
A review of the key international relations theories, the notion of national interest, multinationalism and unilateralism

Colonel Mick Kehoe, Australia – Army

A State worthy of the name has no friends – only interests.

Charles de Gaulle 1968 ¹

Introduction

The notion of ‘national interest’ is inextricably linked to that of ‘the state’ and can be traced back to the development of sovereignty and the legitimacy of the state.² In the study of international relations, the state and national interest are commonly associated with the theory of realism. This theory considers ‘the core national interest of all states must be survival [and] the promotion of the national interest is an iron law of necessity.’³ States focused on the notion of national interest prefer acting unilaterally as this protects freedom to manoeuvre thereby avoiding the possible compromises to state sovereignty that can result from multilateral activities.⁴ Since World War I, international relations has become a more complex field involving multiple theories combining the analysis of past events, states and communities with predictive speculation on the future.⁵ As a result, classifying international actors into one perspective, theory or framework has become increasingly difficult.

In the study of international relations, scholars tend to be associated with particular theories or frameworks, for example Morgenthau with realism and Hoffmann with liberalism. This is not as common with policy makers. Although Charles de Gaulle was consistently passionate about French national interests, he was a remarkably astute politician who could be doggedly multilateral in matters involving the blossoming European Community, yet fiercely unilateral as shown by his withdrawal from the unified military command structure of NATO during the same period. A review of recent history shows that in the pursuit of national interests, individual state regimes and governments display a wide range of behaviour that dispels the notion of theoretical captivity and blinkered thinking.

This paper will review the key international relations theories, the notion of national interest, multilateralism and unilateralism, and examine a range of contemporary examples to gauge the validity of the statement.

International relations

The study of international relations has been described as ‘a protracted competition between the realist, liberal and radical traditions.’⁶ Realism argues that states, while not the sole actors in the world, are the dominant forces existing in an anarchical world system. Given the lack of an overall world sovereign, states must rely on power to maintain order in a never-ending competitive wrestle with other states. Conflict is an inevitable result of this competition and states pursue their own national interests, the key principle being survival.⁷ Liberalism, while acknowledging the key role played by states, argues a range of other non-state actors, attitudes and factors are vital, and generally promotes global cooperation, collective security and harmony of interests rather than the isolationist defensive friction opined by realists.⁸ Marxism was the principal radical theory for most of the 20th century,

positing the view that universal socialism enhanced interstate harmony whereas capitalism inevitably led to friction and conflict.⁹ This view has been replaced largely by a multitude of frameworks that either look at international relations through a particular ‘lens’¹⁰ or downplay the future of the state while emphasising the individual (constructivism).¹¹ Notwithstanding this wide range of study, the two core theories of international relations remain realism and liberalism.

National interests

The term ‘National Interest’ first entered the lexicon at the time of the development of the nation-state and nationalism in 16th century Europe, replacing the earlier notion of ‘*raison d’etat*’ or the reason of state.¹² The noted realist scholar, Hans Morgenthau, was an influential advocate in the mid 20th century. His thesis was that the primary national interest of states was the acquisition and use of power, primarily military and economic.¹³ By defining national interest in terms of power, an objective standard or measure of state behaviour or policies was possible. Morgenthau and the realist school have been the subject of significant criticism by others who argue that, given the greater levels of interdependence between states through trade and formal multilateral organisations, the interests guiding foreign policy are more likely to be subjective and encompass a diverse range of issues. In Western democratic states: ‘The national interest therefore is more likely to be what the policy-makers say it is at any particular time.’¹⁴

A better classification of state or ‘actor’ action is their tendency to multilateral or unilateral behaviour. Some media commentators label certain states or administrations as philosophical adherents of one type of behaviour or the other. In reality, state behaviour is best viewed on a spectrum with the true debate centred on the balance between multilateralism and unilateralism.¹⁵ Accordingly, policy makers are more likely to make a judgement on an assessment of how their national interests will best be served. This may involve a state acting unilaterally on one issue, while simultaneously pursuing a multilateral agenda on a separate issue. This flexibility is the antithesis of blinkered, ideologically-driven thinking.

