggle. Faulty intelligence was not to blame. Western intelligence agencies meticulously tracked Russian troop movements, mapped supply chains, and calculated economic vulnerabilities with remarkable precision. The problem ran deeper: a systematic refusal to recognize that ideology is not merely abstract belief but a material force capable of reshaping how entire societies understand reality. By dismissing ideology as Cold War nostalgia while rivals weaponize it to transform the global order, Western policymakers have rendered themselves analytically blind to the world emerging around them. What has returned is not ideology as rhetoric but as material structure in the form of networks that shape how societies perceive reality, pursue interests, and define international order. These Ideological Power Networks—IPNs—represent the invisible architecture of 21st-century competition. Ideological Power Networks are the materialized webs of populations, elites, and state apparatuses that convert ideas into

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incentives, institutions, and habits—thereby reshaping what states perceive as “rational” interests.

As the first quarter of the twenty-first century draws to a close, so too does the post-Cold War period that began in 1989—not with the clarity of falling walls or treaty signings, but through the accumulated weight of strategic surprises. These shocks have revealed that the assumptions underlying the past three decades—about rationality, convergence, and the triumph of liberal order—no longer explain how the world works. What emerges is not a new Cold War, nor a simple sequel, but something far more complex: a world where ideology operates through material networks that fundamentally alter how states interpret their rational self-interest. In a twist of historical irony, Western democracies became most ideologically captured at the very moment they declared ideology dead. Democracy promotion, humanitarian intervention, the inevitable spread of free markets—these were not neutral policy choices but expressions of an ideological system as all-encompassing as any it claimed to replace. The belief in ideological transcendence became itself an ideology so complete that Western policymakers could no longer see how it shaped their every assumption about rational statecraft. Nor could they recognize when others operated from fundamentally different ideological frameworks.

When China erased over \$1 trillion in market value by crushing its tech giants in 2021, Western analysts labeled it economic suicide. They failed to grasp that Beijing was operating from a Neo-Confucian Communist framework, one where independent billionaires threatened the Party's monopoly on defining Chinese identity and progress. When Turkey purchased Russian S-400 missiles, sacrificing its F-35 partnership, experts focused on alliance politics and arms deals. They missed how neo-Turkic Autonomy, fusing Ottoman historical narratives with strategic independence, had transformed Turkey from a NATO ally to a regional power pursuing its own rules of the game. When India embraced Russian energy while refusing to condemn the Ukraine invasion, observers saw pragmatic balancing rather than ideological assertion of civilizational sovereignty. These misreadings reveal how ideology contains a material force, transforming state behavior and making ostensibly irrational choices entirely coherent within a distinct ideological framework.

Remarkably, the 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy mentions ideology exactly zero times, despite ideology driving over 25% of all global disputes and more

high-intensity wars than any other factor in 2023.¹ Washington has convinced itself that today's conflicts stem from power politics or authoritarian insecurity. But ideology does not discriminate by regime type. Democracies and autocracies prove equally susceptible to its warping effects, a reality the United States discovered painfully after 9/11. When American exceptionalism, democracy promotion, and military supremacy fused into a singular worldview, they produced disasters in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria. Despite explicit warnings about sectarian divisions and state-building difficulties, Washington spent \$4.8 trillion chasing ideologically driven dreams of democratic transformation. These were not strategic miscalculations but ideology reshaping American perceptions of rational self-interest, just as profoundly as Putin's neo-Eurasian Imperialism or Xi's neo-Confucian Communism warps theirs. Today, America faces its own ideological inflection point, as competing visions of national purpose challenge long-held assumptions about the country's global role.

To navigate this new era, policymakers need a framework that grasps ideology's material structure--the networks of populations, elites, and institutions that transform beliefs into forces as real as armies or economies. These ideological power networks fuse into self-reinforcing systems that redefine rational state behavior. As they intensify, states progressively lose the capacity to recognize alternatives to their own worldview. These seemingly hidden forces now define the international system.

1999 – The End of Certainty

I remember my first day as a college freshman in the fall of 1999. We were one of the 20th century's last incoming classes, old enough to have used typewriters in elementary school, yet already addicted to the internet. We felt a pervasive excitement and optimism about entering a new century, accompanied by the unlimited promise of the digital age. We didn't know it at the time, but the United States itself was approaching the peak of its post-Cold War power and influence. No near-peer competitors seemed able to remotely challenge US dominance of the global economy or the strength of the US military. President Bill Clinton captured this optimism, beginning his 2000 State of the Union Address with the declaration: "We are fortunate to be alive at this moment in history. Never before has our nation enjoyed, at once, so much prosperity and social progress, with so little internal crisis or so few external threats."² Today, the bright and promising

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world Clinton described more than two decades ago seems as distant as the outer reaches of our solar system.

