Surrendering Influence: The Effects of Major Power Withdrawal

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Abstract

What would be the effect of the US abandoning the liberal international order (LIO)? Major powers sometimes withdraw support from protégé states, due to changes in strategic priorities (e.g., retrenchment) or domestic politics (e.g., collapse of the USSR). Building on recent work on relational hierarchies, I argue that such sudden changes have both short- and long-term effects on protégé states' domestic and foreign policies, with respect to a major power's broader milieu goals. Using a novel measure of major–minor power influence, I analyze how changes in US and Russian ties with all minor powers from 1950—2010 shape these minor powers' policies. I find that sudden decreases of US influence are associated with short- and long-run declines in minor powers' democratic practices, human rights protections, judicial independence, US trade, and alignment with US foreign policy. In contrast, Russian decreases lead to greater liberal policy implementation and more independent foreign policies. I find analogous effects for other major powers: retrenchment by the liberal powers—Britain and France—undermines the LIO, while waning Chinese influence leads to greater policy independence. These results have implications for the future of the LIO, major-power competition, and global order more generally.

US President Trump's public berating of Ukrainian President Zelenskyy in the Oval Office on February 28, 2025, and his announcement of worldwide 'reciprocal tariffs' on April 2, just a few weeks later, shocked analysts and foreign leaders alike (Chyzh 2025; Last 2025). A day after the tariff announcement, Canadian Prime Minister Carney declared that "The eighty-year period when the United States embraced the mantle of global economic leadership—when it forged alliances rooted in trust and mutual respect, and championed the free and open exchange of goods and services—is over" (Last 2025).

While striking in presentation, Trump's actions were consistent with his longstanding skepticism about the post-World War II liberal international order (LIO), a pillar of US foreign policy. He dismantled USAID, accused NATO of "taking advantage of the US," questioned the benefits of foreign troop deployments in Germany, Japan, and South Korea, called off military exercises with South Korea, invoked national security to justify economic sanctions against allies, and even threatened to annex Canada, Greenland, and the Panama Canal. Though each of these undermined US global leadership, it is less clear how a US retreat from global influence would affect other participants in the LIO. How should we expect these states to behave without US support? More broadly, what is the impact of major power disengagement on a minor power's domestic and foreign policies?

A unilateral US withdrawal from its position atop the LIO is hardly the first instance of a major power disengaging from its network of allied and aligned states. The disintegration of the Soviet Union triggered the collapse of global communism and dramatically undercut Russian influence. British and French global influence likewise waned with their relative material power. In each of these cases, the major power's loss of influence was not geographically uniform: some regions were unaffected, some experienced partial retrenchment, and some were abandoned altogether. France, for instance, withdrew from Indochina, yet remains a key actor in francophone Africa (Schraeder 1995; Yang and Kuokštytė 2025).

I argue that sudden changes in major power influence have both short- and long-term effects on their protégé states' domestic and foreign policies. My theoretical framework begins

with the premise that major powers sit atop informal, hierarchical networks of protégé states. These hierarchies build systems of legitimacy—based on ideology or perceived success—to encourage emulation or deference to a hegemon over specific policy domains without relying exclusively on material capabilities (Wendt and Friedheim 1995; Fordham and Asal 2007; Lake 2009; Kang 2010; Ikenberry 2024). This network generates a loose political order, where protégé states vary in their closeness to the major power and the degree to which their policies are influenced. From this vantage point, political orders are not fixed architectures but shifting configurations: their intensity varies over time and across space.

This framework has generated a number of theoretical and empirical insights, but most existing research focuses on cross-sectional variation in the level of major power influence. That is, this literature asks whether a minor power's presence in a major power's informal protégé-network leads to differences in domestic and foreign policy. McDonald (2015), Beardsley et al. (2020), and Wang et al. (2024), for example, demonstrate that membership in a major power's network affects a minor power's conflict propensity, trade openness, and other policy positions. Lake (2009) and Nieman (2016*b*) show that the position of a minor power within these networks impacts their domestic and foreign policies, with greater embeddedness associated with practices more in line with the major power.

In this article, I shift the focus from levels to dynamics, and examine temporal variation—how sudden changes in a protégé's position within a hierarchy affect its behavior. This emphasis on time allows me to exploit the fact that memberships in major-power political orders—as well as their members' closeness within an order—vary year to year. States drift in and out of favored status; ties tighten and loosen; hierarchies themselves wax and wane.

My primary theoretical interest is major power *disengagement* and its consequences for protégé states' domestic institutions and foreign policy. I argue that disengagement has both short- and long-run effects for protégé states' policies. In the short-term, disengagement produces a sudden reduction in material inducements and technical assistance. This, in turn, leads to an immediate shift in a protégé state's policy away from the major power's

preferred policies and milieu goals. Over the long-term, once a major powers withdraws, it can no longer encourage, reinforce, or pressure protégés towards its ideal point through non-material means. Without that steady pressure, protégé state behavior gravitates back towards its own ideal point and away from that of its (former) patron—or even towards an alternative major power.

I expect that withdrawal leads to a number of negative political outcomes for the major power's milieu goals and geopolitical interests. Sudden decreases in influence from a liberal major power should lead to both immediate and long-run illiberal shifts in a minor power's democratic and legal institutions, reduced trade with the patron, and dis-alignment with its foreign policies. These effects are likely magnified if the liberal major power's influence is replaced by that of an illiberal power. Conversely, when an illiberal major power loses influence, we should observe movement in the opposite direction: a minor power adopting more liberal domestic reforms and pursuing a more independent foreign policy.

I evaluate these predictions using a Bayesian error correction model (ECM) (Nieman and Peterson 2025). This estimation strategy isolates temporal variation in major power influence and protégé state behavior, offering causal leverage while differencing out static, unobservable unit-level characteristics that may correlate with the outcomes variable. The Bayesian framework, in turn, facilitates direct estimation of long-run effects and their uncertainty. The estimator allows for assessing both short- and long-run effects of changes in major power influence on minor power domestic and foreign policy outcomes—including democratic reform, human rights and legal practices, international economic interactions, and foreign policy alignment—and thus provides a more complete picture of the total impact.

The results support the theoretical predictions across major powers and issue areas. Substantively, they underscore two core points. First, major power disengagement has systematic consequences for protégé states' domestic and foreign policy behavior. Second, political orders differ considerably depending on their leaders' milieu goals. Sudden decreases in US influence, for example, are associated with short- and long-run declines in minor powers'

democratic practices, human rights protections, judicial independence, US trade, and US foreign policy alignment. In contrast, Russian losses of influence lead to minor powers' liberal policy implementation and more independent foreign policies. I find analogous effects for other major powers: retrenchment by liberal powers—Britain and France—undermines the LIO, while diminished Chinese influence leads to greater policy independence.

More broadly, the analysis speaks to central debates in international relations. Examining the micro-effects of major power withdrawal, from a global sample of states across a wide range of policy areas, enables a more theoretically and empirically informed understanding of the macro-effects of the end of major power-led political orders. The implications extend beyond the fate of the LIO to questions of grand strategy, great-power competition, and the future of global order.

Building and Maintaining Political Orders

Recent scholarship on status and relational hierarchies views major powers as sitting atop networks of protégé states. These networks are inherently hierarchical, as the major power has significant policy influence over protégés (Lake 2009; McDonald 2015; Beardsley et al. 2020). Yet this influence is not absolute: within each network, protégés vary in terms of their closeness to the major power and the extent of major-power influence over their policies (Wendt and Friedheim 1995; Nieman 2016*b*; Henke 2018, 2019*a*,*b*; Nedal and Nexon 2019). Thus, the strength of the bilateral hierarchical tie between a major power and each protégé is conceptualized along a continuum, rather than as a dichotomy of protégés and non-protégés.[1] This conceptualization allows for overlapping protégé-networks, for either cross-pressured minor powers, e.g., Turkey, or among aligned major powers (Nieman 2016*b*; Nieman et al. 2021).

These arrangements are mutually beneficial for major powers and their protégés (Morrow

[1]That is, I focus on the degree of connectivity (Hays, Kachi and Franzese 2010; Chyzh and Kaiser 2019) rather than separate communities (Beardsley et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2024).

1991; Lake 2009; Ikenberry 2011), while also shaping the cost-benefit calculations of other states within and across major power-led political orders (Nieman 2016*a*,*b*).[2] Protégés receive economic and security guarantees and benefit from the major power-led political order in the form of lower defense spending, trade costs, and access to the major power's security and economic networks (Lake 2009; Allen, VanDusky-Allen and Flynn 2016; Allen, Flynn and VanDusky-Allen 2017; Allen 2018; Norrlof and Wohlforth 2019).[3] At the micro-level, such benefits increase the resources available to leaders of protege states and help them remain in power (Licht 2010; DiGiuseppe and Shea 2015, 2016).

