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NATIONAL INTERESTS

Grand Purposes or Catchphrases?

James F. Miskel

It has become virtually a matter of faith among statesmen and academics that foreign policy is best made when national interests are clearly defined and articulated.¹ How best to define and prioritize national interests can, of course, be a matter of considerable dispute. Thus the controversies that swirled around U.S. policy toward Bosnia and Kosovo, for example, have been sometimes understood as reflections of fundamental disagreement about how U.S. national interests in the Balkans should be defined and prioritized relative to other national interests in the region and other parts of the world. Implicit in these and similar debates about national interests and foreign policy are two assumptions. One is that national interests can be defined precisely. This assumption is obviously true, although actually defining and prioritizing specific interests may be rather difficult in the contemporary era, with growing interdependence among nations and no superpower competition. The second assumption is that states-

men actually attempt to define national interests with precision. Judging from recent history, this assumption warrants challenge.

At least in recent years, statesmen have been reluctant to define national interests with anything other than Delphic ambiguity. Like the ancient Greek oracle, famous for its double-entendre predictions and deliberately obscure advice, today's statesmen routinely offer "definitions" of the national interest so broad that they can be, and in fact are, interpreted in more than one way and in any case reveal little about the actual long-range goals of the nation.

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Very generally speaking, there are two basic schools of thought about how national interests should be defined. One school, the avatars of which might be realist statesmen like Otto von Bismarck in the nineteenth century and Richard Nixon in the twentieth, holds that national interests should be defined in terms of a state's tangible power and sphere of influence relative to those of other states. The single most important form of tangible power for this realist school is military (cannons and rifles in Bismarck's era, nuclear missiles and bombers in Nixon's); the statesman's ultimate challenge is to maintain a balance of military power that is favorable to his or her state. Hence, realists tend to believe that the United States has no important national interests at stake in places like Bosnia and Kosovo, because events there have only a marginal effect on the global distribution of military power.

The other school holds that national interests should be defined more broadly to encompass intangible, but nevertheless highly prized, values like human rights, freedom from economic deprivation, and freedom from disease. In their vastly different ways, Woodrow Wilson and V. I. Lenin might be thought of as exemplars of this school. Both leaders employed the military power of their states to promote, respectively, the values of national self-determination and economic egalitarianism. Advocates of American military action in Bosnia and Kosovo, for instance, tended to argue that events in the Balkans are direct affronts to important intangible values and thus must be confronted. They further argued, perhaps as a sop to realists, that if Washington had ignored them, the ability of the United States to wield "soft power" in other areas would have gradually eroded.

For the last century, the foreign policies of the United States and many other countries have been largely shaped by the decisions of statesmen who have charted courses in the middle ground between the two national-interest schools. This hundred-year database suggests that there has been a collective, albeit unexpressed, judgment by practitioners that neither school has it exactly right. It also suggests that whatever they say in public, practitioners have realized that attempts to define national interests in enough detail to serve as actual guides for foreign policy are, all too often, frustrating and ultimately sterile exercises.

Why, then, are Delphic bows toward the altar of national interest virtually de rigueur in public policy and academic circles? The reason, to the cynic's mind, is that justifying decisions on the basis of supposed relationships to national interests—even vaguely defined national interests—is both intellectually and sentimentally gratifying. Obligatory tips of the hat to the national interest have intellectual appeal in that they appear to validate the expectation of scholars, legislators, and voters that statesmen will base their decisions on reasoned

evaluations of the connection between ends and means. After all, without a clear picture of the ends—national interests—objective comparisons of alternative courses of action would be (and, as importantly, would be perceived by voters as being) little more than guesswork.

Allusions to the national interests are sentimentally attractive because they reaffirm the presumption that the expenditures and exertions that result from strategic decisions are made for worthy purposes. Even in nondemocratic

regimes, creating the sense that worthwhile ends are being served is often vital to the mobilization of national effort. Domestic political support from key interest groups, if not from the population as a whole, is often the sine qua non of successful policy im-

The answers to pressing questions about future U.S. policy would seem to depend at least in part on how national interests are defined and prioritized.

plementation, regardless of the nature of the regime. After all, even Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler, the most ruthless of twentieth-century dictators, felt compelled to justify the sacrifices they demanded of their people by connecting those sacrifices to the grand purposes of “socialism in one country” and German territorial expansion, respectively.

