

N – National Interest

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A shift towards national policy, which nowadays can be observed in many countries, including those formerly oriented towards “sovereignty transfer,” has once again highlighted the somewhat forgotten notion of ‘national interest.’ However, it is paradoxical that controversy over its content continues unabated in international studies. While being central to political realism, it is arduously disputed by other theoretical schools.

From the viewpoint of canonical realism, the conflictive nature of international relations is an inevitable corollary of the absence of supreme authority therein. In this context, states constantly harbor fears for their existence and have to rely solely on their own resources. Therefore, national interest is, above all, rational awareness of the need for security, which implies the protection not only of its physical existence but also of its territorial integrity, independence, economic prosperity, and cultural identity. Security depends on a state’s position in the international system with regard to other countries. But since this position is the derivative of a state’s capabilities (above all, its military capability), national interest is determined “in terms of power (strength),” as Hans Morgenthau, one of the founders of realism, stated.

However, discussions consistently flare up even within canonical realism. For example, Morgenthau and Henry Kissinger had different views on whether the Vietnam War was meeting America's national interests. The new versions of realism—neorealism, offensive realism, and neoclassical realism, which came into being at a later stage—have added further nuances to the relativization of the national interest concept.

Still more criticism came from other theoretical schools. Positivists point to its inoperativeness and even anti-scientific nature because of the impossibility of its empirical verification. According to liberals, national interest is determined not by the external environment but by the state's internal societal needs, which are pluralistic, not unitary. In the final analysis, national interest is a combination of the interests of those groups which are able to impose their political preferences as national. Even though national interests reflect private priorities, they are not necessarily self-centered. In the opinion of neoliberals, the use of the national interest concept is justified only if its content embodies moral norms and such global problems as individual freedoms. The advocates of economic neoliberalism are prepared to agree with rationality as the driving force of national interest, and an aspiration for security as its main component, but only in terms of its market dimension.

Constructivists offer their own explanation of national interests and of the conditions in which they form and change. From their point of view, national interests are based on identity and shaped not so much by states as by shared norms and values which underlie international relations and make them meaningful. Critical theories that study the national interest discourse hold that they are largely determined by the individual interests of the people who formulate them. Finally, foreign policy analysts insist that a state's foreign policy depends on the individual features of the people who make decisions and on the organizational procedures; they claim that any foreign policy is the result of a compromise between bureaucratic structures whose members are often concerned about things other than national interest.

Thus, the content of the national interest concept appears vague, and its role in a state's foreign policy is far from obvious.

However, modern international studies have developed an understanding that different interpretations of the national interest concept do not

prove its irrelevance as a foreign policy incentive or its inefficiency as an analytical tool. Discussions are useful if only because they make us understand what mistakes we should avoid while analyzing the content and role of national interests in a state's international behavior. Lessons of such discussions come down to the following.

Firstly, we should remember that no single theory can fully explain national interests. Therefore, we should not rely on one of the theories but employ the achievements of each of them. Competing, they complement one another and help identify errors.

Secondly, interests and values should not be put in opposition to each other. National interests cannot but rest on values, just as values cannot be understood outside of national interests. It is no accident that realists (Arnold Wolfers) say that national security objectively means an absence of threats to the values cherished by a state, and subjectively mean an absence of the fear that these values may come under attack.

Thirdly, what underlies the explanatory function of national interest is the recognition of a link between a country's foreign policy and its history, geography, culture, mentality, and national traditions—generally speaking, its identity. Even though national identity does change in the course of time, its continuity cannot be denied.

And **fourthly**, reliance on interests enables us to better understand the motives behind a state's foreign policy and evaluate its efficiency in a specific international situation with regard to the policy and activities of other states. As Russian diplomat Sergei Tatishchev wrote back in the 19th century, "in international relations the avails and needs of one's home country are in constant conflict with the aspirations and needs of foreign states."

In other words, the realization of national interests, and of foreign policy in general, depends not only on the conscious, scientifically grounded formulation of the content of these interests, but also on the perception by state leaders of the "avails and needs of their homeland and the aspirations of other countries."

In Russia, discussions on the country's national interests, which were common in the 1990s, centered around the idea that the values of liberal democracy would automatically solve the problems of its security and development. Andrei Kozyrev, then Russia's top diplomat, declared that

Russia did not have any specific national interests, as its main objective was to join the club of the civilized countries of the West. Cooperation with them would bring serious economic assistance from the U.S. and EU countries, he claimed. Russia's foreign policy was to follow a common course with the West towards friendly, even allied relations. However, despite all political concessions made by Russia, it never received any economic and/or financial benefits from the West. Loans from the IMF and the World Bank were granted on general, that is, extremely tough terms. Western "partners" not only failed to render any substantial assistance to post-Soviet Russia but tried hard to impede the recovery of its economic potential in every possible way.

NATO's intervention in Bosnia (1994), its eastward expansion and the fast growth of anti-liberal sentiments in Russia compelled Boris Yeltsin in 1995 to replace Kozyrev as foreign minister with Yevgeny Primakov, who was committed to advancing the country's national interests and the idea of a multipolar world. Being a realist, Primakov considered it normal that Russia's independent foreign policy would face conflicts with other countries. At the same time, he saw his task not in confronting the United States and the European Union but in asserting Russia's right to an independent position on issues concerning its national interests and own values.

After coming to power in 2000, President Vladimir Putin proclaimed de-ideologization and pragmatism as the main principles of Russia's foreign policy. At the same time, while vehemently denouncing NATO's bombings of Belgrade and forced separation of Kosovo from Serbia, he did not intend to steer clear of the West. In 2001 he was the first head of state to express sympathy and solidarity with Washington after the terrorist attacks on America and suggested taking joint action to counter the common threat.

However, the subsequent experience of interaction with the Euro-Atlantic community gradually produced a strong impression among a substantial part of Russia's ruling elite and political circles that its Western "partners" were unwilling to establish equitable cooperation with Russia and recognize its right to have its own interests and exercise national sovereignty internally and externally. Russia increasingly perceives the West as the "Other," in a negative sense, and the West increasingly views Russian identity as non-Western and alien. This factor is one of the principal reasons

for Russia's turn towards the East and further strengthening of strategic partnership with China, based on common interests.

While gradually strengthening its military potential, Russia has been pursuing a more active nationally oriented policy on the world stage. Vladimir Putin's "Munich speech" in 2007, the 2008 Five-Day War with Georgia, and the 2014 Ukraine crisis came as landmark events in this sense. In 2015, the Russian Federation started a military operation in Syria at the request of its legitimate government. The fight against international terrorism has become one of the priorities of Russia's national security policy.

The successes of Russian diplomacy are unquestionable. They are especially notable in the Middle East, where Russia's intermediation made it possible to bring closer the positions of seemingly irreconcilable opponents (Syria, Iran, and Turkey). Russia's successes are also tangible in the CIS, where it has managed to find common ground with the West in settling the political crisis in Moldova. The situation in Europe is much more complicated: there are still no signs of any meaningful progress in the resolution of the Ukraine conflict. Relations with the U.S. are also at their lowest, despite some contradictory signals coming from Donald Trump.

Western sanctions have failed to weaken Russia's foreign policy, but seriously affected its economy. They did not crush it, but they have exposed the acute need for economic modernization and higher production efficiency. Experts are unanimous in that Russia's economic lag, and insufficient standard of well-being and quality of life are the weakest spots of its national interests.