Major powers benefit both ideationally and materially from their protégé-networks. Ideationally, they gain a platform for promoting their milieu goals: diffusing their preferred norms and rules, such as domestic political, legal, and economic institutions, to their protégés (Fordham and Asal 2007; Ruby and Gibler 2010; Gunitsky 2014; Norrlof 2014; McDonald 2015; Chyzh and Labzina 2018; Martinez Machain 2021). In the long term, this diffusion leads to shared preferences and foreign policy goals (Wolfers 1984; Lanoszka 2013; Mousseau 2019; Resnick 2022). Subsequently, major powers are able to gain legitimacy for their actions when their protégés join their international initiatives (Lake 2009; Henke 2017). Materially, major powers can integrate their economies and security networks with those of their protégés, while leveraging their centrality within these networks to bolster their own power (Norrlof 2014; Norrlof and Wohlforth 2019; Acevedo-Ossa 2025). Recent empirical work further illustrates the substantial benefits of building and maintaining protégé networks. Major powers are able to shape the foreign policies of their protégés with regard to military involvement (Nieman 2016*b*; Henke 2017, 2019*a*,*b*), alliance formation (Allen, Flynn and VanDusky-Allen 2017), and trade policy (Lake 2009; Fordham 2010; Allen 2018).

Such hierarchical relationships also carry costs. Protégé states lose autonomy and are required to contribute to coalitions and organizations that support the major power-led

[2]See Chyzh (2016) for a formal assessment of how changing cost-benefit calculations impact international network participation and domestic institutional practices and outcomes.

[3]They also receive special treatment and are granted greater benefit-of-the-doubt should they break the rules than a non-protégé (Stone 2002, 2004; Nieman 2016*b*; Lipscy and Lee 2019; Ferry and Shea 2025).

political order (Nieman 2016*b*; Norrlof and Wohlforth 2019). Major powers, meanwhile, incur 'governance costs' of maintaining a military capable of global projection, military aid to protégés, a wide-ranging diplomatic presence, as well as defending protégés (Lake 2009; McManus and Nieman 2019).[4] Given these costs, there are limits on the number of protégés a major power can retain or pursue (Gilpin 1981; MacDonald and Parent 2011; Haynes 2015). Even wealthy major powers cannot devote unlimited resources and attention to every actual or potential protégé. Therefore, major powers must prioritize among potential protégés in terms of recruitment and retention.[5]

Political Orders and Protégé Behavior

Major power-led political orders differ in the material and ideational benefits they offer. These differences reflect the milieu goals of the major power (Wolfers 1984; Mousseau 2019) and are associated with the policy levers used to promote or lockin these goals (Wendt and Friedheim 1995; Lanoszka 2013; Chyzh and Labzina 2018).

The LIO promoted by the US, for example, is associated with democratic and legalistic domestic institutions and a free market-based economic model. The US uses international legal institutions to further augment its material and ideological interests (Keohane 1984; Ikenberry 2000, 2011). Conversely, China offers an alternative developmental economic model, aid without domestic reform, and tools to combat domestic opposition (Carmody and Owusu 2007; Greitens and Kardon 2024; Ikenberry 2024). This 'no strings attached' approach not only supports aligned governments and increases China's economic and political reach (An and Wang 2024), but also facilitates China's 'gray zone' activities, such as economic pressure, misinformation, cyber-attacks, and harassment of political opponents (Belo 2022, 279).

[4]Musgrave and Nexon (2018) suggest that major powers may also undertake costly symbolic projects to demonstrate their capabilities and legitimacy.

[5]There are some protégé state features that limit governance costs, e.g. strategic location, access to resources (McManus and Nieman 2019). Geographical concentration among protégé states can also consolidate costs and improve logistical efficiency (Allen, VanDusky-Allen and Flynn 2016; Nieman et al. 2021; Carson, Metz and Poast 2025). Similarly, features like shared regime type, common legal systems, linguistic similarity, and cultural closeness further reduce transaction costs (Leeds 1999; Lai and Reiter 2000; Mousseau 2003; Mitchell and Powell 2011; Liu 2014; Cook and Liu 2016; Ward 2020).

Milieu goals often involve the adoption by the protégé states of the major power's preferred domestic institutions and practices (Simmons and Elkins 2004; Fordham and Asal 2007; Gunitsky 2014; McDonald 2015).[6]

These differences are illustrated by a recent example of Ukrainian agricultural trade with African states. After its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia cynically sought African support by attacking Ukrainian shipping, while arguing that Ukraine could not be counted on for grain deliveries. These attacks prompted a global food price shock and heightened fears of food shortages, particularly in less developed countries (Jia et al. 2024). Russia then pressed African states to back its UN initiatives in exchange for its domestic grain stocks.

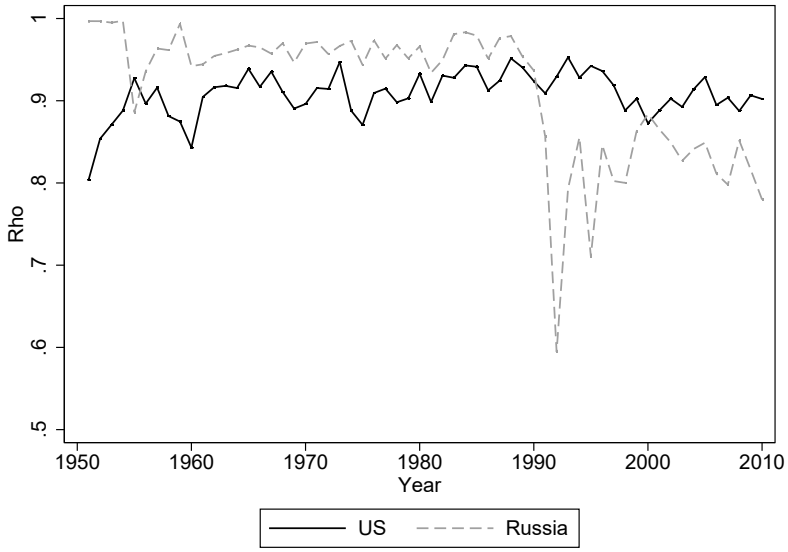
Yet, after Ukraine sank a quarter of the Russian Black Sea fleet and reopened its shipping routes, it did not demand support in exchange for food supplies. Despite Kyiv actively seeking African support—and with roughly half of African states providing support to Russia—it did not link the two issues, honoring pre-existing contracts. Apart from its war-induced economic needs, Ukraine viewed the intentional starvation of a population to coerce its government as morally abhorrent and counter-productive to its aspirations of joining the rule-based LIO.

Major Power Disengagement

Membership in a major power-led political order, and especially the closeness between a major power and a protégé state, vary over time. The two main drivers of this variation are the shifting domestic coalitions within the major power, which affect which specific milieu goals are emphasized (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; Wehner and Thies 2014; Mattes, Leeds and Matsemura 2016; Demirduzen and Thies 2022; Nedal and Schramm 2025; Wehner 2025), and the broader geopolitical environment, which determines the relative costs of participation (Gilpin 1981; Palmer and Morgan 2006; Braumoeller 2008, 2012; Martinez Machain and

[6]Though contradictions between a promoted ideology and its practice often exist (e.g., Pickering and Peceny 2006; Freeman 2023; Rathbun, Parker and Pomeroy 2025).

Figure 1: Annual Year-to-Year Correlation of US- and Russian-Protégé Influence.



Morgan 2013).

In periods of domestic contestation or geopolitical turmoil, a major power may withdraw support from multiple protégé simultaneously. When the turbulence is severe enough, the major power may willingly abandon its own order altogether (Hyde and Saunders 2025; Kang and Gibler 2013, 699). The collapse of the Soviet Union is one such example, as efforts to maintain authority over satellite states became secondary to more pressing domestic crises.

The decline of a political order can also occur more incrementally as strategic retrenchment—reducing its footprint while still maintaining influence in key regions. Examples of retrenchment include the decline of Britain's influence after World War II, France's withdrawal from Southeast Asia in the 1960s and francophone Africa more recently (MacDonald and Parent 2011). Even in these cases, however, retrenchment is often not uniform, but exhibits significant variation in speed (Haynes 2015).

Figure 1 shows how the correlation between the level of major power influence and its one-year lag changes for the US and Russia during the period 1950–2010, using major power influence data from McManus and Nieman (2019).[7] The US annual correlation ranges from

[7]The McManus and Nieman (2019) data are collected at the state-year level for all minor powers for five major powers. These data are described in more detail in the Research Design section.

Table 1: Correlation in Major Power–Protégé Influence

	Level of Influence		Change in Influence	
	One Year Lag	Five Year Lag	One Year Lag	Five Year Lag
US	.91	.85	-.38	-.01
Russia	.91	.82	-.30	-.06

$\rho = .8$ to $\rho = .95$ and is relatively stable from year to year. The Russian annual correlation begins even higher, hovering around $\rho = .95$ with a high of $\rho = .99$, until the collapse of the Soviet Union when it drops precipitously to $\rho = .59$, before climbing back to around $\rho = .83$ during the 2000s.

