

National Interest: a Principal Factor in Foreign Policy Formulation.

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Abstract

Throughout history, individuals, groups and nation-states have appealed to the national interest of their states to justify the policies that they preferred. In their bid to defend the national interests, nations have taken various actions towards one another in the international system. All nation-states, whether big or small, developed or developing, rich or poor place their national interest at the forefront when formulating their foreign policies. This paper seeks to x-ray the inextricable link between national interest and foreign policy; who within the state defines and determines the national interest of the state which is a principal factor in foreign policy formulation; how and why is national security deciding factor in foreign policy formulation.

Introduction

The concept of national interest has always taken and will continue to take centre stage in the foreign policies of sovereign and independent states. There is no degree of certainty as to the definition of national interest, and there is no consensus among statesmen, scholars and practitioners of international politics as to the nature and constitution of the national interest of a state.

Nevertheless, Hans Morgenthau made us understand that all foreign policies of nations “must consider survival as their minimum requirement since national interest is identified with national survival”. The national interest of a nation must be linked to that state’s desire to survive. It is linked with security which could be economic, political, military or ideological security that must not be exposed to external threat. This is in agreement with Van, Dyke’s (1957) assertion that “national security relate to the ultimate desire that the state survives and lives without serious external threat to its values or interest which are regarded as important or vital. This means that all nations are therefore compelled to protect their physical, political, economic and possibly, their cultural identity against being encroach upon by other nations.

What determines a nation’s interest vary from nation to nation, as different criteria are used to determine what constitutes the national interests of nations. The question of who defines the national interest of a nation has always come up when scholars try to analyse approaches to foreign policy formulation vis-a-vis national interest. In trying to answer this question, Alade (1997) stated that national interest is often determined by the interest of the dominant class who control the

state's government machinery. This is a testimony that it is the elites in the state that determine what should be of interest to that state which forms the platform for its foreign policy formulation.

Analysis Of The Concept Of Foreign Policy

There are many definitions of the concept "Foreign policy" as there are many writers on the subject. Alade 1997 defines foreign policy as "the actions of a state towards external environment and the conditions, usually domestic, under which those decisions are formulated". He went further to assert that "in pursuit of their goals and national interests, states devise and follow certain courses, principles and standards of action called policies". These courses, principles and standards, according to him are the means by which states seek to attain their objectives or goals and the measure they use to judge and evaluate their interests and conduct in world politics.

Although Aluko (1981) in concordance with the assertion that there is no universally accepted definition of foreign policy, outlined three common features in the conduct of foreign policy (a) foreign policy is a dynamic process. In other words, it is capable of changing (b) it is a product of interaction between the domestic and external environment (c) foreign policy is not only confined to the work of the foreign service.

Foreign policy of any nation is often determined by the interest of the dominant class in that nation controlling the machinery of governance. This goes a long way to say that the foreign policy of a state is determined by what the elite in that state perceives to be in the national interest (Alade, 1997). In agreeing with the above view, some scholars in international relations have argued that foreign policy "is a coordinated strategy which institutionally designated decision makers seek to manipulate the international environment in order to achieve certain national goal "foreign policy is not something applied only abroad existing in a compartment distinct from domestic policy; they are inevitably both aspect of state's total national policy". To this end, national policies are foreign policies to any extent that they affect or influence other states.

Foreign Policy And National Interest

In trying to conceptualize what national interest is or what it ought to be, many scholars in international relations have come out with various definitions which tend to bring out the extreme ambiguity of the concept. While Robert Osgood describes national interest as a "state of affairs valued solely for its benefit to the nation", Hans Morgenthau (1973) defines it as "political traditions and the total culture context within which a nation formulates its foreign policy. Morgenthau went further to contend that "no nation can have true guide as to what it must do and what it needs to do in foreign policy without accepting national interest as that guide."

From the above definitions by these eminent scholars, it can be deduced that that national interest of a state is that state's goals and ambitions whether economic, military or cultural. The national interest of a state is multifaceted, the primary of which is the state's survival and security. Other important components of a state's interest are the pursuit of wealth, economic growth and power. There are other states today that regard the preservation of their culture as of primary importance.