Where did that world go?

The 21st century has—thus far—been anything but predictable or peaceful. Only a decade after the West’s post-Cold War victory lap, the new millennium’s luster was instantly blackened by the worst terrorist attacks on US soil in 2001. Since then, two decades of misguided military adventurism tarnished the United States’ global reputation and undercut its influence, testing the rules-based international order. In 2008, a global economic crisis exposed the scope of corporate greed and shook societal confidence in capitalism itself. The lop-sided nature of globalization’s unforeseen outcomes led to heightened economic inequality, providing fertile ground for the emergence of populist movements worldwide. The worst global pandemic in a century rang in the 2020s, claiming the lives of more than six million people and wreaking global economic and social disruption on a massive scale. Major war rages once again in Europe, as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine brings us closer to nuclear confrontation than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Serious talk of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan is no longer limited to defense and security circles; it is now part and parcel of everyday discourse. In Washington, DC, the growing hawkish consensus portraying likely—if not inevitable—conflict with China, risks reducing every facet of US-China relations to a militaristic showdown.

In this increasingly volatile landscape, we face a paradox: while we proclaim ourselves to be in a “post-ideological” era, ideology’s influence on global affairs has never been more profound or more misunderstood. The central argument of this book is that ideology functions as a complex adaptive system—a living, breathing network of practices, material contexts, and ideational components that can ultimately eclipse the control of the state itself. These networks, which I term Ideological Power Networks (IPNs), are fundamentally reshaping how states perceive their interests and pursue their strategic objectives. Far from being mere rhetoric or window dressing for material power politics, these IPNs represent a distinct form of power that can seduce populations, elites, states, and territories into joining new structures of meaning—often with dramatic consequences for global security.

Looking back at the first quarter of the 21st century, one cannot help but ask, “What went wrong?” Why have the much-touted forces of globalization and

cosmopolitanism fueled, rather than tamed, geopolitical competition? Conventional wisdom offers a simple explanation: it's democracy versus autocracy, a clash between competing systems of governance.³ This framing has obvious appeal. Authoritarianism is an easy target because it places such "rogue" regimes outside the accepted norms of the international society of states.⁴ Western governments are quick to condemn nondemocratic or authoritarian regimes for crushing human rights, stifling individual freedoms, or pursuing aggressive military adventures—all while maintaining robust trade relationships with these same countries, of course. And to be fair, many of these criticisms are entirely justified. But here's where things get interesting—and uncomfortable. What happens when liberal democracies start behaving exactly like the authoritarian regimes they condemn? When democratic governments adopt the same aggressive, militaristic, and seemingly irrational foreign policies that are so readily criticized in others?

According to the 2022 *National Security Strategy*, the United States finds itself amid a "strategic competition to shape the future of the international order."⁵ Although a cursory glance at the daily news cycle undeniably showcases this ongoing global contest, we have failed to effectively frame, let alone fully comprehend, the essence of this evolving strategic rivalry. While the nucleus of this geopolitical contest remains the US-China dynamic, the task of reining in Russia, Iran, and other destabilizing actors also poses formidable security challenges. Spirited debates rage over how to characterize this era in which we live—is this, as some say, "a new Cold War," or does that term itself evoke anachronistic comparisons?⁶

We, at least in the West, have largely embraced the notion of a "post-ideological" era, declaring ideology a relic that died along with the Cold War. Ideology (or at least its 20th-century version) no longer applies to our globalized, digitalized, and interconnected world. This reluctance to acknowledge ideology, however, essentially caused the West to be "surprised" by the rise of radical Islamic terrorism, to miss the weak signals surrounding populist movements, and to view competitor states, such as China, Russia, and others, exclusively through the narrow lens of hard—or material—power. We dismiss ideational sources of disruption as merely "internal politics" or "nationalism," further distorting our perceptions of how revisionist powers interpret their *own* geopolitical interests.⁷ As a matter of public policy, the 2022 *National Security Strategy* also omits mention of the term "ideology" and fails to acknowledge any role for ideational

agency in outlining the future security landscape.⁸ Part of the problem lies in the existing interpretive frameworks that attempt to address these geopolitical developments.

We are asking the wrong questions and using the wrong tools.

To overcome these shortfalls, this book advances an alternative approach to understanding ideology to examine today's global power dynamics from an ideational vantage point. I argue that we must reconceptualize the notion of ideology itself if we are to understand, characterize, and anticipate competitor states' behavior in this unfolding contest. I make the case for viewing ideology as a complex adaptive system—where a living, breathing network of practices, material contexts, and ideational components collide, solidify, intensify, and eventually eclipse the control of the state. My intent is to deliver a richer understanding of how populations, elites, states, and territories are seduced into joining new structures of meaning.

