

Crafting National Interests in The 21st Century

Alan G. Stolberg

When you're asking Americans to die, you have to be able to explain it in terms of the national interest.

–Henry Kissinger

The most fundamental task in devising a grand strategy is to determine a nation's national interests. Once they are identified, they drive a nation's foreign policy and military strategy; they determine the basic direction that it takes, the types and amounts of resources that it needs, and the manner in which the state must employ them to succeed. Because of the critical role that national interests play, they must be carefully justified, not merely assumed.

–Robert J. Art

Both Henry Kissinger and Robert Art make it clear that the identification of national interests is crucial for the development of policy and strategy. Interests are essential to establishing the objectives or ends that serve as the goals for policy and strategy. “Interests are the foundation and starting point for policy prescriptions.” They help answer questions concerning why a policy is important. National interests also help to determine the types and amounts of the national power employed as the means to implement a designated policy or strategy.

The concept of interest is not new to the 21st century international system. It has always been a fundamental consideration of every actor in the system. Despite what many academics have maintained, national interests are not only a factor for nation states. All actors in the international system possess interests. Using Buzan, Waever, and Wilde's units of analysis, the need to have interests is equally applicable to *international subsystems* (groups or units that can be distinguished from the overall system by the nature or intensity of their interactions with or independence on each other) like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, *individual units* (actors consisting of various subgroups, organizations, and communities) such as nations of people that transcend state boundaries and multinational corporations, *subunits* (organized groups of individuals within units that are able or try to affect the behavior of the unit as a whole) like bureaucracies and lobbies, and finally, *individuals* that all possess separate personal interests as they participate in the overall system. Some academics choose to distinguish between national interests (interests involved in the external relations of the actor) and public interests (interests related within the boundaries of the actor). For purposes of this essay, given the closing gap between the influence of external and internal issues in the 21st century international system brought about by the associated components of a rapidly globalized world, there will be no distinction made between external and internal interests. In effect, they all fall under the concept of the national interest.

#3909-E

Footnotes removed by the GCMC for purposes of brevity.

There is a generally accepted consensus among academics that interests are designed to be of value to the entity or actor responsible for determining the interest for itself. This could include those interests that are intended to be “a standard of conduct or a state of affairs worthy of achievement by virtue of its universal moral value.” However, there is less agreement over the question of whether all nation-state interests are enduring, politically bi-partisan, permanent conditions that represent core interests that transcend changes in government, in contrast to those interests that may be altered over time and or respond to change in the international system.

There is also disagreement over whether national interests are designed purely for the sake of advancing the power of an actor with the object of attaining greater security for that actor, or whether interests can be guided by values and ethics with the intent of doing some type of good for parts of the international system, or the overall system in general. This might include collaboration and coordination with other actors in the international system. It may also require the interest-crafting actor to subordinate certain interests that only benefit it for the sake of other interests that are of greater value to additional actors in the system.

Finally, there is disagreement over the categorization and determination of intensity or prioritization of interests. Terms like survival, vital, critical, major, serious, secondary, extremely important, important, less important, humanitarian, and peripheral have been used to categorize interests in academic writings and official government documents. Some categorize how significant the interest is in terms of chronological relationship to the actor that determines the interest (near term versus longer term impact), while others relate categories to the intensity of the substantive influence that the interest is determined to have on the actor. Categorization is directly related to the question of prioritizing interests based on intensity, deciding which types of interests are more important than others. Perhaps of equal importance is the amount of distinction made between the categories in the prioritization process. In a zero-sum environment, this distinction could determine whether or not an actor’s resources, and in what amount, would be allocated toward the attainment of the interest.

After developing a detailed definition of national interests and analyzing their uses, this chapter will propose a process that future policymakers can use to craft reasonably attainable statements of national interests. The chapter assesses the issue of fixed or adjustable interests over time to understand what degree of flexibility that crafters of interests might have. Similarly, it examines whether policymakers create interests only for the purpose of advancing the power, and thus security, of a state, or if they can also be developed based on ethical and value-driven intent. Finally, the essay examines the creation of a set of category definitions that will provide necessary flexibility for a 21st century policymaker.

In the end, the focus of this chapter will be the development of a series of issues or questions that any policymaker can use as a guideline to assist in the development of national interests that are within the realm of the possible.