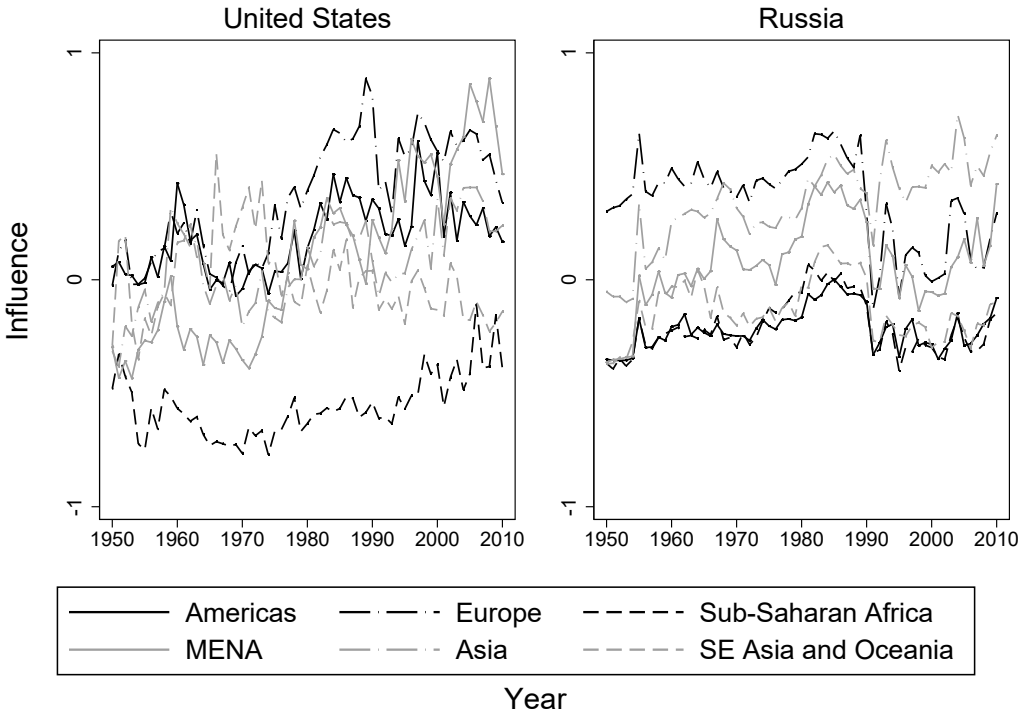
These relatively high aggregate year-to-year correlations, however, mask broader trends within the series. Table 1 reports, on the left, the correlation between the level of major power–protégé influence with its one- and five-year lags, for the US and Russia. For both the US and Russia, the correlation from one year to the next is high, with $\rho = .91$. Five years on, that correlation decreases, to $\rho = .85$ for the US and $\rho = .82$ for Russia.

On the right, the table shows the correlation in the year-to-year *change* in influence and its one- and five-year lags. There is a moderate negative correlation in the year-to-year *change* in influence and its one-year lag. This suggests that any increase (decrease) in influence prompts a slight regression to the mean in the subsequent year. There is no relationship, however, between a change in influence and its five-year lag.

Taken together, the correlations in the change in influence for the two different time periods indicate that, while there may be a slight reversion immediately after an increase or decrease (in the next year), that initial change tends to stabilize to a new equilibrium within a few years. Overall, Table 1 indicates that major powers hold the same degree of influence over states within their protégé-networks most of the time, but that when changes occur, they do so fairly rapidly before stabilizing at a new level.

Major power disengagement can occur even when a major power is strengthening. That is, retrenchment policies can be implemented alongside expansion or maintenance strategies as part of a broader reprioritization of foreign policy interests. The US's frequent efforts to

Figure 2: Average US- and Russian-Protégé Influence by Region.



'pivot to Asia', for example, have involved increased resource allocations to the Indo-Pacific at the expense of Latin America and Western Europe. Foreign policy reprioritization can also be a direct response to geopolitical shocks. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, for example, the US increased engagement with Middle Eastern and African governments to combat terrorism, despite repeated attempts at retrenchment with the former and a previous lack of engagement with the latter. Thus, major powers may choose to disengage from some aligned states, even during periods of expansion and competition.

Figure 2 highlights the pervasiveness of this variation, displaying US influence (left-hand side) and Russian influence (right-hand side) aggregated by region, using the McManus and Nieman (2019) data. As one would expect, the figure shows that US influence is consistently the highest in the Americas, while the region is among the lowest for Russia. A more striking insight is that influence increases in some regions while simultaneously declining in others. US influence in the Middle East, for example, has increased consistently since 1970, while its

influence in Asia has been volatile around a consistent mean. Meanwhile, Russian influence in Europe decreased substantially through the 1990s, at the same time that its influence in Asia increased.

Causal Mechanisms

Whether occurring broadly or in isolated cases, the impact of major power disengagement on minor powers, then, should be the inverse of its gains. That is, if the material and ideological benefits of major power–protégé networks alter domestic and foreign policy behaviors, then their absence should produce the opposite effect. The key mechanism driving this process is ideational drift, which affects the protégé state's policy in both the near- and long-term. Two other mechanisms—material inducements and technical assistance—are likely to manifest in short-term policy changes in response to immediate shocks. Over the longer term, ideological drift can lead to a new status quo equilibrium, where the protégé state either moves into a lower position within the major power's network, becomes non-aligned, or shifts to an alternative major power network.

States' preferences change over time (Bueno de Mesquita 1981; Bailey, Strezhnev and Voeten 2017). While most theorizing has treated this variation as driven by domestic factors, such as changes in the ruling coalition (Colgan 2013; Mattes, Leeds and Carroll 2015; Smith 2016; Leeds and Mattes 2022; Li and Zha 2024) or domestic institutions (Mousseau 2003, 2019; Colgan and Weeks 2015), there is also evidence that external actors can shape preferences. Bearce and Bondanella (2007) show, for instance, that shared memberships in international organizations lead to preference convergence, a result that holds even after accounting for possible selection effects (Egel and Obermeier 2023).

Another driver of state preferences is education. Spilimbergo (2009) and Atkinson (2010) find that international student flows are associated with democratization and improved human rights. Weymouth and MacPherson (2012) show that states with more US-trained economists are more likely to liberalize trade. Similar results hold at the elite-level: Ruby

and Gibler (2010) and Martinez Machain (2021) find that states whose military officers train in the US have improved human rights practices,[8] Nieman and Allamong (2023) show that leaders educated at Anglo-American universities are more likely to implement a wide variety of liberal political and economic reforms. As universities within major powers are the most likely to host foreign students, it is their embedded preferences and values that are most likely to be transmitted.

Other forms of soft power can also affect state preferences. Direct contact with foreign representatives, such as non-invasion troops and aid workers, offer a micro-level pathway (Allen et al. 2020, 2023; Truckos 2021), while external actors also undertake efforts to sway the public or government officials at the macro-level through humanitarian and financial assistance programs (Truckos 2021; Blair, Marty and Roessler 2022; An and Wang 2024) and media manipulation (Jenks 2006; Brady 2015; Mader, Marinov and Schoen 2022). Finally, learning and emulation from perceived success can result in preference convergence (Simmons and Elkins 2004; Simmons, Dobbin and Garrett 2006). Each of these avenues encourages protégé states to adopt a major power's preferences as their own, offering both short- and long-term convergence.[9]

These soft power processes, however, require a sustained and committed effort by a major power to reinforce relevant norms and shape them to its preferred form. The observed policy outcomes of a protégé state are the result of a bargain between its own preferred policies and pressure from the major power (Lake 2009; Kang 2010; Ikenberry 2011; Nieman 2016*b*). The removal (or reduction) of support signals reduced interest and pressure from the major power, causing outcomes to reflect more of the protégé state's preferences and to drift away from those of the patron.[10] For example, the slowdown of Soviet military assistance to China

[8]Though see Martinez Machain (2024).

[9]Major powers may also pursue more coercive options in an attempt to change another state's preferences over the short- and long-term, such as foreign imposed regime change (Lo, Hashimoto and Reiter 2008) or election interference (Levin 2016, 2020). Such efforts, however, may have a destabilizing, or even countervailing, effect (Downes and O'Rourke 2016; Chyzh and Labzina 2018; Yetim 2023, 2025).

[10]This logic is similar to how state economic behavior changes in more competitive environments. For example, a country's economic policy and judicial independence are affected by those of their economic competitors and partners (Simmons and Elkins 2004; Hays 2009; Chyzh 2017).

during the late stages of the Korean War (Lüthi 2008, 36), combined with ideological shifts stemming from Khrushchev's "de-Stalinization" program (Lin 2024, 104-107), contributed to a splintering within the Communist sphere. By 1959, China adjusted its trade policy, suspending supply contracts with Moscow and increasing trade with Japan and Western Europe (Lüthi 2008, 174-77), despite Beijing continuing to hold anti-capitalist and anti-US policy preferences (Beylerian and Canivet 1997; Thies and Nieman 2017, 118–127)

In the short run, a patron may secure compliance through material inducements or technical assistance. Previous research shows that inducements such as aid and favorable trade deals can win the patron support in international institutions, participation in its military coalitions, and provide strategic access (Powers 2004; Palmer and Morgan 2006; Carter and Stone 2015; Henke 2017, 2019*b*). At the same time, even ideologically aligned protégés may fail to achieve the patron's preferred policy outcomes without technical assistance. For example, DiGiuseppe and Shea (2022) show that close ties to the US can strengthen state capacity and reduce the risk of civil war onset.[11] They argue that the US provides logistical and technical training for bureaucracies and law enforcement—e.g., intellectual property protection training for police officers, prosecutors, and judges—to build administrative capacity (DiGiuseppe and Shea 2022, 771).[12] Similarly, Ruby and Gibler (2010) show that US military training of foreign officers promotes the development of civilian control of security forces in recipient states and leads to subsequent improvements in human rights conditions.

