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From Our January 1958 Issue . . .

Realism in International Politics

Hans Morgenthau

THE PROBLEM OF "REALISM IN FOREIGN POLICY" is a special manifestation of a general philosophic and intellectual problem which has been with us almost since the beginning of Western civilization. There are two fundamental attitudes that a man can take toward a political problem and a social problem in general. Either he can start with the assumption that this problem is the result of some historic incident, of some faulty institution or deficient social arrangement, and that by changing this arrangement or by transforming the institution—that is, by bringing about some kind of reform—the problem can be solved once and for all. Or he can assume that the fundamental problems which have confronted man from the beginning of history are the result not of ephemeral historic configurations but rather stem from the very essence of human nature. They, then, cannot be made to disappear, but they can only be mitigated; they can at best be temporarily submerged or shoved into the background; they can be transformed; but they cannot be eliminated altogether.

Hans Morgenthau, then a professor of political science and director of the Center for the Study of American Foreign Policy at the University of Chicago, delivered this lecture at the Naval War College on 2 October 1957.

Born in Coburg, Germany, in 1904, Morgenthau attended the universities of Berlin, Frankfurt, and Munich, and the Graduate Institute for International Studies at Geneva. Admitted to the bar in 1927, he practiced law in Munich and Frankfurt and taught political science at the University of Geneva. In 1937 Professor Morgenthau came to the United States and was naturalized as an American citizen in 1943. He taught government, law, history, and political science at Brooklyn College, the University of Kansas at Kansas City, and the University of Chicago, where he became professor of political science in 1949. He was the author of articles and books on international law, international politics, and political theory, among them *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (1946), the three-volume *Politics in the Twentieth Century* (1962), and *Politics among Nations* (all of which are still in print). Professor Morgenthau died in 1980.

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In politics, and in international politics in particular, those two attitudes have manifested themselves in the juxtaposition between "realism" and "idealism," or "utopianism." There has been a school of thought, particularly strong since the beginning of the twentieth century and making particular headway in the Anglo-American countries, which believes that what we call "power politics," with all of its disagreeable and dangerous manifestations, is a kind of historic accident—the result, let me say, of the remnants of aristocratic government. For instance, the British philosopher Herbert Spencer believed this when he said that war was the result of aristocratic society; that in an industrial society men would find an outlet for their combative instincts in financial investments, in stock exchange speculations—a somewhat utopian approach, as we now realize.

There are others who believe that a democratic form of government would, by itself, eliminate war and what is called "power politics." Woodrow Wilson is the outstanding example in our country of those who believe that if one could only establish democracy throughout the world one would thereby have eliminated all by itself most of the risks and evils which we have historically associated with foreign policy.

Take, for instance, a school of thought which played an enormous role in the nineteenth century: the idea that free trade, the elimination of trade barriers, all by itself would bring about the millennium in international politics. As the British liberal leader, Richard Cobden, said: "Free trade, what is it? The international law of the Almighty."

Or take the confidence in international law and, more especially, international arbitration. In the late nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century it was quite widely believed that war and international conflict could be eliminated if only all nations would pledge themselves to submit all international disputes to compulsory arbitration.

Finally, the idea has been widely held that international organization *per se* provides a kind of panacea for the ills of international politics; that the very fact of a League of Nations or a United Nations would provide an alternative to what is generally called "power politics."

Perhaps all of this is summed up in the statement of a leader of nineteenth-century British liberalism to the effect that the test of free communities and of democratic societies in future times would be whether or not they had a foreign policy to begin with. In other words, it was the abolition of foreign policy—to get away from this dangerous and risky game—which was at the bottom of those utopian approaches to foreign policy.

It would be a mistake to believe that this utopian approach has been discredited completely by the succession of past disappointments and disillusions. It always reappears in a new garb, in a new setting, in a new formulation, testifying to the innate human tendency to escape from the burdens of power

politics, from the risks and liabilities of power itself, and to find refuge in some kind of millennium, to resort to some kind of panacea which only needs to be put into practice in order to bring mankind the blessings of its beneficial results.