Niccollo Machiavelli who belonged to the realist school of thought was regarded as the first political thinker to advocate for the primacy of national interest in international relations among nations. Later the notion of national interest in interaction among nations dominated European politics. This led states to embark on wars for selfish reasons. It can then be conveniently said that a foreign policy geared towards pursuing national interest is the foundation of the realist school of thought in international relations. This realist school reached its greatest heights at the Congress of Vienna with the practice of the balance of power, which amounted to balancing the national interests of several great and lesser powers in Europe. Methernich of Austria was celebrated as the principal artist and theoretician of this balancing. However, the notion of national interest and balancing of power become much criticized after the bloody debacle of the first world war, and the concept of the balance of power was replaced with the idea of collective security, whereby all members of the league of nations “would consider an attack upon one as an attack upon all”, thus deterring the use of violence forever. The league of nations did not work, partially because the United States did not join and partially because in practice nations did not always find it “in the national interest” to deter each other from the use of force.

Today, the concept of “national interest” is often associated with political realists who wish to differentiate their policies from “idealistic” policies that seek either to inject morality into foreign policy or promote solutions that rely on multilateral institutions which might weaken the independence of the state. A considerable disagreement exists in every country over what is or is not in “the national interest”. The term often invoked to justify isolationist and pacifistic policies.

In their submission, Offiong and Oriakhi (2004) argued that there is no global consensus as to what constitutes the national interest of a state. However, they identified national interest as a struggle for power and national survival. “Nevertheless, so long as the main stream of international politics remains the struggle for power by various actors (nations) all foreign policies of nations, as Hans Morgenthau advocates, must consider survival as their minimum requirement since national interest is identified with national survival”. (Offiong and Oriakhi 2004) positioning power as a core factor of national interest, they see power as a force to reckon with as “nations are compelled to protect their physical, political and cultural identity against being encroached upon by other nations”. Their view is married to Morgenthau’s assertion that “statesmen think of national interest in terms of power. The power here could be economic power, political power, military power or cultural power”. This was captured by Tunde Adeniran (1993) when he argued that “when statesmen and bureaucrats are expected or are required to act in the national interest, what is meant is that they are being called upon to take action on issues that would improve the political situation, the economic and social well being, the health and culture of the people as well as their political survival”.

Nations formulate their foreign policy in a way that they put into consideration how such policies will affect their national interest. Before a foreign policy is formulated, a state must have an idea of what her national interest is. “Consequently, nation states conceive their foreign policies, and act in the international system in such a way that their national interests are not jeopardized”. There is no doubt here therefore, that the national interest of a nation is of paramount importance to her during her foreign policy formulation and implementation. It is the national interest of a state that motivates that state to act the way it acts in the international system.

What determines a nation's national interest?

When defining national interest, people often want to know what criteria are used in defining and determining what a nation's interest are vis-a-vis its relation with other states. Some analysts believe that economic criteria should be used as the determinant of national interest.

“Any policy that enhances a state's economic position is seen to be in the national interest. Improving a country's balance of trade, strengthening a country's industrial base, or guaranteeing a country's access to oil, natural gas, or other energy or non-fuel mineral resources may all be considered to be in a country's national interest”. This goes to buttress Alade's (1997) argument that all nations are interested in economic well-being, economic stability and prosperity which see such a nation fighting vigorously against unemployment, inflation, and unfavorable trade relations with others.

Another criterion which has sometimes been seen as the predominant criteria is the ideological criteria which most nations have used to justify both their legitimacy and their policies. “A Western liberal-democratic state in most cases sees its interests paralleling the interests of other Western liberal-democratic states, a poverty-stricken state of the Third World regularly take side with other nations of the third world.

Military security or advantage is another prominent criteria for determining national interest with force playing such a prominent role in international relations, states perhaps only naturally look to military security as a minimum determinant of their national interest.

Proponent of military security argue that a chief responsibility of any state is to provide safety for its inhabitants. They argue that the best way to achieve that safety is through military advantage.

The types of government a nation has plays prominent role in determining the focus of that nation's national interests. While government of western-liberal democracies often take into account the wishes and desires of various interest groups that wield domestic political power, governments with dictatorial leanings define their national interest without views and inputs from democratic interest groups.

Who Defines National Interest

National interest has always played and will continue to play important role in the formulation of foreign policies of sovereign states. As stated earlier, even though there is no generally acceptable definition of what constitutes the national interest of nation states, Ugwu (1986) sees national interest as a concept that “serves as a convenient base to encompass all strategies employed in the international interactions of states to ensure the perseverance of the stated goals of society”. She maintains that these goals cannot be actualized without a clear perception of the core values of the society. It is imperative to note here that national interest should not be considered without regard to their global implications.