Major power assistance, of course, may also take more coercive forms. Russia, for example, aided Yanukovych's government in Ukraine by providing intelligence and security personnel to help repress Maidan protesters (Chyzh and Labzina 2018). Regardless of the specific form, a recipient's state capacity is likely to erode, at least in the short-term, when major power technical and material assistance ceases.

[11]Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) similarly argue that the withdrawal of major power assistance at the end of the Cold War reduced the capacity of both governments and rebel groups, prompting shifts in their military strategies.

[12]The logic that differences in major power influence generate variation in state capacity is similar to that found with differences in colonially imposed bureaucratic and administrative practices (Davie 2000; Burset 2023; Vogler 2023).

These complementary mechanisms lead to the two following expectations:

H_1: A sudden withdrawal of major power influence results in an immediate shift away from that major power's milieu goals and foreign policy positions by the protégé state.

H_2: A sudden withdrawal of major power influence results in a protégé state's long-term divergence from that major power's milieu goals and foreign policy positions.

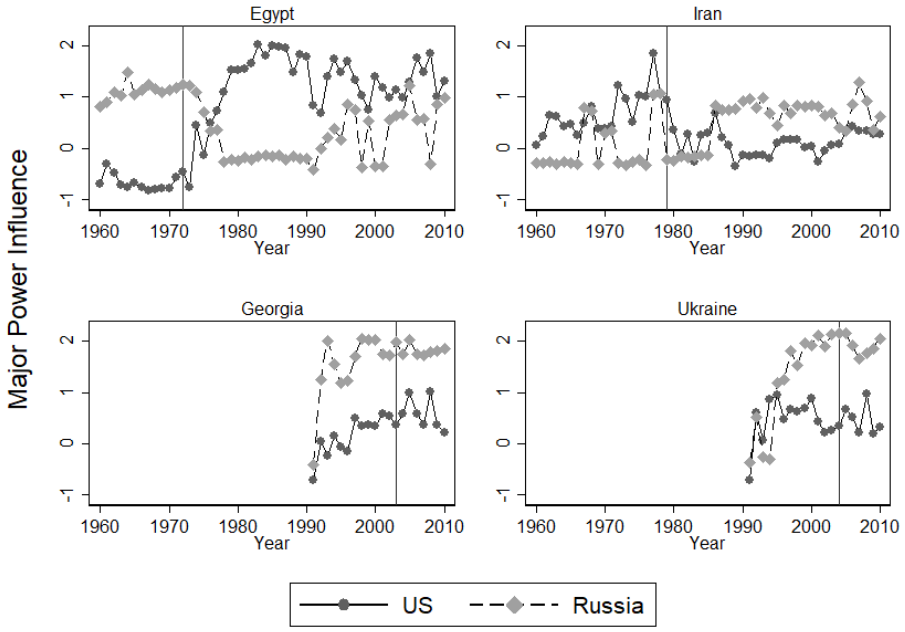
Finally, a protégé state's policies may also shift when, after losing support from one major power, it turns to an alternative patron. The milieu goals and policies promoted in the alternative political order may align with those of the protégé's previous order. In such cases, the protégé's domestic and foreign policies may undergo an even more substantial transformation.

This process, however, is relatively uncommon in practice. While Cold War fears and color revolutions capture the popular imagination, there are few instances in which a decrease in alignment with one major power is matched by an immediate increase in alignment with another. Using the McManus and Nieman (2019) data, the correlation between *US Influence* and *Russia Influence* for protégés from 1950–2010 is $r = -.07$. This reflects two factors: first, many minor powers remain unaligned; second, a loss of engagement with one major power does not necessarily imply improved relations with an alternative one.[13]

Even high-profile cases—such as al-Sadat's Egypt severing its alliance with the USSR in 1972, the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution, and Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution—did not lead to sudden changes in major power influence or immediate transitions from one major power-led political order to another. As shown in Figure 3, Egypt and Iran shifted from Soviet to US influence over the course of roughly half a decade, while Russia continued to exert influence in Georgia and Ukraine even after the Color Revolutions, with only modest increases in US influence that never approached Russian levels. These cases illustrate that minor powers rarely switch major power-led political orders quickly; instead, the loss of major power influence typically leads them either to remain non-aligned or to

[13]If the US- and Russia-led political orders were reverse images, the correlation would be strongly negative, rather than close to zero.

Figure 3: US and Russian Influence in Egypt, Iran, Georgia, and Ukraine.



Note: The vertical line indicates the timing of a major policy change. From top left to bottom right: al-Sadat's withdraw from Soviet treaty, Iranian Revolution, Georgia's Rose Revolution, and Ukraine's Orange Revolution.

enter an alternative political order only gradually.[14]

Instead of an instantaneous effect, protégé realignment driven by major power competition is more likely to unfold gradually, over several years. A decrease in one major power's influence is typically followed by an increase in an alternative major power only after some delay. Thus, when a protégé state moves from a political order led by a liberal major power to one led by an illiberal major power—or vice versa—the overall policy shift is greater: the loss of one patron's influence is compounded by the rival's subsequent gain. In other words, the long-run effects of changes in influence from different major powers are largely independent of one another. This leads to the following expectation:

[14]Even in cases such as the Cuban Revolution—where the fall of the Batista regime and rise of Castro coincided with a transition from the US political order to the Soviet one—the shifts, though in close time, were neither instantaneous nor fully simultaneous (Stodden and Weiss 2016). Castro initially retained several moderate and liberal officials, emphasized the need for continued positive economic relations with the US, and described both the USSR and the US as equally imperialist. His relations with the Soviets remained cold through much of 1959. Only after the Soviet Technical and Agricultural Exposition was moved to Havana did Cuba fully shift into the USSR's protégé network (Stodden and Weiss 2016, 82–87).

H_3: A sudden increase in major power influence results in a protégé state's long-term shift towards that major power's milieu goals and foreign policy positions, even after controlling for changes in influence from alternative major powers.

Research Design

I evaluate these hypotheses using annual data on major power influence for all minor powers from 1950–2010. Specifically, I use data from McManus and Nieman (2019) that capture security relationships between major and minor powers. The measure uses several observable signals—e.g., alliances, troop deployments, joint military exercises—to generate continuous scores for the latent degree of major power influence. Major powers are defined as the US, Russia, China, UK, and France, with all other states treated as minor powers.

I examine how changes in major power influence over a protégé correspond to changes across a range of that minor power's domestic and foreign policies: democratic reform, human rights protections, judicial independence, trade openness, bilateral trade share with the major power, and foreign policy alignment. For domestic institutions and policies, I expect changes in major power influence to align with shifts in the protégé towards the patron's milieu goals, e.g., towards liberalism for the US, UK, and France and towards illiberalism for Russia and China (Wolfers 1984; McDonald 2015; Martinez Machain 2021; Nieman and Allamong 2023).

Methodology

I use a Bayesian ECM to evaluate the hypotheses. An ECM allows me to focus on the dynamic properties of the relationship between changes in major power influence and minor power's policy outcomes (De Boef and Keele 2008; Webb, Linn and Lebo 2020). A Bayesian framework, meanwhile, aids in the construction of estimates of the long-run effects, particularly their associated uncertainty (Nieman and Peterson 2025).

The ECM is specified as:

$$\Delta y_t = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 y_{t-1} + \beta_0 \Delta x_t + \beta_1 x_{t-1} + \epsilon_t, \tag{1}$$

where the first difference of y_t is determined by a constant, α_0, the lagged value of y_{t-1}, the first difference and lagged value of x_t, and the stochastic term, ϵ_t. The error correction parameter, α_1, accounts for how fast the system (i.e., the time series of y and x) returns to equilibrium after a shock.[15] The theoretical range of this parameter is $0 > \alpha_1 > -2$, where the midpoint, $\alpha = -1$, implies an immediate return to equilibrium, whereas values further away (towards either bound) imply a slower return.[16]

The instantaneous effect of a change in x_t is captured by β_0, while the impact of the lagged level of x is represented by β_1. The latter identifies the shock to the equilibrium that will then reverberate through the lagged dependent variable until the system returns to equilibrium. The long-run effect of a change in x on y, then, needs to account for the total effect of a change in x across multiple time periods. This is calculated from the long-run multiplier (LRM), which is the initial shock divided by the error correction rate, or $-\frac{\beta_1}{\alpha_1}$.