Think, for instance, of the present utopian expectation according to which any drastic change in the Russian system of government or even in the outlook of the present leaders of the Soviet Union would somehow do away with the problems with which the Soviet Union has confronted us since the end of the Second World War. Here, again, we are in the presence of this assumption that the troubles of international politics are the result of some isolated, circumstantial event, such as Stalinism or Bolshevism. Do away with Stalinism or Bolshevism, and you will have done away with the main problems of international politics themselves.

This, it seems to me, is a complete misunderstanding of the nature of international politics. I would say, and I have said many times before, that if the czars still reigned in Russia, that if Lenin had died of the measles at an early age, that if Stalin had never been heard of, but if the power of the Soviet Union were exactly what it is today, the problem of Russia would be for us by and large what it is today. If the Russian armies stood exactly where they stand today, and if Russian technological development were what it is today, we would be by and large confronted with the same problems which confront us today. Certainly we would not have the problem of subversion in the same way in which we have it today, but we would have a bipolar political world, and the United States would have to bend every effort to maintain a balance of power between itself and so powerful a Russia. So the expectation that a change in the form or in the composition of government or even in the outlook of a particular government could materially affect the problems which face us today is a truly utopian expectation.

I could go on and on to give you examples. I'll give you another one which just comes to my mind: the expectation (which was very prevalent in the last year or so of the Second World War) that at the end of that war, with the enemies defeated, we would enter into a kind of millennium from which, again, power politics with all of its manifestations would be dispelled. Secretary of State Cordell Hull, when he came back from the Moscow Conference of 1943, at which the establishment of the United Nations had been agreed upon, said that the United Nations would usher in a new era in foreign policy by doing away with power politics, with alliances, with the armaments race, with spheres of influence, and so forth. And he repeated this utopian expectation much later, in his memoirs.

This is another example of the belief that the difficulties which confront us, the risks which threaten us, the liabilities which we must face in international affairs are the result of some kind of ephemeral, unique configuration; that if

you do away with the latter you will have done away with the liabilities, the risks, and the difficulties as well. This belief is mistaken; for it is the very essence of historic experience that whenever you have disposed of one danger in foreign policy another one is going to raise its head. Once we had disposed of the Axis as a threat to American security, we were right away confronted with a new threat: the threat of the Soviet Union. I daresay if we could, by some kind of miracle, do away tomorrow with the threat which emanates from the Soviet Union, we would very soon be confronted again with a new threat—and perhaps from a very unexpected quarter.

At the foundation of the realist's approach to foreign policy there is the conviction that the struggle for power on the international scene—as the struggle for power on all levels of social interaction—is not the result of some historic accident, of some passing social, constitutional, legal, or economic configuration (think, for instance, of the utopian expectations of Marxism), but that it is part and parcel of human nature itself; that the aspirations for power are innate in human nature; that it is futile to search for a mechanical device with which to eliminate those aspirations; that the wise approach to political problems lies in taking the perennial character of those aspirations for granted—in trying to live with them, to redirect them into socially valuable and beneficial channels, to transform them, to civilize them. This is as much as a man can do with this psychological and social heritage, which he cannot escape. In other words, a realistic approach to foreign policy starts with the assumption that international politics is of necessity a struggle for power; that the balance of power, for instance, is not the invention of some misguided diplomats but is the inevitable result of a multiplicity of nations living with each other, competing with each other for power, and trying to maintain their autonomy.

Now let me turn to some practical problems which illustrate the characteristics of realism in foreign policy as over against the utopian or idealistic approach. Take, again, the balance of power. The balance of power, you may say, is for foreign policy what the law of gravity is for nature; that is, it is the very essence of foreign policy. I remember very well that when I used the term "balance of power" at the beginning of my academic career in the early 30's I met with an unfavorable reaction. "Balance of power" was then a kind of dirty word—something which respectable scholars would not use, at least not in an affirmative sense. It was something not to be investigated, not to be practiced; it was something to be abolished. I remember again very well a lecture I gave in Milwaukee (I think it was in 1944) in which I made the point I just made: that when the war was over there would of necessity be a new balance of power, a new set of problems which we would have to solve—and that more likely than not it would be the Soviet Union which would raise the problems. Many

in the audience seemed to believe that I was a kind of Fascist agent who was trying to perpetuate an evil that they were just in the process of getting rid of.

Take, again, the outstanding example of Woodrow Wilson. Time and again, he most eloquently proclaimed that the purpose of America's intervention in the First World War was to get rid of the balance of power—to replace the balance of power with something else, something different, something better.

