
‘Does foreign aid undermine human rights in recipient countries? If so, how and under what set of conditions does it impact human rights outcomes, particularly physical integrity rights?’ Salvador Santino Fulo Regilme Jr. takes on these questions in his book, Aid Imperium, a welcome addition to conversations about foreign relations between major powers and smaller states in the Global South. Regilme sets the scene with an overview of US foreign aid from the post-Cold War period and the years following the September 2001 attacks. It is clear at the outset the comprehensiveness of the theoretical and empirical approaches of the book when Regilme opts to use the term foreign strategic support rather than foreign aid to cover all military and economic forms of aid disbursement, including the political and diplomatic strategies that inform them. The book is also a departure from the dominant narratives about foreign aid being either beneficial to the development and democratisation or detrimental to the autonomy and resilience of recipient countries. Notwithstanding the history that led to these narratives, Regilme adds another layer to the analysis of foreign aid outcomes. He deploys his theory of interest convergence and argues that the outcome of foreign aid is dependent on the confluence of interests by both donor and recipient governments. The book, therefore, combines ideational and material factors, from both external and domestic contexts, into a sophisticated framework that can explain the impact of foreign strategic support on human rights protection.

Using the Philippines and Thailand as illustrative cases of the causal and constitutive dynamics underpinning his theory, Regilme provides a rich account of how the different governments in both countries localised US foreign strategic support. In the Philippines, the democracy promotion shared by the Clinton and Ramos administrations in the 1990s resulted in an improved human rights situation. This was overturned by Bush’s ‘war on terror’ and Macapagal-Arroyo’s domestic counterterrorism efforts, converging into a shared militaristic approach to security, thereby resulting in increased extrajudicial killings and state-led violence in the Philippines. Unfortunately, this culture of impunity was resistant to change despite the non-militaristic policies of the administrations of both Obama and Aquino III. Regilme then compares the Philippine case with that of Thailand and finds the same pattern. A better human rights record in the post-Cold War period was cut short when the Thai government’s war on drugs and unarmed political dissent coincided with US global counterterrorism, enabling Thaksin to channel foreign strategic sup-
port toward the violent silencing of his political opponents. What is common between Macapagal-Arroyo and Thaksin, according to Regilme, is their dwindling domestic political legitimacy during their administrations; they accepted political aid to bolster their political influence through the perpetration of physical violence.

The book is a reminder that recipient countries are not entirely passive to the conditions attached to foreign aid. It is an empowering conclusion, but also a troubling one. While some ‘aid recipients with weak domestic political legitimacy are more likely to instrumentalize foreign aid’ (p. 17), some of them are also actively hinging foreign support on their domestic legitimacy. Foreign aid can fall into the hands of authoritarian or militaristic leaders who may implement oppressive policies behind the facade of democracy and human rights. The Philippine and Thai cases demonstrate this possibility even after a long history of democratisation. However, at the same time, Regilme’s multi-level analysis of international and national policies raises hope that NGOs, human rights activists, and individual voters have the power to shift political dynamics, as we have seen in various social movements around the world. After all, as Regilme reminds us in his book, states are not monoliths and can drastically change; and that change can come from individuals and groups.

The value of Aid Imperium’s theoretical approach and empirical analysis is not limited to democracy and human rights promotion. For instance, the book’s framework can also help explain the relationship between international assistance and peacebuilding in post-conflict or conflict-affected societies. In much of the peacebuilding literature, the analysis either overstates the impact of external intervention on domestic peacebuilding processes or romanticises the political agency of domestic actors. Regilme’s interest convergence theory helps break away from that binary conception and instead examines how the convergence or divergence of strategic interests of international and domestic actors influence peacebuilding processes and outcomes. A related analysis would be that of financial contributions to United Nations peacekeeping operations during the post-Cold War and post-9/11 periods when the US and its close allies virtually dominated the operations and with China’s growing financial contributions to peacekeeping operations. Traditionally, peace operations’ mandates emphasise human rights protection, but China’s ‘behind the doors’ negotiations to defund human rights posts in some peacekeeping missions during the 2017 UN budget deliberations raised alarm on the potential erosion of international norms on human rights (Charbonneau 2017). Although some commentators view China’s funding priorities as merely pragmatic (Gowan 2020), and considering that the recent UN budget proposal is deemed to strengthen human rights (UN 2022), examining the impact of fund-
ing reprioritisation in conflict-affected societies extends the relevance of the book’s framework to other cases where foreign strategic support and domestic policies meet. As Regilme points out, without US foreign aid during episodes of political instability in the Philippines and Thailand, Macapagal-Arroyo and Thaksin, respectively, would have sourced the necessary support from China.

The book prompts important questions for further research. For one, how enduring is the impact of foreign aid on human rights? Aid Imperium shows that this is tied to the political life of the leaders of recipient countries and conditional to the resilience of its democratic institutions. This suggests that the intended outcomes of foreign aid are ephemeral in nature. Therefore, in the concluding chapter of his book, Regilme recommends a recalibration of foreign aid toward the strengthening of judicial and security institutions of recipient governments with weak domestic legitimacy to prevent its misuse against civilians and unarmed political opponents. However, the question remains in the book of how militaristic, capacity-building, and development types of aid can either contradict each other or coalesce under the same government.

Finally, on methodology, I echo Santino’s call to move our analysis of political dynamics beyond quantitative approaches. Aid Imperium is successful in highlighting the importance of complementing quantitative data with a qualitative analysis of public discourses behind the policy preferences of aid donors and recipients. Regilme handles such an approach prudently by employing macro and meso levels of analysis while calling for more micro-level analyses in future research. In doing so, the book is a testament to how multi-level analysis can benefit from different methodologies. It is a valuable read for anyone seeking to deepen their understanding of the relationship between foreign aid and human rights.

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References