Ugwu, in trying to explicate Frankel's categorization of national interest asserts that national interest falls into two distinct categories. The first category she calls "Aspiration" and the second she calls "Operational". She said in making this distinction, Frankel recognizes that nations usually have a vision of a set of ideal goals which they may fail to actively pursue or implement because of environmental limitations. These limitations could be external or domestic. "In that case, the interest remains at the aspiration level, but capable of being revived toward effectiveness when conditions improve". (Ugwu, 1986). Commenting on the second category, she posits that "a state can claim to operationalise its national interest when it possesses the capability to achieve its stated objectives. When proclamations of objectives outweigh capability, national interest remains a non-operational aspiration". (Ibid).

No matter the category a state's national interest may find itself, the salient questions often asked (i) who defines national interests? (ii) Are national interests a dynamic process i.e do they change with a change in government (iii) which group or groups within a state **determine** what the national interest of that state are?

In answering the last question which is of paramount relevance to this paper Alade (1997) averred that national interest is often determined by the interest of the dominant class controlling the machinery of governance. This goes a long way to say or conclude that the foreign policy of a state is determined by what the elites in that state perceive to be in the national interest. Throughout history leaders and the elites in the state have appealed to the national interest to justify the policies they cherish. Hannibal was convinced, and he believed that the national interest of Carthage dictated war against Rome until Carthage was defeated by the Romans in the Punic Wars. Without considering the United State's friendly disposition toward France, Thomas Jefferson promptly informed the French emperor that the United States considered whoever possessed New Orleans in Louisiana to be "our natural and habitual enemy" when it was discovered that Napoleon intended to occupy New Orleans as part of a secret agreement with Spain since the importance of New Orleans was to the national interest of the United States. Thomas Jefferson did not only buy New Orleans, but the entire Louisiana Territory. Today, Louisiana is one of the states of the United States of America. The above two scenarios show how leaders in the state can determine what the national interest of that state is or should be. To this extent, it is therefore, not out of place to say that foreign policy is often conducted for the benefit of the decision-making elite.

This is often the case where foreign economic policies are involved. This view is also captured by Stephen (1992) who observed correctly that this is so because it is the elite group in the state that dominate the state apparatus, which in turn controls domestic economic structures within a corporatist framework. He further observed that "this process is facilitated by the non-democratic structures of the overwhelming majority of African states, the general absence of what could be classed as effective public opinion, and the strong governmental control exerted over the media".

National Security As A Deciding Factor In Foreign Policy Formulation

Until now, no precise definition has been agreed upon to the concept of national security. Van Dyke (1957) in his submission asserts that national security relates to "the ultimate desire that the state survives and lives without serious external threat to values or interest which are regarded as

important or vital”. According to him, “the values or interests to be kept secure must be selected and defined; the nature and extent of foreign threats must be appraised; the degree of security sought must be determined; and the methods of promoting security must be selected”. It has therefore, become difficult to explain the analytical entity of the conventional approach to national security in a coherent manner. There are competing paradigms, assertions and divergent conclusions within the approach. The literature of the conventional western approach shares some major commonalities in understanding the phenomenon of national security. Those commonalities are: the unitary conception of national security in terms of a “high political-strategic” dimension; the emphasis on coercive power as the instrument to preserve national security; the pre-occupation with management technique aspects of national security; and lastly the heavy reliance on environmental determinism on the system level (Azar and Moon 1984).

The first commonality is the conception of national security in terms of diplomatic-strategic factors. A diplomatic conception of national security in turn assumes the existence of external threats which are violent, hostile, or military in form. In other words, national security is understood exclusively in terms of the physical protection of nation states from external military threats.

Thus, Danus (1977) for example defines national security as the “prevention of property damage injury and loss of life caused by military means. The nature of such threats, according to Handrieder and Buel(1979) involves “all types of external aggression, espionage, hostile reconnaissance, sabotage, subversion, annoyance and other inimical influences’ exercised by adversaries”. Even Walter Lipman understood national security in this manner, suggesting that national security implies the extent to which “the state is not in danger of having to sacrifice core values if it wishes to avoid war and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by victory in such a war, and that security rises and falls with the ability of a nation to deter an attack, or to defeat it”. (Lipman 1943).

Explicit here is the notion that the source of the threat is external, and its nature is military and coercive.