I am not at all blind to the shortcomings of the balance of power, but this is beside the point. The real question is: What else have you got to put in place of the balance of power? You have nothing, as long as you have a multiplicity of autonomous nations competing with each other for power.

I am reminded of the story which is told about the earthquake of Lisbon in 1756, when somebody walked around in the devastated streets of Lisbon hawking anti-earthquake pills. He was asked what good they would do. His answer was: "What else would you put in their place?" I am not saying that the balance of power is as useless as are anti-earthquake pills, but I would identify myself with the reply of the hawker by asking: What else have you to put in its place? In other words, to criticize the balance of power for its shortcomings leads nowhere as long as you have no viable alternative with which to replace it.

What we call isolationism in this country—the reflection of the historic fact of America's actual isolation in the nineteenth century—has very much to do with the problem we are discussing. For there is again in twentieth-century isolationism a very strong tendency to believe that a great nation has a choice between an active foreign policy, involving it of necessity in all the risks and disabilities and liabilities which are concomitant with foreign policy, and abstention from foreign policy. In the same way in which Woodrow Wilson and Cordell Hull believed that the United States had a choice between power politics and a United Nations or League of Nations politics, so the isolationist believes that America has a choice between an active foreign policy, pursued with traditional means for traditional ends, and no foreign policy at all. So you see that this somewhat abstract and philosophic discussion with which I started has very practical ramifications.

Take another problem which is of vital importance for our foreign policy and very much misunderstood: the problem of foreign aid. As you well know, every year there is a bitter discussion not about the purposes of foreign aid, not about its practical application, but about the amount of money to be appropriated for the purposes of foreign aid. There exists a considerable confusion on all levels of public debate about the purposes and the policies of foreign aid. At the bottom of the controversy there is again the conflict between the two approaches to foreign policy which we are discussing. One school of thought believes (at least in its extreme form—there are many gradations between the

two extremes) that foreign aid constitutes, as it were, the key to the whole problem of international order and peace. That school of thought makes a series of simple equations: *first,* that foreign aid will lead to a rise in the standard of living; *second,* that a rise in the standard of living will lead to democracy; *third,* that democracy will lead to peaceful foreign policies. I have oversimplified the picture on purpose, but in essence those are the assumptions which underlie the extreme philosophy of foreign aid.

". . .[A] realistic approach to foreign policy starts with the assumption that international politics is of necessity a struggle for power; that the balance of power . . . is the inevitable result of a multiplicity of nations living with each other. . . ."

The over-all assumption which underlies those different assumptions themselves is that if you could raise the standard of living, if you could establish democracy, and if you could thereby promote peaceful foreign policies, you would have solved, as it were, the problem of foreign policy itself—at least with regard to the so-called "underdeveloped areas." This seems to me to be an extremely doubtful assumption, for it can well be maintained from a study—even a very cursory study—of history that it is not the underdeveloped areas of the world which threaten the world with war; it is the higher-developed areas of the world—and, especially, the highest-developed areas of the world—which so threaten us. As long as the Soviet Union was an underdeveloped country, it did not threaten the world, because it did not have the power. It threatened the world verbally or by subversion, but certainly not as the other great power of the world. It became the other great power of the world only after it had left the stage of underdevelopment. One can therefore well maintain the proposition that the industrialization of the underdeveloped area—whatever its other merits may be, whatever may be said in its favor on other grounds—cannot be defended on the ground that it will make for a more peaceful and stable world. Quite on the contrary, more likely than not it will lead to new, unforeseen and unforeseeable problems in international politics.

Take, for instance, Communist China. As long as Communist China remains a backward, underdeveloped nation, it is only a potential threat to the rest of the world. But once 600 million Chinese are in the possession of the modern instruments of industry, then they will become an enormous threat to the rest of mankind, the Soviet Union included. Thus, the terms in which foreign aid is generally discussed and especially in which it is defended present another manifestation of the utopian approach to the problems of foreign policy. What is needed instead is a realistic correlation between foreign aid and the national

interest of the United States. What is the national interest of the United States with respect to the economic development of a particular country, and what kind of foreign aid will serve that interest, if it does serve it at all? It is with such questions that a realistic debate on foreign aid ought to concern itself.