Contemporary examples

The 20th century provides ample opportunity to review the actions of policy makers at the state level. Some have, in hindsight, shown a tendency to blindly pursue a policy direction to the detriment of their national interests. The 1920s and 30s saw the rise to power of Mussolini and Hitler in their respective countries. Although ruling by dictatorship, they had their domestic economies in relatively good shape by the mid 1930s. While both can be classed as ‘realists’ or believers in ‘power politics’, they combined the pursuit of state power with a policy of territorial expansion that was unacceptable to the international community. This pursuit of expansion proved to be disastrous to their national interest and ultimately their regimes did not survive World War II.¹⁶ It can also be argued that Chamberlain’s dogged adherence to a framework of appeasement or ‘peace at any price’, while pandering to the British public’s distaste for conflict, ultimately worked against the national interests of Great Britain as they were poorly prepared for large scale war. That said, it is highly questionable whether a stronger stance by Chamberlain involving non-military elements of national power would have avoided war.¹⁷

There are, however, more examples of policy makers whose actions in the pursuit of national interests show no strict adherence to a particular policy, theory or framework. Winston Churchill was a conservative-thinking Prime Minister and an avowed anti-communist. Despite this, he was

prepared to provide significant support to Tito's partisans during the war against Germany, despite knowing Yugoslavia was likely to be a communist state after the war. He placed Britain's immediate national interest (the defeat of the Germans), as he assessed it, uppermost.¹⁸ The USA, particularly in the immediate aftermath of World War II, has displayed a strong liberalist and multilateral tradition. Nevertheless, they were prepared to take unilateral action if required during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis,¹⁹ and took such action with a 'coalition of the willing' in Vietnam in the 1960s and again in 2003 in Iraq.²⁰ The French argued passionately against the recent Iraq War and criticised the USA for taking action without UN approval. Nevertheless, France was a key participant in the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999 despite there being no UN Security Council authorisation.²¹ Both actions involved the sovereignty violation of nation states.

Policy makers have shown significant flexibility in the pursuit of their national interests in areas not related strictly to security. The USA has pursued its national interests, despite its traditional commitment to liberalism and multilateralism, by not participating in a UN-sponsored conference concerning a comprehensive nuclear test ban, its opposition to the International Criminal Court, and a reluctance to endorse the Kyoto Protocol. In the latter half of the 20th century, France has developed into a leading proponent of multilateral action. Some observers have commented that this rising advocacy, particularly through the UN and the EU, has coincided with a decline in its 'real' influence and power on the international stage. It has been argued France has concluded it can pursue national interests better through various multilateral forums, thereby maintaining its status as a major world power.²²

Other small states are realising that multilateral organisation membership, arguably ceding away elements of sovereignty, is the best way to safeguard national interests. The large number of small states seeking 'accession' to the European Union concerns some of the original states as they perceive that small states reap the benefits but have few obligations. Leaders of the small states see membership as vital to their long-term national interests, particularly when considering the implications of not joining or being excluded. Pragmatism and national interests appear to be winning out.²³

Conclusion

The opening statement opines that policy makers often display blinkered thinking, thereby jeopardising national interests by becoming captive to the very theoretical frameworks they use to inform their judgments. Although academics are commonly associated with particular international relations theories, policy makers tend to avoid rigid classification. The balance of evidence leads to the conclusion that policy makers will adapt and vary their behaviour according to the contingency or context.

Far from being captives of certain theories, most policy makers display great flexibility in their actions. Many leaders and administrations have been in the position of handling one particular issue with unilateral realism-based behaviour, yet concurrently pursuing other matters firmly through multilateral channels with their dialogue resembling more liberalist frameworks. This apparent contradiction is due to their assessment of the state's national interest at the time.

Over 100 years before de Gaulle's observation on interests, Lord Palmerston noted: 'We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual friends. Our interests are eternal, and those interests it is our duty to follow.'²⁴ Notwithstanding a preference among many contemporary commentators for countries to display legitimate behaviour beneath a broad multilateral umbrella, it is likely that countries, large and small, will continue to place their perceived national interests as a priority and adopt the appropriate behaviour to realise those interests.