While recovering an estimate of the long-run effect is relatively straightforward, calculating its uncertainty is more complicated, as there is not a direct estimate of the standard error of the LRM (De Boef and Keele 2008, 191–192). Since the LRM is a ratio of coefficients, the formula for the variance of the ratio of coefficients with known variances can be used. The formula is:

$$Var(\frac{a}{b}) = (\frac{1}{b^2})Var(a) + (\frac{a^2}{b^4})Var(b) - 2(\frac{a}{b^3})Cov(a,b). \tag{2}$$

[15]The ECM from Equation 1 is mathematically equivalent to an auto-distributed lag (ADL) model specified as $y_t = \alpha_0' + \alpha_1' y_{t-1} + \beta_0' x_t + \beta_1' x_{t-1} + \epsilon_t$, where y is measured in level terms, x_t and x_{t-1} are measured as the level of the independent variable at time t and $t-1$. The relationship between the key coefficients on y_{t-1}, x_t, and x_{t-1} for the ECM and ADL are: $\alpha_1 = \alpha_1' - 1$, $\beta_0 = \beta_0'$, $\beta_1 = \beta_0' + \beta_1'$. See Marriott and Newbold (1998, 327–328), De Boef and Keele (2008, 189–190), and Keele, Linn and Webb (2016).

[16]An error correction rate where $0 > \alpha_1 > -1$ implies a steady return to the long-run equilibrium, whereas a rate of $-1 > \alpha_1 > -2$ indicates an oscillating return. Values of either $\alpha_1 > 0$ or $\alpha_1 < -2$ mean that the relationship is explosive and no long-run equilibrium exists. See Keele, Linn and Webb (2016, 34–35).

There are two common approaches to approximate the variance of this ratio. The first is to calculate the LRM from an ECM and use the Bewley transformation. The second approach is to apply the Delta method, which expands a random variable—in this case the LRM—via a Taylor series. While these estimates of the standard error are *asymptotically* accurate, they may not be as appropriate for relatively short series, or when the dynamic properties of the data exhibit high autocorrelation or are unknown (Webb, Linn and Lebo 2019, 2020; Nieman and Peterson 2025). The data used in the current study exhibit both characteristics: a short time series and a high autocorrelation for the key variables. As a result, the approximations of the variance of the LRM can lead to standard errors that do not conform with the theoretical range of the point estimates, and possibly take on nonsensical values (Nieman and Peterson 2025).[17]

I overcome these issues by applying a Bayesian technique developed by Nieman and Peterson (2025) that directly estimates the LRM and its uncertainty. The technique uses a semi-informed prior on the coefficient of the lagged dependent variable and estimates the posterior distribution from Markov chain Monte Carlos (MCMC). The semi-informed prior is specified as a uniform distribution between -2 and 0. This prior constrains the variance of the dynamic relationship to its theoretical bounds, but gives an equal weight to the values between these bounds so as to not impact the point estimate.

Estimation via MCMC takes advantage of the well-known property to estimate and summarize the distribution of functions of parameters (e.g., ratios of coefficients) *directly* from the posterior distribution (Gelfand et al. 1990; Murr, Traunmüller and Gill 2023). This eschews the need for asymptotic assumptions: once a Markov chain has converged, each individual MCMC simulation draws parameter estimates from the joint probability distribution and, since the LRM is a ratio of coefficients, then it, too, is drawn from the posterior distribution.[18] The combination of the semi-informed prior and MCMC estimation

[17]If the confidence interval for α_1 nears or exceeds 0, then the denominator of the LRM can take very small, or even negative, values. In that case, the estimation of the variance of the LRM will be "mildly explosive" Hill and Peng (2014, 293). If $\alpha_1 = 0$, the variance will be undefined.

[18]The quality of inference for sampling-based methods, such as MCMCs, relies on the *number of samples*

provides direct and theoretically-informed estimates of the long-run effects of a change in the independent variable.

The Bayesian ECM is specified as in Eq 1, with a semi-informed prior of $\mathcal{U}(-2, 0)$ on the coefficient for lagged y, diffuse priors of $\mathcal{N}(0, 20)$ for the constant and the coefficients associated with Δx_t and x_{t-1}, and a prior for the variance distributed $\mathcal{G}(1, 10)$. The specific size of the MCMC sample, number of burn-in iterations, and degree of thinning vary based on diagnostics for the specific model.[19]

Major Power Influence

In order to capture the degree of *major power influence* directed towards a minor power, I use the data from McManus and Nieman (2019). These scores are measured annually for each minor power, from each major power, for the period from 1950 to 2010. The data are derived by a Bayesian latent measurement model to measure the level of major power support based on seven indicators: alliances, nuclear and troop deployments, arms transfers, military exercises, and leadership visits and statements.[20] The measurement model captures the latent level of influence by estimating the relative importance of the individual signals based on their frequency and correlation, and calculates the total support for each minor power based on the relative weights of the observed signals they receive.

These indicators are valuable in measuring major power influence, as they necessitate mutual intent on both the sender and receiver. That is, each indicator requires more than just intention on the part of the major power but also a degree of agreement and subordination on the part of the recipient protégé state, reflecting the security–autonomy tradeoff (Morrow 1991; Lake 2009; Johnson 2015). Moreover, because the sender can readily suspend these actions, they are especially well suited for examining the effects of sudden major power

taken, rather than the *size of the sample* (McNeish 2016).

[19]The minimum number of MCMCs are 50,000 after a burn-in of 250,000 and thinning of 50.

[20]The indicator data on alliances are from Gibler (2009), nuclear deployments from (Fuhrmann and Sechser 2014), troop deployments from Braithwaite (2015), arms transfers from SIPRI (2018), military exercises from D'Orazio (2016), and leadership visits and statements from McManus (2018).

disengagement on protégé outcomes.

The *major power influence* measure offers other advantages over alternative measures. First, rather than relying on just one or two indicators, the latent measure accounts for a variety of potential foreign policy tools at a major power's disposal, while weighing each indicator's relative contribution. Next, by incorporating several indicators, the measure can account for foreign policy substitution among foreign policy tools (Most and Starr 1989; Palmer and Morgan 2006; Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka and Cooper 2016). This is important, as some major powers use different indicators for democratic and autocratic protégés (McManus and Yarhi-Milo 2017). Finally, rather than assuming that all indicators convey the same informational value when used by different major powers, McManus and Nieman (2019) account for heterogeneity in the strength of individual gestures across major powers.

Dependent Variables

I evaluate the hypotheses using several dependent variables. This strategy allows me to assess whether the impact of changes in major power influence is consistent across a range of domestic and foreign policy outcomes.

Democracy is operationalized using the polyarchy score from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (Pemstein and von Römer 2025). The polyarchy measure is an index that weighs various indicators of electoral processes and government constraints. The resulting measure ranges from 0 and 1.

I also explore other domestic legal institutions, specifically *human rights protections* and *judicial independence*. Human rights protections capture the level of physical integrity rights protections using data from Fariss (2014). Fariss uses a measurement model to estimate latent human rights protections over time while accounting for changing standards of accountability. The data range between -3.11 and 4.67. Judicial independence is a latent variable of de facto independence in the rule of law based on a measurement model developed by Linzer and Staton (2015). This measure also ranges from 0 to 1.

Next, I account for *trade openness* and *major power share of trade* to capture international economic policy. Trade openness captures how dependent an economy is on international economic processes and is measured as a state's total trade divided by GDP. Major power trade share captures the share of a country's total trade conducted with the specified major power. These are measured using trade data from Barbieri, Keshk and Pollins (2009) and GDP from Gleditsch (2002).

Finally, *foreign policy alignment* is operationalized in two ways. First, I use an alliance-based measure of foreign policy similarity. The assumption is that states with less diversified alliance portfolios, such as those where most or all allies share an alliance with the same major power, are more reliant on that major power and more aligned in their foreign policy. Conversely, a more diversified alliance portfolio, with a greater share of alliances that are independent of the major power, is less aligned (Bueno de Mesquita 1981; Lake 2009). The specific variable employed is Häge's (2011) kappa measure.

Second, I use a measure based on UN General Assembly voting agreement. While alliances capture broad, structural dimensions of foreign policy alignment, UN voting accounts for more issue-specific and flexible aspects. I operationalize this measure as the percentange agreement with a specific major power and obtain UN voting data from Bailey, Strezhnev and Voeten (2017). Together, these two measures capture the most common dimensions of foreign policy similarity (Signorino and Ritter 1999; Gallop and Minhas 2021).

Controls

I also include several statistical controls. I include *GDP/capita* and *external threat* in all models. GDP/capita is from Gleditsch (2002). External threat is a continuous latent measure that captures the probability of a violent militarized dispute given a state's geopolitical neighborhood and is obtained from Nieman and Gibler (2023). Models for human rights protections include controls for the logged number of *protests*, logged *population*, and an indicator for a new or ongoing *civil war*. The first two variables are from Banks and Wilson

(2010) and the last variable from Dixon and Sarkees (2016). Models for trade openness, major power trade share, and foreign policy alignment include controls for GDP, obtained from (Gleditsch 2002). The trade models also account for human rights protections. Lastly, all models include democracy (except when it is the outcome of interest).

Since the ECM focuses on the first difference of the dependent variables, rather than their levels, time-invariant cross-sectional factors (e.g., former colonial status) or unit-level unobservables, which are often modeled with dummy variables or country fixed effects, are effectively differenced out of the estimated equations. The ECM thus enhances causal leverage by isolating the impact of temporal changes on the variables of interest.