Recent policy documents from Washington illustrate a proclivity toward defining national interests with studied imprecision and away from definitions that are specific enough actually to guide policy or to engage the public in a meaningful dialogue about the grand purposes that foreign policy might, and perhaps should, serve. The national security strategy statements issued by presidents more or less annually since the late 1980s are prime examples. These strategy publications were legislatively mandated in 1986 by the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act. Thus it is technically accurate to characterize the annual strategy reports as something that the executive branch publishes without enthusiasm and only because its collective arm has been twisted.

The 1986 legislation specified that the reports were to identify national interests and the strategies being pursued to achieve them, and that both classified and unclassified reports were to be published.² In other words, the legislation makes explicit the congressional assumption that foreign policy is best made and best overseen when national interests are clearly defined. The act required unclassified reports in order to inform Congress as a whole and the public at large. While an unclassified strategy report must be considerably less detailed than its classified sibling, the unclassified documents that have been issued since 1986 have defined national interests so broadly as to raise doubts about whether the

reports serve any constructive purpose in terms of educating or even informing the public.

The December 2000 national security strategy report, which President William Clinton issued only a month before the inauguration of President George W. Bush, is typical. A parting shot, a laundry list of bromides and unfulfilled wishes, the 2000 report nevertheless resembles national security strategy statements from the Clinton and earlier administrations in terms of how those statements defined national interests.³ “Vital interests,” the 2000 report declared, “are those directly connected to the survival, safety, and vitality of our nation. Among these are the physical security of our territory. . . . We will do what we must to defend these interests. This may involve the use of military force, including unilateral action, where deemed necessary or appropriate.”⁴

At one level, this “definition” simply restates the obvious. There can hardly be any need to explain to the American public, to any other national government on the planet, or even to any terrorist organization, that the U.S. government considers military attacks on or within its sovereign borders injurious to vital American interests. There may be no harm in restating the obvious, but neither is any grand purpose served.

Furthermore, the excerpt above makes clear that this definition of “vital national interest” is intended to cover more than “merely” military attack by a hostile state on the land occupied by the United States or expansion by another state into territory over which the United States claims sovereignty. Plainly, if these were the exclusive foci of the definition, there would hardly be any reason to say that response “may involve the use of military force.” Neither would it be necessary to indicate that threats to vital national interests can be envisioned in response to which unilateral military action would be neither necessary nor appropriate. Yet, as to what those situations might be, the report provides no insight. In other words, this definition of a “vital national interest” provides clarity where the point is obvious but is otherwise vacuous.

The protection of sovereign territory is only one of the national interests that have been defined in overly general terms. Others include “the safety of our citizens both at home and abroad,” “the economic well-being of our society,” and “the protection of our critical infrastructure—including . . . vital human services and government services—from disruption intended to cripple their operation.”⁵ These national interests are so broadly defined as to be the functional equivalent of platitudes. They are catchphrases that no statesman or politician would ever publicly reject—what would be the point?—but that nevertheless play absolutely no meaningful role in the policy formulation process.

No policy maker in Washington would ever declare his or her indifference to the safety of American citizens, to the protection of critical infrastructure, or to

the nation's economic well-being. Simply stating, however, that all three are desirable says nothing about the directions that policy makers intend to take. Nor do such statements do anything to inform or educate the public. Thus, on several counts, the ways in which American national interests are being defined appear to defeat the purpose of Congress in requiring unclassified reports about the goals and directions of the nation's security strategy.

Admittedly, from the perspective of the statesman-navigator charting a particular foreign policy course, there may be practical reasons for preferring the ambiguity of Delphi over the precision of science when it comes to publicly explaining the relationship between the national interests and the nation's foreign and defense policies. Policy formulation and implementation usually require

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some level of agreement, compromise, or political consensus—in effect, marriages of convenience between the executive branch of government and other elements of society. Such marriages are

considerably easier to arrange when the terms are defined only generally than when they are set out in detail. Marriages of convenience between Congress and the executive branch and between the Republican and Democratic parties, however temporary, can be essential to the foreign and defense policy-making processes. They are, indeed, the basis of the shibboleth that politics should end at the water's edge.

A complicating factor in the era of globalization is that nongovernmental entities—such as multinational corporations, humanitarian relief organizations, vested interest groups, and coalitions of concerned citizens, each with its perspectives and issues—have proven that they can influence policy formulation by lobbying and generating pressure through the media. If only through bitter experience, statesmen have come to understand that to express national interests in detailed, specific terms is often to invite political challenge from entities whose special interests are adversely affected by some nuance.