Endnotes

1. R. Tripp, *The International Thesaurus of Quotations: a companion to Roget's International Thesaurus*, Unwin Brothers, Surrey, 1974, p. 611.
2. G. Evans and J. Newnham, 'The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations', Penguin Books, London, 1998, p. 345.
3. T. Dunn and B.C. Schmidt, 'Realism', in Baylis, J. and S. Smith (eds), *The Globalisation of World Politics: An introduction to International Relations*, 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 144.
4. S. Burchill, 'Introduction' in S. Burchill, R. Devetak, A. Linklater, M. Paterson, C. Reus-Smit, and J. True (eds), *Theories of International Relations*, Palgrave, London, 2001, pp. 81–85.
5. *ibid.*, p. 7.
6. S. Walt, 'International Relations: One World, Many Theories', *Foreign Policy*, Spring, 1998, p. 30.
7. *ibid.*, pp. 31–31.
8. G. Evans and J. Newnham, *op. cit.*, pp. 304–305.
9. Walt, *op. cit.*, pp. 33–34.
10. Examples include post-colonial and feminist.
11. Walt, *op. cit.*, pp. 40–41.
12. G. Evans and J. Newnham, *op. cit.*, pp. 460–461.
13. M. Roskin, 'National Interest: From Abstraction to Strategy', *US Army War College Paper*, 1994, pp. 2–3.
14. G. Evans and J. Newnham, *op. cit.*, p. 345.
15. P. Stewart, 'Beyond Coalitions of the Willing: Assessing US Multilateralism', *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2003, p. 37.
16. Roskin, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
17. A. Reid, *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Second World War*, Osprey, Berkshire, 1974, p. 145.
18. Roskin, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
19. Despite the contingency planning for independent action, President Kennedy still sought the legitimacy of international opinion expressed in multilateral forums such as the UN and the OAS.
20. J. Nye, 'Seven Tests: Between Concert and Unilateralism', *The National Interest*, Winter, 2001, <www.findarticles.com/cfids/m2751/2001_Winter>.
21. A. Roberts, 'NATO's Humanitarian War over Kosovo', *Survival*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 1999, pp. 102–104.
22. S. Basu, 'Superpower or not, France supports India', 2003, <www.HindustanTimes.com, Hindustantimes.com/news/>.
23. A. Moravcsik and M. Vachudova, 'National Interests, State Power, and EU Enlargement', *Centre for European Studies Working Paper* No. 97, 2002, <www.ces.fas.harvard.edu/working_papers/Moravcsik_Vachudova.pdf>.
24. R. Kanga 'International Relations and Global Trends', 2003, Marshallcentre.org, <www.marshallcentre.org/site-graphic/lang-en/>.

Bibliography

- Basu S., 'Superpower or not, France supports India', 2003, <www.HindustanTimes.com,Hindustantimes.com/news/>, accessed 10 February 2004.
- Baylis, J. and S., Smith, *The Globalisation of World Politics: An introduction to international relations*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001.
- Burchill, S. and Linklater, A., *Theories of International Relations*, Second Edition, Palgrave, London, 2001.
- Evans, G. and Newnham, J., *The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, Penguin Books, London, 1998.
- Kanga R., 'International Relations and Global Trends', Marshallcentre.org, 2003, <www.marshallcentre.org/site-graphic/lang-en/>, accessed 2 February 2004.
- Moravcsik A. and Vachudova, M., 'National Interests, State Power, and EU Enlargement', Centre for European Studies Working Paper No. 97, 2002, <www.ces.fas.harvard.edu/working_papers/Moravcsik_Vachudova.pdf>, accessed 10 February 2004.
- Nye, J., 'Seven Tests: Between Concert and Unilateralism', *The National Interest*, Winter, 2001, <www.findartcles.com/cfdls/m2751/2001_Winter>, accessed 10 February 2004.
- Reid, A., *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Second World War*, Osprey, Berkshire, 1974.
- Roberts, A., 'NATO's Humanitarian War over Kosovo', *Survival*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 1999.
- Roskin, M., 'National Interest: From Abstraction to Strategy', US Army War College Paper, 1994, pp. 2–3.
- Stewart, P., 'Beyond Coalitions of the Willing: Assessing US Multilateralism', *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2003.
- Tripp, R., *The International Thesaurus of Quotations: a companion to Roget's International Thesaurus*, Unwin Brothers, Surrey, 1974.
- Walt, S.M., 'International Relations: One World, Many Theories', *Foreign Policy*, Spring, 1998.