Results

I evaluate the hypotheses across several domestic and foreign policy domains. The results are presented in two parts: the top of each table reports the short-term effects of changes in major power influence, while the bottom of each table displays the long-term effects. For each, I summarize the posterior distribution from the MCMCs by reporting the median value as a point estimate and its 95 percent credible interval in braces.

Democratic institutions. Table 2 reports the impact of changes in US and Russian influence on a protégé state's level of democracy. Model 1 focuses on the impact of changes in US influence: I start with the instantaneous effect, which is captured by the coefficient on Δ*US Influence*. The coefficient for Δ*US Influence* is positive and its 95 percent credible interval excludes zero, indicating a positive effect. In fact, the effect is positive in over 99.9% of the draws from the posterior, indicating an extremely high level of confidence in a positive effect. Of course, a positive effect for Δ*US Influence* implies that the level of democracy increases when there is a year-to-year increase in US influence; the inverse, then, also holds: a decrease in US influence leads to a decrease in a protégé's democracy level. This offers initial support for Hypothesis 1.

Table 2: Effect of Changes in Major Power Influence on Protégé Democracy.

Sample:	All Regimes	Mixed Regimes	Mixed Regimes
Δ US Influence	.005	.008	.008
	[.002, .008]	[.003, .012]	[.003, .012]
US Influence$_{t-1}$	.004	.008	.007
	[.002, .005]	[.005, .010]	[.005, .010]
Δ Russia Influence			-.005
			[-.011, .001]
Russia Influence$_{t-1}$			-.003
			[-.005, -.001]
Democracy$_{t-1}$	-.017	-.075	-.080
	[-.021, -.012]	[-.086, -.065]	[-.089, -.069]
Long-run Effect			
US Influence	.215	.102	.090
	[.122, .315]	[.068, .138]	[.058, .124]
Russia Influence			-.042
			[-.069, -.016]
Controls	Y	Y	Y
Number of Observations	7945	4154	4154

Note: Median and 95% credible interval (in braces) summarize the posterior distribution estimated from Bayesian error correction model with 50,000 MCMCs after 250,000 burn-in and thinning of 50. Control variables are *GDP/capita* and *external threat*. Long-run effects are constructed from the MCMCs for the ratio of parameters for the change and lag of major power over the lagged dependent variable (long-run multiplier: $-\frac{\beta_1}{\alpha_1}$).

The long-term impact of changes in US influence is constructed from the ratio of the coefficients on *US Influence*$_{t-1}$ and *Democracy*$_{t-1}$. The former represents the initial shock to the equilibrium and the latter captures the error correction rate, that is, the speed in which the system returns to equilibrium after a shock. This ratio is the LRM, which represents the total effect of a change in the independent variable.

The coefficient on *US Influence*$_{t-1}$ is positive and so is its 95 percent credible interval; here, more than 99.9% of draws from the posterior are positive. The coefficient for *Democracy*$_{t-1}$ is very close to zero—the upper limit—with $\alpha = -.017$, which indicates a very slow return to equilibrium. In other words, the variable is largely determined by its own prior values and exhibits a high degree of autocorrelation.[21] As such, a shock in influence at time t will impact future values of the outcome for periods far beyond the initial

[21] An estimate of $\alpha_1 = -.017$ on the lagged dependent variable from an ECM is equivalent to an estimate of $\alpha_1' = .983$ on the lagged dependent variable from an ADL model in fn 15.

change.

As noted above, an advantage of the Bayesian approach in the context of an ECM is its estimation of the long-run effects and their variance, these quantities are obtained directly from the MCMC draws (Gelfand et al. 1990; Murr, Traunmüller and Gill 2023). There is clear evidence that a change in US influence has a positive long-run impact on a protégé state's level of democracy: the median estimate is a .215 increase in the level of democracy and the entirety of the 95 percent credible interval is above zero, with a lower bound of .126 and an upper bound of .321, and over 99.9% of draws above zero. A decrease in US influence, of course, would translate to the inverse of these figures. Substantively, this is a shift in the quality of democracy equivalent to the difference between the single party rule Mexico of 1992 and its competitive democratic 2008 version.

The slight asymmetry in the Bayesian credible intervals reflects the slow error correction rate: as the denominator (α_1) of the long-run multiplier nears zero, the impact of the numerator (β_1) is significantly heightened and skews the credible interval. This asymmetry highlights the value of the Bayesian ECM with a semi-informed prior on the coefficient on the dependent variable when their is a high degree of autocorrelation and the time series is short—the maximum length of a time series for any country in the sample is 61 observations.

Model 2 repeats the analysis but restricts the sample to mixed regimes only.[22] The results are similar: the coefficients for Δ*US Influence* and *US Influence*$_{t-1}$ are positive while the parameter on *Democracy*$_{t-1}$ is slightly lower at $\alpha_1 = -.075$ but still indicates that contemporaneous shocks persist through strong temporal autocorrelation. Though the short-run effect sizes of a change in US influence and the previous level of influence are slightly greater than in the full sample, the reduction in the size of the error correction rate is large enough to reduce the long-run effect roughly in half. Substantively, this smaller effect size is akin to a difference between Mexico in 1992 to its late 1990s emerging democracy version.

Model 3 also examines mixed regimes, but adds Δ*Russia Influence* and *Russia*

[22]States are coded as mixed regimes if their value on V-Dem's polyarchy measure ranges between .15 and .65. This range excludes consolidated democracies and autocracies.

Influence$_{t-1}$ to account for Russia as an illiberal alternative major power. The results for Δ*US Influence* and *US Influence*$_{t-1}$ are the same as the previous model; both have positive effects. In contrast, Δ*Russia Influence* and *Russia Influence*$_{t-1}$ are each negative, though about half the size of the US effects. The 95 percent credible interval for Δ*Russia Influence* includes zero—ranging from -.011 to .001—though it is negative in approximately 94% of draws, giving relatively high confidence in inferring a negative effect. *Russia Influence*$_{t-1}$ is also negative and the credible interval excludes zero. The error correction rate is similar to that of Model 2, with high autocorrelation between periods. The long-run effect for a change in US influence is similar to the previous model. The long-run effect for a positive change in Russian influence is a reduction of democracy level of .04, with a positive estimate in over 99.9% of draws from the posterior.

Legal institutions. Table 3 displays the results for four models comparing the impact of changes in US and Russian influence on the domestic legal institutional practices of human rights protections (Models 1 and 2) and rule of law (Models 3 and 4). Models 1 and 3 report the changes in US influence, the lagged level of US influence, and the error correction rate (lagged dependent variable). Model 2 replicates the first model while adding the first difference and lagged value of Russian influence.

Models 1 and 2 show little evidence of an instantaneous effect on human rights protections from changes by either major power. Both models, however, find that the lagged level of major power influence, and the lagged level of human rights protections, have significant effects. Both US and Russian influence are positive, while the error correction rate is close to zero, suggesting that changes in major power influence feed back through the dependent variable to produce long-run effects. The results bear this out: changes in US influence are positively associated with relatively large long-run effects. Surprisingly, changes in Russian influence yield directionally similar, albeit smaller, long-run effects.

A possible explanation for this unexpected result is that the baseline level of human rights protections for protégé states with relatively high US influence is greater than that of Russia's

Table 3: Effect of Changes in Major Power Influence on Protégé Domestic Practices

	Human Rights Protections		Judicial Independence	
Δ US Influence	.001	.004	.000	.001
	[-.008, .010]	[-.003, .010]	[-.001, .002]	[-.001, .002]
US Influence$_{t-1}$	.007	.011	.001	.001
	[.003, .012]	[.007, .015]	[.001, .002]	[.000, .002]
Δ Russia Influence		.001		-.002
		[-.010, .011]		[-.003, -.000]
Russia Influence$_{t-1}$		.009		-.000
		[.004, .013]		[-.001, .001]
Human Rights Protections$_{t-1}$	-.019	-.020	-.010	-.009
	[-.023, -.015]	[-.023, -.016]	[-.012, -.008]	[-.012, -.006]
Long-run Effect				
US Influence	.387	.542	.120	.121
	[.148, .645]	[.341, .759]	[.050, .212]	[.046, .221]
Russia Influence		.435		-.009
		[.200, .692]		[-.087, .067]
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y
Number of Observations	7738	7738	7693	7693

Note: Median and 95% credible interval (in braces) summarize the posterior distribution estimated from Bayesian error correction model with 50,000 MCMCs after 500,000 burn-in and thinning of 100 for models 1 and 2, and 100,000 MCMCs after 1,500,000 burn-in and thinning of 200 for models 3 and 4. Control variables are: *GDP/capita*, *democracy*, *protests*, *civil war*, *external threat*, and population. Long-run effects are constructed from the MCMCs for the ratio of parameters for the change and lag of major power over the lagged dependent variable (long-run multiplier: $-\frac{\beta_1}{\alpha_1}$).

protégés. Since an ECM looks at changes in, rather than levels of, the dependent variable, it may be the case that greater major power influence contributes to enhanced stability which then prevents the worst levels of human rights violations, rather than increases in major power influence directly improving human rights across the board. In support of this interpretation, the conditional mean for human rights of a country with a US influence score of .5 or greater (e.g., conducting a joint military exercise and receiving arms transfers) is just under one standard deviation higher than that for a country with a Russia influence score of .5 or greater. This descriptive analysis—combined with the results in Table 3—suggests that while there are clear baseline differences in human rights practices between US and Russian protégé states, decreases in major power influence worsen human rights conditions.