Consequently, this book introduces a theory of how ideologies become “material” in a systemically important way for understanding international security politics. I argue that ideologies assume a networked form of material structure, called IPNs, that shape, and, at times, distort, the trajectory of states' foreign policy strategies. These networks are composed of complex interactions among the general populace, sociopolitical elites, and the control apparatuses of the state. It is from this vantage point that one can frame 21st-century geopolitics as a multitrack arena of competing IPNs. Further delineating the parameters of ideological power, this book identifies the ways in which IPNs materialize, proliferate, and intensify.

The central questions that we'll investigate include:

1. Does ideology possess constitutive agency that alters states' perceptions of their self-interest?
2. What is the process through which ideology takes on a material structure within the foreign policy strategies of states that seek to use it?
3. How does the intensity of IPNs affect the structure of the international order?

Addressing these inquiries will give us an enhanced roadmap for the more subtle and diverse power games that underpin 21st-century great power competition—showing us not only where to look for emerging signals of rising powers'

revisionist practices, but also how established powers overextend themselves as ideology warps their notions of rational self-interest. Ultimately, this book delivers a conceptual model of ideological power that will enhance our understanding of “soft power,” which is currently too dependent on a normative consensus about the rules of the game. It is my hope to enrich and refine the discourse surrounding material and ideational power dynamics in international relations.

Toward this end, this book addresses gaps in contemporary international relations theory and reveals the very real and intense ideological struggles unfolding across the globe. By putting the argument in a contemporary context, this book tackles a significant void in critical analysis of ideology since the end of the Cold War, which falls into four intellectual camps: 1) A doctrinaire Marxist reading of ideology to explain everything; 2) Realist international relations theories that dismiss any value in thinking about ideological differences; 3) Work on nonstate actors, for which ideology is primarily used to explain the phenomenon of violent extremism; and 4) Constructivist approaches, which eschew questions of ideology in favor of investigating norms and identities.

Beyond the purely theoretical, I seek to deliver a practical framework to better understand shifts in global order and interpret what superficially appears to be “irrational” state behavior. Thus, my hypotheses rest heavily on the IPNs’ agency to influence individual state actors’ foreign policy choices. This framework will establish that ideologies precede the actions of a particular state and correlate with foreign policy outcomes. In a broader sense, IPNs inspire foreign policy actions rather than simply providing a justificatory pretext.*

Today, our volatile world is characterized by unprecedented complexity. To put it bluntly, complex problems cannot be “solved” in a conventional sense. They are dynamic, interconnected challenges in which cause-and-effect relationships are not always evident. For example, think about how technology has

* Examining the deterministic effects of concepts, such as ideology on foreign policy, inevitably demands engagement with the domestic political experience of promoting ideas toward policy outcomes. While this work centers on foreign policy, my thinking on this subject has been considerably shaped by seminal studies that address state-building, empire, and the role of ideas in molding the political and governance structure of states themselves. These studies include Sheri Berman, *The Social Democratic Movement: Ideas and Politics in the Making of Interwar Europe* (Harvard University Press, 1998); Colin D. Moore, *American Imperialism and the State 1893-1921* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Warren Zimmermann, *The First Great Triumph: How Five Americans Made Their Country a World Power* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002).

profoundly shifted global power dynamics. Never before have *individuals* been able to wield a portable media studio (in the form of a smartphone) and wage narrative warfare across the globe in real time, 24 hours per day, seven days per week. What was once the exclusive purview of states has diffused to the individual level. The intricate feedback loops generated among individuals, states, and international organizations are a key consequence of this reality.

This complexity negates using a reductionist “democracy versus autocracy” contest to analyze today’s unfolding competition. Digging deeper into the intensity—and agency—of emerging IPNs acknowledges ideology’s pivotal role in contemporary geopolitics, revealing that democracies and autocracies are *equally* susceptible to the agency of IPNs. Any regime—from democratic to authoritarian—can become lost in its own image and follow a path of strategic folly. If we are to understand how and why unique, state-centric ideologies are emerging—and thriving—in our supposedly post-ideological era, we cannot examine material power alone. There is much more to the story.