Another reason for the practitioner's preference for general descriptions of national interest is that specific formulations can have unintended consequences. The most infamous example is North Korea's attack on South Korea in 1950 after Washington had indicated that the latter was outside the geographic zone of vital U.S. national interests. Such instances can be cited as proof that ambiguity serves a strategically useful purpose; nonetheless, it is not always the wisest course. Indeed, ambiguity appears as likely as specificity to send the kind of inadvertent signals that creates crises. It is, for example, conceivable that until the air war on Serbia in 2000, Slobodan Milosevic and the other perpetrators of

human rights abuses in the Balkans were emboldened by the apparent uncertainty of the United States as to its national interests in the former Yugoslavia. Further, it seems quite likely that the platitudinous expressions by Washington and other governments in the mid-1990s about the importance of human rights were actually interpreted in Rwanda as signals of indifference toward genocide in sub-Saharan Africa.

A negative consequence of another order is the shallowness of the political alliances negotiated among Congress, the White House, Democratic and Republican activists, and special-interest groups on the basis of vaguely defined and ambiguously prioritized national interests. Marriages of convenience can very quickly mutate into separations of convenience—perhaps a minor problem when the issues themselves merit only modest and brief bursts of energy from the body politic, but potentially of great significance for matters that are serious and lasting.

Over the long term, ambiguity imposes a heavy opportunity cost in terms of forfeited occasions in which the public might have been educated about grand purposes—enduring issues and long-term objectives being addressed by the foreign policy establishment. The American public is famously uninterested in foreign affairs, and this indifference presumably contributes to its passive acceptance of deliberately vague definitions of national interests. Whether such ambiguity is the “chicken” or the “egg” of the public’s unconcern, democracy suffers when leaders continually defer serious dialogue about how national interests should be defined and prioritized.

The foreign policy establishment has periodically, although not recently, engaged the public and Congress in serious discourse about the national interest; and when it has, enduring public and legislative support for specific grand strategies has resulted. This occurred, for example, during the early 1980s, at the end of the Jimmy Carter administration and the beginning of the Ronald Reagan administration, when there was a broad public debate about the level of U.S. defense spending needed in light of the threat posed by the Soviet Union and its bloc. The result was public support for a multiyear, across-the-board increase in defense spending and for a more assertive foreign policy. Earlier in the Cold War there had been a similar dialogue involving the public and Congress; in the end, the policies of containment and nuclear deterrence were formulated and the Nato treaty was approved. Each of these strategies required and was to receive decades-long political support by the public and financial support by the public’s representatives in Congress.

Another example occurred during the years after World War I, when President Wilson tried to convince the public and Congress that membership in the League of Nations was in the national interest of the United States. Wilson failed, but the public debate had lasting effects. For almost two decades the public and

its elected representatives supported a foreign policy that minimized defense spending and commitments outside the hemisphere, particularly commitments with military implications. Indeed, the fact that the outcome of the debate was different than Wilson intended demonstrates the value of serious public discourse in the first place. Had the president been able to attach the nation to the League by executive fiat, its membership would have been futile. The mood of Congress and the public would have denied Wilson support for the expansive foreign and defense strategies that he envisioned as part and parcel of the League of Nations ideal.

A public debate about national interests after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon was, of course, unnecessary, at least with respect to mobilizing public support for homeland security programs and the war against the perpetrators of the attacks and their supporters. There are, however, other aspects of the war on terrorism for which public and congressional support is less certain, because their relationships to the 11 September attacks are indirect.

For example, the direction that the war on terrorism will take after Afghanistan is by no means clear—beyond the fact that it will be a long-term effort. One need not agree that Iran, Iraq, and North Korea are part of an “axis of evil” to

After all, even the most ruthless of twentieth-century dictators felt compelled to justify the sacrifices they demanded of their people by connecting them to grand purposes.

recognize that President Bush’s critics have failed to acknowledge that publicly labeling rogue states is a positive step in terms of debating and defining more rigorously than usual national interests with respect to each. In the process of engaging Congress, and through

it the public, in a substantive dialogue about the nation’s interests in preventing terrorists from acquiring weapons of mass destruction developed by rogue states, the “axis of evil” epithet is preferable to platitudes about the survival and vitality of the United States.