Definition of National Interest

In a very generic sense, national interests are “that which is deemed by a particular state (actor) to be a . . . desirable goal.” The attainment of this goal is something that the identifying actor believes will have a positive impact on itself. Realization of the interest could enhance the political, economic, security, environmental, and/or moral well being of a populace and the

state (actor) or national enterprise to which they belong. This holds true within the territory of the actor, as well as in any external relations that the actor may undertake outside of the administrative control of that actor.

Interests would be the concern of the actor as a whole, “or at least (for) a sufficiently substantial subset of its membership to transcend the specific interests of (any) particular groups” within the actor. For the United States, the executive body of the federal government, rather than the legislative or judicial, has the primary responsibility for determining the national interests that address perceived needs and aspirations external to the geographic borders of the nation. The determination of internal or domestic interests is more complex with executive and legislative bodies at federal, state, and local levels interacting in the political process to reach decisions.

Uses for National Interests

Interests serve as the foundation and guiding direction for the formulation of policy. For a nation state, there is more often than not a direct correlation between the nation’s interests and foreign policy. In most cases, “statesmen think and act in terms of interest.” Those interests believed to be the most significant for the attainment of a policy objective (the actor’s wants and needs) will earn the greatest amount of emphasis during the policy formulation process. They should be designed to tell the policymaker why and how much he should care about an issue. Interests help determine what kind and how much attention should be given to both challenges or threats and opportunities. They also assist the policymaker in identifying key issues during the policy formulation process. Examples could include: How are current developments affecting interests? Are hostile forces able to negatively impact the interests? Is there sufficient power (both military and non-military) available to protect the interests? How much of that power must be used to defend the interests? In effect, the understanding of an actor’s interests helps the actor determine the degree of importance to be given to an issue.

Fixed or Changing Interests

Some political scientists, like Hans Morgenthau, believe that national interests are permanent features of the international system. Regardless of what government is in power, the interests of a nation state remain fixed components of the policymaking process. They are “unaffected by the circumstances of time and place.” Some interpret this to mean that nation states possess permanent, unchanging core interests. This would imply that the United States has core interests, potentially in existence since the beginning of the republic in the later part of the eighteenth century, that have never changed since their inception. This analysis will suggest that adjustments have, in fact, taken place over the course of time.

Morgenthau, himself, indicates that the key concept of interest is not to be defined “with a meaning that is fixed once and for all.” Morgenthau believed the generic concept of interest was unchanging in terms of its importance to the international system. But this did not mean that individual interests could not be adjusted or newly created in order to take into account changes in the international system.

Other theorists have argued that interests are likely to be “a diverse, pluralistic set of subjective preferences that change periodically, both in response to the domestic political process itself and in response to shifts in the international environment. The national interest therefore is more likely to be what the policymakers say it is at any particular time.” Like most actors in the

international system, the United States has had both changing and unchanging national interests over an extended period of time. Some interests have been a more consistent focus of various policies and strategies than others, and all have had different degrees of importance over both the long and short terms. Some of these interests changed or adjusted because of shifting world conditions and/or domestic political considerations.

Using a portion of the preamble of the Constitution, all seven national security strategies drafted during the course of the Clinton administration identified three core interests that have remained timeless in some manner, shape, or form for the United States: “provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” These were translated in those national security strategies into the modern day interests of: enhancing security at home and abroad (security), promoting prosperity (economic well-being), and promoting democracy and human rights (democratic values).

For purposes of 21st century America, these three core interests may be defined as:

Security: “Protection of the people (both home and abroad), territory, and institutions of the United States against potential foreign dangers.” This has always included defense of the American homeland. Domestically, it would now include protection of critical infrastructure such as energy, banking and finance, telecommunications, transportation, water systems, and cyber networks. America’s expansion into the world that began in the 19th century resulted in a broadening of the external portion of this core interest to now include components like protection against WMD proliferation, freedom of movement, access to key facilities, and assurance that U.S. national security institutions are transformed to meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

Economic Well-Being: “Promotion of (American) international trade and investment, including protection of United States private economic interests in foreign countries.” The 19th century American entry onto the world stage also ensured that this core interest would evolve to now incorporate expanded global economic growth through free markets and trade, to include the advance of globalization.

Democratic Values: Until the 20th century, this core interest was confined to ensuring that the domestic democratic process and associated values framed the traditional American tenets of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The nation’s continued expansion into the world witnessed a change that in the 21st century can be said to include the promotion of democracy and human rights abroad.