Undertaking a systems-based analysis of ideology would identify IPNs as the catalysts in the competition for global order. My theoretical approach reconceptualizes elements of international relations theory—particularly realist theories that adopt a very narrow view of materialism. Furthermore, my explanatory framework redefines insufficient terminology and incorporates unique insights from sociology, philosophy, and psychology to craft new hypotheses. Constructing a tangible map of the material structure of IPNs reveals how ideologies materialize and identifies which ideological models challenge the status quo. In pinpointing ideology’s constitutive agency to shape states’ foreign policy strategies, I aim to shed light on a process occurring in plain sight, but which is largely ignored in our contemporary policy discourse.

This theoretical framework further addresses inherent limitations of realist and liberal international relations theory in accounting for the disruptive nature of ideology in today’s security landscape. Three powerful examples from today’s geopolitical landscape illuminate distinct ideological models: neo-Confucian Communism in China, neo-Eurasian Imperialism in Russia, and neo-Turkic Autonomy in Turkey. Each originates from distinct IPNs that promote widely contrasting conceptions of the state’s self-interest, regional power position, and notions of global order writ large. These real-world examples illustrate how emerging (and in some instances, advanced) IPNs in China, Russia, and Turkey

are fueling today's great power competition—and offer a means to anticipate and interpret the behavior of competitor states in the 21st century. The IPNs' conceptual model serves as a guidebook for mapping out sources of global disruption and change that characterize contemporary geopolitics. More importantly, it shows us that we are grappling with a future global order that is profoundly premised on competing IPNs.

Why Ideology?

My curiosity regarding ideology's agency in foreign policy—particularly its ability to alter states' conditions of self-interest—unfolded rather unconventionally during the early 2000s. I was commissioned as an intelligence officer in the United States Air Force in May 2003, just two months after the US invasion of Iraq. My generation of military officers was swept up in the post-9/11 era and the accompanying patriotism to respond to the 21st century's equivalent of Pearl Harbor. But we collectively became bogged down in one of the worst foreign policy debacles in this country's history.[†] This harsh reality—that the United States had fumbled its way into an untenable and intractable situation in Iraq—became clear to me on a scorching day in Qatar in 2007. While I stared into the rising panoply of computer screens, telephones, and hanging wires cluttering my makeshift desk at the Combined Air and Space Operations Center, I was taken aback as our team frantically responded to what seemed like incessant requests for aerial intelligence support to improvised explosive device (IED) attacks. I tried to contemplate just how a group of ragtag insurgents could inflict so much damage—and frankly humiliate—a military force and “superpower” that was vastly superior in every way. But more fundamentally, I questioned what we were accomplishing. Why were we—Americans from places like Texas, Maine, and California—fighting and dying in the deserts of Iraq and mountains of Afghanistan? Questions certainly not unique to me.

The answer, I came to realize, lies in what would later form the foundation of my theory of IPNs. The United States had entered Iraq armed with

[†] The US Army War College published a comprehensive, two-volume study of the Iraq conflict. This detailed report, containing more than 1,000 unclassified documents, concludes that Iran is the only party to emerge from the conflict as a victor. For the complete report, see: COL Joel D. Rayburn et al., *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War—Vol. 1: Invasion, Insurgency, Civil War, 2003-2006*, and *Vol. 2: Surge and Withdrawal, 2007-2011* (US Army War College Press, 2019), <http://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/3667.pdf>.

overwhelming material superiority but suffered from a profound ideational deficit. Our mission had transformed from a security operation into the physical manifestation of an ideological doctrine—democracy promotion—that proved incapable of seducing local populations into embracing our vision for their futures. This failure was not merely tactical; it represented what I would come to identify as hegemonic narcissism—a prime example of how IPNs can distort a state's perception of its interests and capabilities. This experience revealed to me how ideology functions not just as a set of beliefs, but as a material force that shapes military and political outcomes. This realization sparked my investigation into how IPNs materialize, proliferate, and ultimately shape the destiny of nations—sometimes in ways that escape the control of even the most powerful states.

When it became apparent that Iraq's Saddam Hussein did not possess weapons of mass destruction, the US strategic narrative changed: "So it is the policy of the United States," declared President George W. Bush in 2005, "to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."⁹ Hence, the US presence in the Middle East had metastasized into a tangible, material extension of the ideational dogma of "democracy promotion." The reality, however, of the US foray into the quagmire of Iraq was not to wage a war of necessity but was a poignant example of the paramount role of IPNs in foreign policy.

No one could claim that a dearth of military and economic power was to blame for US military failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. Rather, US political and military leaders failed to identify their severe ideational deficits in convincing—or seducing—local populations to embrace a liberal democratic future. The misguided doctrine of democracy promotion (which spanned consecutive US administrations) resulted in a tragic fiasco driven by hegemonic narcissism—the apex of ideological agency distorting a state's conditions and perceptions of self-interest. I will explain the particulars of hegemonic narcissism and other foundational concepts after I introduce some of the methodological challenges in analyzing ideology, establish my own definitions and conceptualizations, and address the shortcomings of international relations theory vis-a-vis ideology and its relationship to state behavior.