Other issues with indirect but important relationships to homeland security and to the future direction of the war on terrorism are the Arab-Israeli peace process and the concept of “nation building,” assistance in the restoration of collapsed states to viability on the basis of democratic institutions. With respect to the latter, judgments will be required over the next several years about the role the United States should play in nation building in order to prevent future terrorists from finding platforms in the no-man’s-lands of ineffective or failing states. Nation building is not a science. It is an art that takes effort and investment over extended periods of time. In Bosnia, for example, nation building has

been under way since 1996, but the end of the project is not in sight. Should the role of the United States be direct or indirect? Should the work be led by the United Nations or by some multilateral organization, perhaps built for the purpose? The answers to these and other questions would seem to depend at least in part on how U.S. national interests are defined and prioritized. Further, public and congressional support for this complex and expensive task may depend heavily on the depth of the American people's understanding of and commitment to those interests.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is related to the war on terrorism and homeland security because Islamic extremists, and many Muslims generally, condemn the United States for enabling Israel to defend itself and maintain its hold over occupied territory. Since at least 1973, when Secretary of State Henry Kissinger shuttled between Arab and Israeli capitals to negotiate a cease-fire and withdrawal of forces after the Yom Kippur/Ramadan War, the United States has invested considerable time, energy, and resources in pursuit of a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Presidents Carter and Clinton, in the 1970s and 1990s, respectively, were personally engaged in the peace process; during the Reagan and George Bush administrations, the secretaries of state actively promoted settlement. Reagan's secretary of state, George Shultz, negotiated what turned out to be a short-lived peace settlement in 1983; Bush's secretary of state, James Baker, shuttled to the Middle East eleven times in a single year (1991) and hosted an Arab-Israeli peace conference in Madrid.

There were, of course, ebbs and flow in the level of direct U.S. engagement in the peace process, due to judgments at the time about the practical prospects for success. What is remarkable is rather the consistently high level of effort over three decades despite major shifts in the geostrategic environment. U.S. shuttle diplomacy, forward military presence in the eastern Mediterranean, and substantial foreign aid investment in Israel and Egypt started during the Cold War. Today the United States is no longer vying with a rival superpower, and its national interests in the region are presumably either different or, at the very least, less at risk. U.S. strategies, nevertheless, appear to have changed hardly at all. High-level emissaries still shuttle to the Middle East in attempts to mediate; the United States gives more foreign aid to both Israel and Egypt than to any other country; and forward military presence in the eastern Mediterranean continues. The reason is that such enmity and distrust exist between the Palestinians and the Israelis that no true settlement will ever be reached without long-term commitment by the United States. This almost certainly will entail nation-building assistance to the Palestinians, even more foreign aid to Israel (and perhaps to Egypt and other moderate Arab states), and either security guarantees or the actual interposition of American peacekeepers. It may be hard to maintain steady

levels of political support for such sustained efforts if they are “marketed” to the American public and Congress on the basis of catchphrases and buzzwords about national interests.

There may be other policy areas that will also require long-term support from the public and Congress. It is not necessary to identify them here. The point is that for thoroughly practical reasons—specifically, the mobilization and maintenance of resources and commitment for projects that require protracted effort—it would be wise to engage the public and Congress in a meaningful dialogue about the national interests that may be involved. Such a dialogue is simply not possible when national interests are so generally defined that they mean all things to all people. So in this regard, for the future direction of the war against terrorism, the president’s “axis of evil” speech was a useful, clarifying step. The congressional requirement for annual unclassified national security reports, in contrast, has proven to have little value in furthering the debate. Congress would do well to consider whether the public interest would be better served if national security reports were required only once in a presidential term—on the assumption that interests and strategies do not, or at least should not, change annually.

NOTES

1. Examples include Michèle A. Flournoy, ed., *QDR 2001: Strategy-Driven Choices for America’s Security* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense Univ. Press, 2001), pp. 10–1; Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, “Competing Visions for U.S. Strategy,” *International Security*, Winter 1997, pp. 5–53; and Donald E. Neuchterlein, *America Recommitted: United States National Interests in a Restructured World* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1991), pp. 13–22. Indeed, as Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow argue in *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2d ed. (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1999), most analysts assume that nation-states orient their strategic decisions around national interests. Allison and Zelikow argue that the “rational actor model” assumes that statesmen have reasonably clear appreciations of the national interests and act in ways that maximize those interests.
2. Public Law 99-433, sec. 603 (a) (104).
3. William J. Clinton, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (Washington, D.C.: White House, December 1999), p. 1, and *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (Washington, D.C.: White House, May 1997), p. 5; and George Bush, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: White House, August 1991), p. 3.
4. William J. Clinton, *A National Security Strategy for a Global Age* (Washington, D.C.: White House, December 2000), p. 4.
5. *Ibid.*