This understanding of national security places the military dimension of national security at the top hierarchy of national core values. Furthermore, threats to national security are easily identifiable: war, border conflicts, terrorism, and other forms of cover and/or overt hostile military behaviours exhibited by adversaries. National security, thus, involves the development, maintenance, and exercise of coercive and behavioural power. Any shifts in absolute or relative coercive power may in fact or in prospect, trigger new security problems. Thus the accumulation of “power commodities” such as economic growth, and the like constitute the essential pre-requisites to the preservation of national security. Here, the relative and absolute inventories of power commodities have become the most important indicator of a country’s national security.

Bobrow and Stoker (1978), Morgenthau (1950) Hertman (1978) and Cline (1980) among others have recommended, under this line of reasoning, the effective accumulation of power stocks. The accumulation of power commodities determines ultimately the level of national security capability. It is seen as a coercive process with behavioural outcome such as the protection and extension of

vital values of nation-state (i.e. one party can influence the behaviour of the other by coercive means). This coercive behaviour dimension of power is best manifested in the form of military force.

In the words of Stressinger (1962) “power in the last analysis, must rest on the capacity of physical force”. It is this logic that has brought the military dimension of national security to be top of the national security agenda. Military component of power thus, becomes the ultimate criterion by which the overall levels of power potential and national security capability are measured and judged.

Since the concept of national security is ambiguous and somehow, controversial, no consensus therefore, exists on the notion of national interest. National security, therefore, covers a broad spectrum of vital national interests, such as organic survival of a given national population, protection of sovereignty, well-being of citizens, and political status and prestige (Azar and Moon 1984). The above position of these duo is corroborated by Knorr and Trager who observed that “national security concerns arise when vital or core national values are threatened by external actions or events. What is regarded as “vital” is a matter of subjective judgment depending on a nation’s hierarchy of values (Knorr and Trager 1977). For example, during period of acute economic depression or external economic disturbance, the hierarchy of “vital” values may shift in favour of economic ones, and thereby outpacing other core values previously perceived and agreed upon by a state.

Defining economic security in terms of “the absence of threat of severe deprivation of economic welfare” Krasue and Nye (1975) argue that economic security has become one of the most important national security agenda items, equally or more important than military-strategic ones, certainly, in the absence of military tensions affecting physical security, the maintenance of a standard of living consistent with the society’s culture may become the core value of national security concern.

Another important dimension of national security as posited by Azar and Moon is the growing ecological scarcity and its implication for the survival of a national population. “The rise and decay of national population at the interface with environmental constraints has been a long standing historical theme. Yet the application of this theme to conflict theories has been a recent phenomenon”. (Azar and Moon 1984). There is great significance of the ecological dimension in identifying national security dilemmas. Eminent scholars like Brown (1977), Ashley (1981) have noted that the security of a nation-state is more related to an organic dependence of its national population to its physical environment rather than to physical protection of a nation-state from external military threats. “This stems from the realization that the national population constitutes the main component of the nation-state, and it is an organic unit that cannot survive without a proper resource space for population expansion and consumption. In this sense, national security involves the continual ability of a nation to keep space with its rising domestic economic and resource demands either through external expansion of its ecological resources space or by domestic adjustment”.

Azar and Moon argue that if these domestic adjustments are not attained at a reasonable cost within national boundaries, new types of adjustments such as trade expansion and/or territorial expansion by force have to be devised which often extend national boundaries. They went further to observe that “Today’s developing countries experience constant population growth, yet they lack domestic resources to cope with the population pressures. Chronic food and energy shortages are often a daily reality in these states. In addition, the level of technological innovation is low, and technological dependence on the West is growing. At the sametime, developing countries are incapable of external expansion as a result poor military and economic capabilities” (Azar and Moon, 1984).

Conclusion

Since there is no generally accepted definition of national interest it is agreed that national interest vary from state to state, even though the Brookings institution’s definition as “the general and continuing ends for which the nation acts can be accepted as the most appropriate definitions. Statesmen profess to attach great importance to whatever they consider be of their national interest, as there is no global consensus as to what constitutes the national interest of a state. The believe by some foreign policy analysts that economic military power and ideological learning have always been paramount determining a nation’s national interest in relation to its interaction with other nations has been carefully looked into and analyzed. Attention is drawn to the fact that national security which a married to a nation’s interest should not be viewed exclusively from military-strategic perspective. Third World countries are endowed with many security contexts in which the nature, source, actors and value involved vary from one country to another. We cannot, therefore, talk for foreign policy in isolation from national interest, with national security as a salient component.

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