Let us take another problem—and wherever you look you will find a problem which exemplifies this controversy. Take the problem of disarmament. The belief is widespread that disarmament constitutes the key to the problem of international peace. That belief is based again upon a very simple equation: Wars are fought with weapons; diminish the quantity of weapons and you thereby diminish the likelihood of war; do away with all weapons and you will have eliminated the likelihood of war, and you will have solved the most urgent problem of international politics.

In truth, the armaments race is a mere symptom of the actual problem, which does not lie in the possession of weapons but in the existence of unsolved political problems. For instance, as long as the political problems between the United States and the Soviet Union remain unsolved, what you would do by disarmament—if you could have disarmament at all (which I personally doubt very much)—would be to simply change the technology of war; you would not do away with the incidence of war at all. If you were able to abolish atomic weapons (which, of conrse, is a perfectly utopian assumption)—let us suppose you could get an agreement for the outlawing of all atomic weapons and make it stick—what you would have achieved would simply be the reduction of the technology of warfare to the state it had reached at the end of the Second World War. You would simply have made sure that the Third World War would be fought with pre-atomic weapons, at least at the beginning, rather than with atomic weapons—and I grant you that this would be a very important and beneficial thing. But certainly it has nothing to do with the argument that there exists a direct relationship between disarmament and the incidence of war; that by disarmament you can increase the chances for peace or even do away with war altogether.

Certainly a disarmament agreement in itself would have a great and beneficial psychological effect, but this again begs the question because without the relaxation of psychological tensions preceding a disarmament agreement you are not likely to get a disarmament agreement to begin with. The unsolved political problems of necessity intrude into the disarmament negotiations and make the disarmament negotiations simply a reflection of the different attitudes and interests of the nations undertaking them. This was obvious, for instance, in the disarmament negotiations which led to the Washington Treaty of 1922, providing for naval disarmament; it was obvious in the discussions of the disarmament conference at Geneva of the early thirties; and it has been obvious

again in recent times in the disarmament conferences taking place under the auspices of the United Nations.

Each side in those negotiations inevitably regards the negotiations as a particular phase of the over-all struggle for power and tries to gain an advantage in that struggle by putting forward certain proposals relating to disarmament. So I would almost regard it as axiomatic that to start with disarmament is the utopian approach to the problem of war; that any knowledgeable government which starts to try to solve the problem of war by negotiating on disarmament shows that it is not serious about the solution of the problem to begin with. For in the presence of unsolved political problems which have given rise to the armaments race in the first place, it is a mere manipulation—and a necessarily unsuccessful manipulation—of symptoms to try to get a disarmament agreement among nations which are divided by incompatible political interests.

Take, again, another problem in which this basic philosophical conflict becomes obvious. Take the problem of the United Nations, to which I have already briefly referred. It is still widely believed in our country that if you submit a dispute to the United Nations, you have thereby done something politically and morally more meritorious than if you had tried to solve that problem by traditional diplomatic methods. Many of us still hold to the belief (no longer as strongly as we did ten years ago, it is true) that somehow the United Nations has a virtue, or even an efficiency, in terms of the solution of political problems which is superior to that of the traditional methods of diplomacy. In truth, as the United Nations is presently constituted, it is merely an extension of the ordinary traditional diplomatic processes. It is simply another forum in which the struggle for power is fought out, as it has been fought out before the advent of international organizations, in the chancelleries of diplomats and on the battlefields.

It is not a question of principle—moral or otherwise—but a mere question of expediency whether, let me say, the government of the United States wants to use the United Nations for its purposes or does not want to do so. Especially under present conditions, when in terms of the distribution of votes the United States is in an infinitely more difficult position than it was before the drastic extension of the membership of the United Nations a year ago, it becomes much more doubtful from the point of view of the United States whether it is wise to emphasize the role of the United Nations for the foreign policy of the United States.

