

## NATIONAL INTEREST

Of all the concepts covered in International Relations, this one is the most vague and therefore easily used and abused, particularly by politicians. To claim that a particular foreign policy is in the national interest imparts a degree of authority and legitimacy to that policy. Although the concept attracted a great deal of scholarly attention soon after the Second World War, particularly in the United States, this is no longer the case today.

Still, this is not a concept we can just dismiss as mere rhetoric. Without an accepted notion of the national interest, those who are called upon to evaluate their leaders' performance have no helpful criteria by which to do so. The concept is usually used in two related ways. On the one hand, the word interest implies a need that has, by some standard of justification, attained the status of an acceptable claim on behalf of the state. On the other hand, the national interest is also used to describe and support particular policies. The problem is how to determine the criteria that can establish a correspondence between the national interests expressed as a principle and the sorts of policies by which it is advanced.

In formal terms, one can identify two attributes of such policies. The first is one of inclusiveness, according to which the policies should concern the country as a whole, or at least a sufficiently substantial subset of its membership to transcend the specific interests of particular groups. In contrast, the second attribute is one of exclusiveness. The national interest does not necessarily include the interests of groups outside the state, although it may do so. Given these attributes, what criteria link the concept to specific policies? Those who tackle this question do so in one of three ways.

First, one may simply equate the national interest with the policies of those officially responsible for the conduct of foreign policy. The national interest is what decision-makers at the highest levels of government say it is. They are the best judges of various policy trade-offs, therefore the national interest is something to be dispassionately defined and defended by those who possess the appropriate expertise and authority to speak for the whole country. The difficulty with this elitist approach is that it does not help in distinguishing a good foreign policy from a bad one. For according to this argument, as long as the government pursues what it deems to be general societal objectives and does so for long enough, it can never act contrary to the national interest.

A second approach, closely identified with the **realist** school of thought, conceives of the national interest in terms of some basic assumptions about the nature of international relations and the motivations of states. These include the idea that **anarchy** makes **security** the paramount foreign policy concern of states. Security, in turn, requires the acquisition and rational management of **power** (which can never be wholly divorced from military force), and only policies conducted in this spirit can serve the national interest. Of course, this approach depends on the truth of the underlying assumptions. At the risk of oversimplifying a very complex debate, there are at least two problems with this approach. First, it often suffers from the resort to tautology in that interest is often defined in terms of power, and power in terms of interest. It is not very helpful to say that nations must seek power because they seek power! Second, there is an important tension between free will and determinism in the realist approach. For if international relations are indeed determined by a struggle for power, it should not be necessary to exhort leaders to abide by the national interest

as defined by realists. If it is necessary to do so, the alleged constraints of anarchy cannot be invoked as the basis for identifying the national interest.

In complete contrast, a third approach to the national interest suggests that the rules for its identification are given by tenets of the political process that have an independent normative value – those of democratic procedure. In other words, the national interest can best be identified when it resolves itself into a verifiable expression of the nation's preferences. On the assumption that a nation's interests cannot be more accurately expressed by some external observer than by the standards of the nation itself, this approach undermines both elitist and realist views. In the absence of democratically aggregated and expressed judgments on the matter, the link between foreign policy and the national interest cannot be known. This does not mean that nondemocratic countries lack a national interest – merely that we cannot know what it is if it is not defined by democratic procedures.