All three of these, now 21st century core interests, have also evolved as a result of the American experience in the aftermath of the two world wars of the 20th century into what can be considered a fourth core interest for the United States:

Stable and Secure World Order: A favorable world order based on the “establishment of a peaceful international environment in which disputes between nations can be resolved without resort to war and in which collective security rather than unilateral action is employed to deter or cope with aggression.” Requirements for global stability in the 21st century world would also include secure alliances and coalitions, the security of regions or countries in which the U.S. has a sizable economic stake, and the need to respond to humanitarian or other concerns, such as response to natural and manmade disasters, protecting the global environment, minimizing destabilizing refugee flows, and support for health problems like HIV/AIDS and food and water shortages.

Realism or Morality-Based Interests

Once the appropriate interests have been determined, the next question is why should the actor care enough to do anything about them. Is the underlying rationale for any kind of action to be one of realism or morality, or can both be utilized to explain the need to pursue certain interests? The complexity of the international system creates a decision-making problem that forces the crafter of national interests to make hard “choices concerning moral and national values; national treasure and even blood; and the time, energy, and influence that a government expends on external matters.”

The realist school of thought is founded on the premise that as a tool for the policymaker the national interest is intended to identify what is in the best interest of his state in its relations with other states. The term “best” is defined in terms of power and security. Realists view national security as the primary basis of a state’s national interest because of the threat of anarchy and constraints on sovereign states that are part of the international system. Anarchy in the international system would be manifested as “disorder, disarray, confusion, or chaos.” This could either be interpreted as a description of the general condition of the international system, or as the absence of any authoritative institutions, rules, or norms that are more powerful than any sovereign state actor and, thus, have the ability to ensure security in the overall system. The result is a lack of security for the actors that are members of the system.

In addition to anarchy, realists are also very sensitive to threats to a state’s interests that are posed by “external constraints on their freedom of maneuver from international treaties, the interests and power of other states, and other factors beyond the control of the (state) such as geographic location and dependence on foreign trade.”

According to realism, the absence of security caused by anarchy and constraints in the system causes states to orient their interests on “the acquisition and management of power,” more often than not to be related to some form of the military element of national power. The result, according to Morgenthau, is the need to focus an actor’s national interests on meeting its security requirements by “protect(ing) (its) physical, political, and cultural identity against encroachments by other nations.”

For the national interest, the emphasis in realism is on doing what is primarily and almost solely to the advantage of that particular state actor. It is done with an express focus on power and security. In contrast, morality-based interests are defined “more broadly to encompass intangible values like human rights, freedom from economic deprivation, and freedom from disease.” While military power could still be the national power element of choice, morality-based interests would promote concepts such as “the values of national self-determination and economic egalitarianism.” The last part of the 20th century witnessed a surge in support for these kinds of morality-based interests through the execution of humanitarian intervention in places like Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Humanitarian intervention is “armed interference in a sovereign state by [other states] with the . . . objective of ending or reducing suffering within the first state. That suffering may be the result of civil war, humanitarian crisis, or crimes by the first state including genocide.” Moralitybased interests are not developed only to benefit the actor that crafts the interest. Rather, they are designed so other actors in the international system are also likely to benefit.

Given the complex world of the 21st century, neither one of these approaches is likely to be the sole rationale for why any given interest will be developed to guide policymaking. The bipartisan Commission on America’s National Interests assessed that the difference between

realism and morality-based interests was more an alternative expression of valuation between the two as opposed to two dichotomous poles in contraposition to each other. The American people are oriented on the survival and well being of the United States, while at the same time, owing much to historically embedded values, they are concerned about human rights and the welfare of individuals in other countries.

In addition, Joseph Nye, the Dean of the Kennedy School at Harvard and clear promoter of the morality component through his advocacy of soft power, argues that national interests are a set of shared priorities that often include issues of human rights and democracy. “A democratic definition of the national interest does not accept the difference between a morality-based and an interest [realism]-based foreign policy.” There is both constant tension and constant cooperation between the two underlying rationales that help guide the formation of interests. Given the situation of the moment, each one will have its own applicability. Henry Kissinger, a most noted supporter of the realist school, described it best when he stated that:

The alleged dichotomy of pragmatism (realism) and morality seems to me a misleading choice. Pragmatism without a moral element leads to random activism, brutality, or stagnation. We must always be pragmatic about our national security. We cannot abandon national security in pursuit of virtue. But beyond this bedrock of all policy, our challenge is to advance our principles in a way that does not isolate us in the long run.