During the first decade of the United Nations, and, more particularly during the Korean War, the United States could count upon the two-thirds majority in the General Assembly necessary to pass a recommendation. Today, the United States is just barely sure of getting the one-third minority necessary to prevent a two-third majority from forming in support of a recommendation. So while

five years ago, let me say, the United States was able to use the United Nations for many of the purposes of its own foreign policy, today it must rather be satisfied in being able to prevent others from using the United Nations for their purposes. In other words, there has occurred in the distribution of voting power—which, I would say, is the only effective power within the United Nations General Assembly—a drastic and not generally recognized change that works clearly against the interests of the United States. Here, again, you can see not only how intellectually untenable but also how politically dangerous those oversimplified utopian assumptions and conclusions are when they are applied to the current problems of foreign policy. It is simple and superficially attractive to say: "Let's appeal to the United Nations; let's submit the problem to the United Nations." But in actuality if you look at the subtle relationships of power and influence which exist in the world, the United Nations included, you will realize how useless and even how dangerous and pernicious such a simple utopian approach to foreign policy can well be.

Let me say, in conclusion, a word about another manifestation of this basic philosophic problem, which concerns again the nature of foreign policy and of the way it is to be conducted. There is a very strong tendency—especially in democracies—to identify the positions of the different antagonistic nations with simple, clear-cut moral positions. Especially in Anglo-Saxon democracies there is a strong tendency to look at the international scene as if it were a struggle between good and evil, between virtue and vice, and there is never any doubt where virtue and good are located and where evil and vice are to be found. Underlying this simple "black and white" conception of foreign policy there is always the assumption that the triumph of virtue and good is somehow assured by the very nature of the historic process.

This oversimplified approach is not limited to Anglo-Saxon democracies, even though it has appeared there in the nineteenth century in a particularly strong form. Marxism has developed a similarly oversimplified and distorted view of the nature of international politics, only with the locations of virtue and vice and good and evil being reversed. Under the impact of this interpretation of international conflict as being essentially a moral conflict, foreign policy is bound to transform itself into a crusade, serving the inevitable triumph of virtue over vice. In such a crusade, there is no place for the traditional methods of foreign policy. For if the purpose of foreign policy is the triumph of virtue over vice, then diplomatic negotiations, of necessity aiming at accommodation, compromise, and the give-and-take of bargaining, have no place in foreign policy. One can even go farther and say that those diplomatic methods of compromise and accommodation are then tantamount to a betrayal of the moral principles for which the nation is supposed to stand.

Here, again, you see the intimate relationship between this moralistic approach to foreign policy and the general utopian conception of foreign policy—something which a nation has a choice of either embracing or doing away with. For if the foreign policy of a nation is tantamount to a crusade and the only objective of foreign policy is the unconditional surrender of the enemy, who is identified with all that is evil in the world, diplomacy then becomes really an instrument of war, preceding the actual armed conflict. Any retreat, however tactical, and any concession, however temporary or however outbalanced by a concession from the other side, becomes a betrayal of the very principles for which the nation is supposed to stand.

The very fact that what I have just said very much corresponds to the actual practice of foreign policy of the last ten years between East and West shows to what extent foreign policy, realistically understood, has degenerated in our time. What we call the "cold war" is really in its essence a denial that diplomacy has any important role—let alone a decisive role—to play in the struggle between East and West. The very transformation of the struggle between the two major powers in the world into a struggle fought with the means of propaganda and subversion, with peace reposing upon a stand-off in the strategic atomic field—all of this points to the decline of foreign policy, realistically and traditionally understood. To a considerable extent, in other words, foreign policy in the postwar era—especially as practiced between the United States and the Soviet Union—has indeed become not only in philosophic conception but in actual practice a conflict between two moral principles—each claiming its absolute superiority over the other.

It seems to me that to a great extent the future peace of the world—and the future peace of the world means under present conditions the future *existence* of the world—will depend upon the restoration of the original, the traditional, the realistic concepts of foreign policy: of a foreign policy which was regarded and practiced as what you might call the "mundane business" of accommodating divergent interests, defining seemingly incompatible interests, and then redefining them until finally they became compatible. For it seems to me to be very unlikely that the "cold war," as it has been practiced in the last ten years, will continue indefinitely.

About five or six years ago Sir Winston Churchill said in a speech in the House of Commons exactly this: "Things as they are cannot last; either they will get better, or they will get worse." If the present trend continues, I think, in spite of what has been said about the desirability and possibility of limited war, the danger of an all-out atomic war will increase. One of the instruments to avoid this universal catastrophe lies in the restoration of those processes of a realistic foreign policy to which I have referred.