A Roadmap of This Book

We begin in Chapter 1 by confronting the methodological challenges that have historically made ideology such a difficult subject to analyze systematically. This foundation allows us to establish new conceptual tools that better capture ideology's role in contemporary global affairs. Chapters 2 and 3 take us deeper, examining why traditional international relations theories—from realism to constructivism—have failed to account for ideology's agency in systemic terms. Here, we develop a new theoretical framework that reveals how IPNs intensify, how they can overwhelm regimes, and how they fundamentally shape foreign policy decisions.

With this theoretical foundation in place, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 take us into the three compelling examples that demonstrate IPNs in action. Chapter 4 examines China's neo-Confucian communist network, showing how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has weaponized cultural and moral traditions to monopolize claims to meaning. Chapter 5 builds on these insights by analyzing Russia's neo-Eurasian Imperialism, revealing how mythicized imperial visions can capture and redirect national identity. Chapter 6 completes our case study trilogy by exploring Turkey's dramatic transformation—through competing IPNs—from Kemalism to contemporary neo-Turkic Autonomy.

In each chapter, this theoretical framework illustrates and analyzes three key areas:

1. Determining how the state's IPN manifests as a material structure;
2. Assessing which phase of network intensification best characterizes the country's IPN; and
3. Framing how each country's IPN shapes its preference for global order.

And specific to each country, the theory accomplishes the following:

- Identifies neo-Confucian Communism's role in rebranding the CCP;
- Assesses the extent to which Western powers' foreign policy actions accelerate neo-Eurasian Imperialism's network intensity; and
- Examines the implications of neo-Turkic Autonomy for the regional and international order.

Finally, Chapter 7 serves as both a culmination and a wake-up call, demonstrating how our framework illuminates current global conflicts and points the way toward more effective policy responses. This concluding chapter

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reveals that ideology—not traditional competition for resources or status—stands as the primary driver behind most of today's major conflicts.

At a systemic level, IPNs reveal a profound truth: ideology possesses the constitutive agency to fundamentally alter how states perceive and pursue their rational self-interest. This insight forces us to reconsider our assumptions about the trajectory of international relations. Although conventional wisdom suggests that globalization and economic interdependence would naturally lead to greater integration and cooperation, the reality of the 21st century tells a different story. States bound by intensifying IPNs often move in precisely the opposite direction, learning the wrong lessons from conflicts and interpreting rationality through increasingly distorted lenses. Thus, rather than a convergence toward integration and cooperation, intensified IPNs can drive the exact *opposite* effect.

This intensification challenges the foundational assumptions of mainstream international relations theory. Realists have long argued that the international system's inherent anarchy condemns states to an endless struggle for survival, with material power serving as the only meaningful currency.¹⁰ Constructivists, in contrast, famously contend that “anarchy is what states make of it,” but their framework tends to underestimate the crucial role of material power in achieving ideational objectives.¹¹ My research charts a different course. By treating ideas, ideology, and norms as genuine currencies of state power, we can better understand how material and ideational forces function as dialectically connected variables, intrinsically bound together within IPNs.

What emerges from this analysis is a revelation about the nature of ideology itself: it represents a unique form of power that transforms abstract ideas into concrete material manifestations through these networks. Yet unlike economic or security disputes, ideological conflicts resist traditional forms of compromise in international politics. Systems of belief and competing visions of global order cannot be parceled out or traded like material resources. Instead, we must understand that anarchy itself is interpreted through the lens of what IPNs make of it. As these networks overwhelm states and regime types, they create what I call the *revenge of ideology*—a force that distorts rational choice regardless of whether a state is liberal or authoritarian.

These conclusions carry profound implications for foreign policy decision-making. For US policymakers, the path forward requires developing what I term

Strategic Ideological Interplay—a grand strategy that deliberately engages with and exploits the dynamics of IPNs. This approach would enable the United States to identify and exploit gaps in adversary networks while simultaneously strengthening and promoting US values and interests. The goal is not simply to counter opposing ideologies, but to shape a more stable and peaceful global order through a sophisticated understanding of how ideological power actually operates.

Before such a strategy can take root, however, policymakers must fundamentally reassess their understanding of ideological agency in contemporary geopolitics. The invisible regime of ideological power is already reshaping the international landscape. Our choice is not whether to engage with it, but whether we do so with clear-eyed understanding or misapprehension of its true nature and influence.

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August 2025