Models 3 and 4 demonstrate that while there is little evidence of a short-term impact of US influence on judicial independence, there is a positive relationship between the lagged level of US influence and judicial independence. The reverse holds for Russian influence:

there is a small negative relationship between changes in influence and judicial independence, but there is no evidence of a relationship between the lagged level of influence and judicial independence. The error correction rate is again close to zero, indicating strong feedback processes. The long-run effect of increases (decreases) in US influence is relatively large gains (losses) in judicial independence. There is little evidence, however, for an impact of Russian influence on long-term judicial independence.

International economic policies. Next, I turn to the impact of major power influence on trade openness and US trade share, in Table 4. Trade openness captures the liberal principle of trade in general, whereas US trade share measures the specific benefits for one major power. I focus on US trade share, rather than Russian trade share, owing to a lack of reliable data during the Soviet period.

Each of the models estimates an error correction rate near zero, indicating significant autocorrelation in the time series. Models 1 and 2 show limited evidence, however of a short- or long-run impact of changes in major power influence on trade openness.[23] Models 3 and 4, however, show a much clearer pattern: the US trade share is significantly impacted. As the dependent variable is logged, the coefficient can be interpreted as an approximate percent change in the outcome. A one-unit increase in US influence (one-unit decrease) is associated with roughly a 4 percent increase (4 percent decrease) in US trade share. Similarly, an increase (decrease) in Russian influence leads to an approximate 2.5 percent decrease (2.5 percent increase) in US trade share. Taken together, Table 4 provides little evidence that a decrease in US influence changes a minor power's overall reliance on trade, but does reduce the share of that trade conducted with the US.

To calculate the long-run impact of a change in US influence on the US share of a minor power's trade, the simple percent-change approximation no longer suffices; instead, the formula $\%\Delta y = 100[\exp(\beta) - 1]$ is used. Applied to Model 3, a one-unit increase in US influence is associated with an approximate 44 percent increase in US trade share. The

[23]The long-run impact of the LRM is negative in 88.3% and 85.1% of draws, respectively.

Table 4: Effect of Changes in Major Power Influence on Protégé Trade.

Dependent Variable:	$\frac{\text{Trade}}{\text{GDP}}$	$\frac{\text{Trade}}{\text{GDP}}$	$\frac{\text{US Trade}}{\text{Total Trade}}$	$\frac{\text{US Trade}}{\text{Total Trade}}$
Δ US Influence	.004	.004	.041	.039
	[-.006, .014]	[-.007, .014]	[.019, .065]	[.014, .063]
US Influence$_{t-1}$	-.004	-.003	.026	.017
	[-.010, .002]	[-.010, .003]	[.012, .041]	[.002, .033]
Δ Russia Influence		-.008		-.027
		[-.020, .004]		[-.056, .003]
Russia Influence$_{t-1}$		.000		-.051
		[-.007, .008]		[-.066, -.037]
Dependent Variable$_{t-1}$	-.038	-.038	-.072	-.081
	[-.045, -.031]	[-.045, -.031]	[-.080, -.063]	[-.090, -.072]
Long-run Effect				
US Influence	-.100	-.090	.368	.212
	[-.270, .064]	[-.266, .081]	[.171, .569]	[.030, .408]
Russia Influence		.004		-.631
		[-.200, .202]		[-.805, -.461]
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y
Number of Observations	6086	6086	7383	7383

Note: Median and 95% credible interval (in braces) summarize the posterior distribution estimated from Bayesian error correction model with 50,000 MCMCs after 100,000 burn-in and thinning of 50. Control variables are: *GDP/capita*, *GDP*, *democracy*, *human rights protections*, and *external threat*. All controls include their difference and one-year lag. Long-run effects are constructed from the MCMCs for the ratio of parameters for the change and lag of major power over the lagged dependent variable (long-run multiplier: $-\frac{\beta_1}{\alpha_1}$).

inverse, a decrease in US influence, however, would have a negative coefficient, producing a 31 percent decrease in the US share of trade. Model 4 reveals a result in the same direction, but smaller in scope. Here, a one-unit increase in US influence would lead to a 24 percent increase in the US share of trade over the long-run, while a similarly sized decrease would produce a reduction in US share of total trade of roughly 19 percent. An increase in Russian influence would have a long-run effect of reducing the US trade share by nearly 47 percent.

Foreign policy alignment. Finally, Table 5 examines the impact of a change in US influence on a minor power's foreign policy alignment with the US and with Russia. Protégé state foreign policy positions appear fairly stable over time; the error correction rates indicate high temporal dependence, though the coefficients for Russian alignment (Models 3 and 4) are lower than those for US alignment (Models 1 and 2). Models 1 and 2 focus on US foreign policy alignment, with the former using an alliance-based measure and the latter based on UN voting. Both show that increases in US influence correspond to increased alignment in

Table 5: Effect of Changes in Major Power Influence on Protégé Foreign Policy Alignment.

Dependent Variable:	US Align. (Alliance)	US Align. (UN Votes)	Russia Align. (Alliance)	Russia Align. (UN Votes)
Δ US Influence	.001	.012	.000	.000
	[-.001, .003]	[.006, .017]	[-.003, .003]	[-.006, .007]
US Influence$_{t-1}$	.001	.003	-.001	-.002
	[.000, .003]	[-.001, .006]	[-.003, .001]	[-.006, .002]
Δ Russia Influence	-.004	-.009	.032	.032
	[-.006, -.001]	[-.016, -.002]	[.028, .035]	[.024, .039]
Russia Influence$_{t-1}$	-.000	-.005	.011	.017
	[-.001, .001]	[-.009, -.002]	[.009, .014]	.013, .020
Dependent Variable$_{t-1}$	-.008	-.147	-.061	-.176
	[-.011, -.005]	[-.157, -.136]	[-.068, -.055]	[-.188, -.165]
Long-run Effect				
US Influence	.163	.018	-.014	-.011
	[-.003, .330]	[-.007, .042]	[-.046, .016]	[-.032, .011]
Russia Influence	-.050	-.037	.186	.095
	[-.203, .104]	[-.060, -.014]	[.156, .216]	[.074, .116]
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y
Number of Observations	7945	7224	7945	7222

Note: Median and 95% credible interval (in braces) summarize the posterior distribution estimated from Bayesian error correction model with 40,000 MCMCs after 75,000 burn-in and thinning of 50. Control variables are: *GDP/capita*, *GDP*, *democracy*, and *external threat*. Long-run effects are constructed from the MCMCs for the ratio of parameters for the change and lag of major power over the lagged dependent variable (long-run multiplier: $-\frac{\beta_1}{\alpha_1}$).

both the short- and long-run, with Δ*US Influence* positive in over 89% of draws using the alliance-based measure and over 99.9% of draws with the UN voting measure and the LRM positive in over 97.7% of draws with the alliance-based measure and over 92.5% of draws for the UN voting measure. Increases in Russian influence are negative in the short-run for the alliance-based measure,[24] and both the short- and long-run for the measure based on UN voting. Substantively, the short-run effects of changes in US influence are very small for both the alliance- and UN-based measures, while the long-run effects are moderate for the alliance-based measure[25]—the coefficient of .172 represents a change of 57% of one standard deviation from the mean—but only a 2 percentage point change in the share of UN voting agreement.

Models 3 and 4 display foreign policy alignment with Russia, using the same two measures. In this case, increases in Russian influence exert both short- and long-run positive

[24]The long-run effect is negative in only 75% of draws.

[25]The alliance-based measure varies from a minimum of -.33 to a maximum .9.

effects on alignment. Moreover, these effects are larger, in substantive terms, than those of increases in US influence. For the alliance-based measure, the long-run effect for Russian influence is just over one standard deviation, while the difference in agreement in UN voting is over four times greater. Of course, the inverse is that decreases in Russian influence are associated with similarly sized dis-alignment in a minor power's foreign policy. Conversely, changes in US influence have virtually no short-term effect on a minor power's alignment towards Russian foreign policy. There is also only moderate evidence of a long-term effect, with the LRM for the alliance- and UN voting-based measures being negative in over 82.6% and 83.4% of draws, respectively.

The differences in the substantive effects of changes in major power influence and protégé state foreign policy alignment, across the US- and Russian-led networks, may reflect differences in how such hierarchical networks are organized and structured (McManus and Nieman 2019; Norrlof and Wohlforth 2019), or whether a network is led by either a liberal or illiberal power (Lanoszka 2013; Chyzh and Labzina 2018). In particular, there is likely variation in whether carrots are withdrawn or sticks applied by major powers when a minor power acts counter to the existing hierarchical arrangement (Lanoszka 2013; Truckos 2021). In either case, the results of Table 5 indicate that when support is withdrawn, minor powers tend to drift away from the major power.