The issues associated with the 21st century world will require the crafter of national interests to simultaneously be both a pragmatic realist and an advocate of morality. Based on circumstances, sometimes one theoretical foundation will have greater influence than the other for the development of interests. With all of the many complex issues that will be present in the 21st century, this is likely to be true for American policymakers so long as the United States intends to maximize its influence on a global basis.

Categorization and Intensity of Interests

In order for the crafter of national interests to determine what types of resources to allocate in what amount toward the attainment of an interest, he must understand the categorization and determination of the intensity of the interest. This part of the crafting process is necessary to address key policy questions like: Which issues matter most? Why should people care? How much should the populace be willing to pay to deal with identified threats or take advantage of recognized opportunities?

The determination of priority—usually expressed in terms of the intensity of an interest—is crucial because, from the perspective of the policymaker, interests may very well come into conflict with each other. This conflict could be over the resources that an actor would require to attain the interests, including the time and attention of key decision makers. Such resources are likely to be limited in some manner for any decision making body, thus requiring prioritization before the interest crafting process is complete.

The most difficult problem in this part of the process is usually the determination of the intensity or stake that an actor has in a specific issue. The leadership of the interest crafting actor must address its desire to influence issues and events, both external and internal, its willingness to use any or all elements of national power to defend or advance certain interests in preference to others, and potentially its willingness to do so at the expense of other actors.

Categorization is important not only because it can be used as a framework for systematic evaluation of national interests, but also because it can also provide “a way to distinguish immediate from long-range” interest concerns using time as a basis. Identified academic sources used between two and four different categories of interests, and two National Security Strategies published during the Clinton Administration used three categories. The categories are designed to delineate the different levels of intensity, or order of priority for any respective interest.

The principal difference amongst these approaches is whether they use a separate category for survival interests, or whether they consider survival interests and vital interests essentially one and the same. “The major difference between a survival interest and a vital interest” is “in the nature and imminence of a military threat” to the actor. Both terms address the life of the actor, one deals with the imminent danger of death while the other is only potentially fatal. In this case, the time difference is the key. If one believes there are specific interests where the very survival or existence of the actor, and little more, is at stake, then four categories are necessary.

For purposes of this assessment, using the work of Neuchterlein, Art, and The Commission on America’s National Interests, this chapter will use four prioritized categories of intensity, from high to low (Survival, Vital, Important, Peripheral):

Survival

These represent the single most important interests for any actor. This is the very essence of the actor’s existence—the protection of its citizens and their institutions from attack by enemies, both foreign and domestic. It addresses an imminent threat of attack and is an interest that cannot be compromised. If not attained, it will “bring costs that are catastrophic, or nearly so.” Whatever can be done would be done to ensure the survival of the actor, to include the use of military force.

Examples: Prevent, deter, and reduce the threat of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons attacks on the interest crafting actor or its military forces abroad; Ensure the survival of allies and their active cooperation in shaping an international system in which the actor crafting the interest can thrive; Prevent the emergence of hostile major powers or failed states on the borders of the actor crafting the interest.

Vital

A vital interest exists when an issue is so important to an actor’s well being that its leadership can only compromise up to a certain point. Beyond that point, compromise is no longer possible because the potential harm to the actor would no longer be tolerable. If the interest is achieved, it would bring great benefit to the actor; if denied, it would carry costs to the actor that are severe but not catastrophic. Such costs could severely prejudice but not strictly imperil the ability of the actor’s government to safeguard and enhance the well being of its populace.

Examples: Prevent the regional proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and delivery systems; prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon in important regions; promote the wellbeing of allies and friends and protect them from external aggression.

Important

These interests would be significant but not crucial to the actor’s well being. They could cause serious concern and harm to the actor’s overseas interests, and even though the result may be somewhat painful, would be much more likely be resolved with compromise and negotiation,

rather than confrontation. It could increase its “economic well being and perhaps its security” and, thus, contribute to “making the international environment more congenial” to its overall interests. The potential value, as well as potential loss of these interests, would be moderate and not great. Important interests differ from vital and survival interests in the degree of danger perceived to the actor, and the amount of time available to find a peaceful solution to the issue.

Examples: Promote pluralism, freedom, and democracy in strategically important state actors as much as feasible without destabilization; discourage massive human rights violations in foreign countries; prevent and, if possible at low cost, end conflicts in strategically less significant geographic regions.

Peripheral

These interests neither involve a threat to the actor’s security or the well-being of its populace, nor seriously impact the stability of the international system. They are desirable conditions, but ones that have little direct impact on the ability of the actor to safeguard its populace.

Examples: Promoting the economic interests of private citizens abroad; enlarging democracy everywhere for its own sake; preserving the territorial integrity or political constitution of other actors everywhere.

The Influence of Interests on 21st Century Policy and Strategy Making

Just as the development of national interests is complex, so is the actual application of interests in the policy and strategy formulation process. The importance of national interests to the process is significant, as described by Lord Palmerston, the British foreign minister in 1856: “When people ask me . . . for what is called a policy, the only answer is that we mean to do what may seem to be best, upon each occasion as it arises, making the interests of our country one’s guiding principle.”

As we have seen, the crafter participating in the development of interests must take the following issues into account: How flexible can the interest of the moment be in relation to the actor’s core interests of the period? Must the interest be based on either realism or morality, or rather; can it be some combination of the two? Where does the interest fit in terms of how it is to be categorized with what degree of intensity?

Perhaps the most complicating factor that the crafter must take into account will be the influence of domestic politics on the interest formulation process. The concept that resource allocation by type and quantity will be impacted by the identification of the interest designed to guide a policy creates a critical linkage between the two. The connection is key because, in a democracy, it is the government of a state actor that will have to sustain the investment of resources required to attain the interest. Interests with greater fidelity and less ambiguity are easier for governments and populations to support because they have a clearer idea of why it is they are being asked to do something, like allocate money or military forces. At the same time, such a detailed understanding could lead to a lack of support on the part of either the government, the people, or parts thereof, if the interest is assessed to be too low on the scale of intensity.

If they are to develop relevant and executable 21st century interests, a most important understanding for those participating in the interest development process must be that they are endowed with a degree of flexibility allowing them to discern the limits of domestic politics in

terms of what types of interests are likely to be supportable. This must entail the provision of the maximum amount of data available for the development and resulting identification of the interests at hand. The greater the fidelity and degree of consensus on categorization and level of intensity, the greater the possibility that the public will support actions to protect or advance the interest.

But even with proper addressal of all the most important issues, resulting in a logical, supportable interest, at times governments and populations do not support some interests with a high level of intensity. Conversely, political bodies often support other interests that are identified with a low level of intensity. The explanation for this behavior is typically found in the internal political decision making of the actor. For example, sometimes domestic lobbies exercise a significant amount of influence on parliaments or the American congress, with resulting impact on decisions that determine whether some interests will be supported at the level necessary to achieve attainment.

One such example comes from the period between 1992 and 2001 when the relatively small Armenian lobby in Congress, strongly supported by the Armenian American community, prevented the United States from providing any direct aid to Azerbaijan. This was in response to the Azerbaijani blockade of Armenia, which was at war with Azerbaijan over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. American government policymakers felt it important to provide support for Azerbaijan because it was just emerging from the former Soviet Union and lay in a very sensitive geographic region bordering the Caspian Sea and Iran. However, they were prevented from doing so even though assistance to Azerbaijan could have fallen within the parameters of a vital interest in an effort to protect the state and its Caspian Sea-based hydrocarbon resources from external aggression.

To recapitulate, the interest crafting process should include the following to ensure the greatest opportunity for the development of interests that are both appropriate and supportable for any actor. These issues and questions must be addressed during the course of the process (the conclusion of which is when the national interest is identified and ready for use to guide the development of policy and strategy):

- They should be designed to tell the policymaker why and how much he should care about an issue. Part of this is framed by the determination of where realism and morality fit in the process.
- Interests help determine what kind and how much attention should be given to challenges or threats, as well as opportunities.
- They also assist the policymaker in identifying key questions to address during the policy formulation process. Examples could include:
 - How are current developments affecting the actor's interests?
 - Are hostile forces able to negatively impact the actor's interests?
 - Is there sufficient power (both military and non military) available to protect the actor's interests?
 - Which issues matter the most? Where do they fit in terms of the interest prioritization levels of intensity? Survival, Vital, Important, or Peripheral?
 - Why should people care?

- How much would the populace be willing to pay to deal with identified threats and challenges or take advantage of recognized opportunities? Is it enough?

Summary

In the end, while some may believe as Lord Palmerston stated to the House of Commons in 1848 that “we have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies. (Only) our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow,” the challenges and opportunities found in the 21st century will require the flexibility to craft interests that can work in this complex world, writ large. They may be rationalized in terms of either realism or a morality-based approach, or by a combination thereof in accordance with the particular circumstances of the issue. In turn, this rational determination is likely to drive how future policymakers decide to categorize and prioritize future interests. It will not be easy, but it must be done.