Overall, the results summarized in the four tables illustrate the impact of variation in US and Russian influence on protégé states' domestic institutions and practices, as well as their foreign economic and security policies. Reductions in major power influence sometimes lead to a short-term turn against the major power's milieu goals, e.g., democracy and trade, offering some support for Hypothesis 1. Yet, even when there is not an immediate shift, there is strong evidence of a long-term backlash against the major power's milieu goals across the range of policy outcomes—consistent with Hypothesis 2. Finally, the repercussions are further heightened when a rival major power is able to step in to fill the void; this result is consistent with Hypothesis 3.

Other Major Powers

The previous section demonstrates how changes in US and Russian influence affect the degree to which protégé states adhere to their patron's milieu goals. Here, I consider whether changes in influence by other liberal and illiberal major powers similarly affect variation in protégé state behavior over both the short and long term. Specifically, I look at the effect of changes in influence by the UK, France, and China on all minor powers in the international system. I treat the UK and France as holding liberal milieu goals and China as promoting illiberal goals. In the case of the UK and France, I use the same 1950–2010 sample; however, I restrict the analysis to the time period after the end of the Cold War (post 1990) in the case of China, to reflect its re-emergence as a global actor.

The results of this analysis are presented in Table 6 and are broadly similar to those reported in the previous section. The liberal major powers, the UK and France, exhibit the effects similar to those of the US, while the illiberal major power, China, exhibits effects similar to those of Russia. Increases in the UK's and France's influence are associated with short- and long-run increases in democratic reform and human rights protections.[26] In contrast, increases in China's influence are associated with negative short- and long-term effects for democratic reform and human rights.[27] Increases in influence by all three major powers are associated with short- and long-term increases in bilateral trade and foreign policy alignment.[28]

Overall, the results from this and the previous section demonstrate the impact of major power influence and withdrawal. On average, increases in influence from a liberal major power correspond to improvements in democracy and human rights in the minor power, an increased share of the minor power's trade with the major power, and more aligned foreign

[26]Increases in Δ*Influence* for the UK and the LRM for France are positive in over 97.1% and 94.1% of draws, respectively, for *democracy*. In the case of *human rights*, Δ*Influence* for the UK and France are positive in over 92.9% and 97.6% of draws, respectively.

[27]Increases in Δ*Influence* for China are negative for *human rights* in over 94.4% of draws and, surprisingly, positive for *judicial independence* in over 91.4% of draws.

[28]For *foreign policy alignment*, increases in Δ*Influence* for China are positive in over 96.8% of draws.

Table 6: Effect of Changes in UK, France, and China Influence on Protégé Policies

Dependent Variable:	Democracy	Human Rights	Judicial Independence	$\frac{\text{Trade}}{\text{GDP}}$	$\frac{\text{MP Trade}}{\text{GDP}}$	MP Align. (Alliance)
			Major Power: United Kingdom			
Δ Influence	.005	.006	-.000	-.009	.015	.010
	[-.000, .010]	[-.002, .014]	[-.001, .001]	[-.018, .001]	[-.004, .034]	[.007, .012]
Influence_{t-1}	.007	.011	-.000	-.000	.025	.011
	[.003,.011]	[.005, .018]	[-.001, .001]	[-.008, .007]	[.010, .039]	[.008, .013]
$\text{Dependent Variable}_{t-1}$	-.072	-.020	-.009	-.038	-.080	-.026
	[-.082, -.061]	[-.024, -.017]	[-.011, -.006]	[-.045, -.031]	[-.089, -.072]	[-.031, -.021]
Long-run Effect	.097	.561	-.040	-.010	.305	.400
	[.038, .158]	[.269, .866]	[-.152, .065]	[-.213, .192]	[.120, 491]	[.326, .477]
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Number of Observations	4154	7738	7693	6086	7383	7945
			Major Power: France			
Δ Influence	.001	.007	.000	.001	.017	.006
	[-.003, .005]	[-.000, .014]	[-.001, .001]	[-.006, .009]	[.000, .034]	[.003, .008]
Influence_{t-1}	.003	.008	.000	.000	.034	.005
	[-.001, .007]	[.002, .014]	[-.001, .001]	[-.007, .007]	[.020, .049]	[.003, .008]
$\text{Dependent Variable}_{t-1}$	-.071	-.019	-.010	-.038	-.075	-.022
	[-.081, -.060]	[-.023, -.015]	[-.012, -.008]	[-.045, -.031]	[-.083, -.068]	[-.027, -.018]
Long-run Effect	.046	.408	.004	.001	.455	.244
	[-.012, .104]	[.086, .740]	[-.083, .082]	[-.192, .187]	[.264, 641]	[.153, .330]
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Number of Observations	4154	7738	7693	6086	7383	7945
			Major Power: China			
Δ Influence	-.009	-.011	.000	-.020	.049	.003
	[-.015, -.002]	[-.025, .002]	[-.001, .002]	[-.035, -.006]	[.022, .076]	[-.000, .007]
Influence_{t-1}	-.011	-.020	.001	-.010	.049	.001
	[-.018, -.004]	[-.034, -.007]	[-.000, .002]	[-.026, .006]	[.020, .078]	[-.003, .005]
$\text{Dependent Variable}_{t-1}$	-.085	-.030	-.004	-.037	-.057	-.007
	[-.102, -.069]	[-.036, -.025]	[-.007, -.000]	[-.047, -.026]	[-.070, -.044]	[-.014, -.000]
Long-run Effect	-.129	-.675	.231	-.285	.853	.182
	[-.218, -.050]	[-1.137, -.236]	[-.116, 2.531]	[-.762, .151]	[.355, 1.322]	[-1.317, 2.066]
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Number of Observations	1791	3259	3253	3083	3067	3277

Note: Median and 95% credible interval (in braces) summarize the posterior distribution estimated from Bayesian error correction model with 50,000 MCMCs after 500,000 burn-in and thinning of 100 for models 1 and 2, and 100,000 MCMCs after 1,500,000 burn-in and thinning of 200 for models 3 and 4. The sample for *democracy* includes only mixed regimes. All samples for China restricted to after 1990. Control variables are the same as for the dependent variables in Tables 2–5. Long-run effects are constructed from the MCMCs for the ratio of parameters for the change and lag of major power over the lagged dependent variable (long-run multiplier: $-\frac{\beta_1}{\alpha_1}$).

policies. Minor powers that lose the support of a liberal major power experience democratic backsliding, a deterioration of human rights, and a diversification of trade and foreign policy alignment away from the liberal major power. Increased engagement with an illiberal power yields declines in democracy, less trade with liberal powers, and a more aligned foreign policy, while decreased engagement leads to the inverse.

Conclusion

I argue that major power disengagement has substantial consequences for minor power's behavior. The results bear this out across a wide range of domestic institutions and policy practices: in both the short and long run, minor powers tend to drift away from the patron's milieu goals. These shifts are especially pronounced when a rival major power steps in to replace the old patron's influence with its own, pushing the protégé further along a new ideological and strategic trajectory.

The changes do not affect only the protégés; they also impose real costs on the major power itself. When a major power abandons relatively low-cost tools of influence—such as long-standing security ties and diplomatic engagement—it may later find that achieving the same policy outcomes requires much more expensive forms of coercion or inducement. States whose preferences and policies already lean towards those of the patron require far fewer material incentives to join military coalitions (Henke 2017) or to host troops or for intelligence assets (Nieman et al. 2021; Carson, Metz and Poast 2025). Likewise, publics that view a major power favorably tend to be more accepting of its foreign policy and less likely to mobilize against requests for support (Henke 2018; Allen et al. 2020, 2023). Once there reservoirs of goodwill and habit are depleted, recreating them is costly and uncertain,

Taken together, the results paint a sobering picture for the future of the LIO. US President Trump has chosen to voluntarily erode and undermine ties with aligned protégé states (US White House 2025). Because all major powers depend on partners to sustain their political orders (Mastanduno 2019), the likely consequence is that the US will face a world less receptive to its values, less easily influenced by its preferences, and more expensive to shape when it tries. Some traditional partners, such as Canada, are already seeking to reduce their dependence on US armaments (Gillies 2025). Other liberal powers, such as Germany and Japan, are expanding their military capabilities (Stanley-Becker 2025; Yamaguchi 2024). While Washington has long called for greater burden-sharing, a natural corollary is that these partners will be less willing to accept a junior role and will insist on greater voice i

how their resources are used.

Finally, the full implications of US withdrawal for global order will unfold only gradually. A future administration may attempt to repair or rebuild the damaged order—but doing so would require renewed cooperation from the very states that were recently sidelined, and such trust is not easy or quickly restored. Unless other liberal powers can effectively substitute for the US in their relations with abandoned protégés, while simultaneously constraining the expansion of rival illiberal powers such as China and Russia, liberalism is likely to recede—unevenly, but perceptibly—across the system. Under such a scenario, the LIO may not vanish altogether, but its depth and scope are likely to contract sharply.

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