Analysis

A guide for action

Defining the U.S. national interest

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For the United States, the Cold War was a much simpler time. Holding back the advance of Soviet communism gave American presidents a clear understanding of the nation’s vital interests. In the two decades since the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States has failed to develop a clearly defined set of vital national interests. Instead, as one report noted, “Many find it difficult to distinguish between America’s national interests and whatever interests them personally.”¹ This current state of affairs has left too many policy makers and intellectuals in the U.S. in a position to confuse the most likely and most dangerous threats facing the country. For European leaders, this is cause for great concern.

The vagaries of the nation’s strategic documents offer little clarification as to the composition of the national interest. The latest National Security Strategy (2010) is a case in point. It suggests American interests are enduring. They are:

- The security of the United States, its citizens, and U.S. allies and partners;
- A strong, innovative, and growing U.S. economy in an open international economic system that promotes opportunity and prosperity;
- Respect for universal values at home and around the world;
- An international order advanced by U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges.²

Sadly, this unspecific description of the national interest serves limited utility in creating a clear understanding of what matters most to the United States.

What then is the solution to this problem? Perhaps it is time for the nation’s political leaders to engage in an open discussion with the American people so that the country may reach a consensus, or as close to one as possible, concerning what comprises the United States’ national interest. As the former Commission on America’s National Interest wrote more than a decade ago, “For the decade ahead, the only sound foundation for a coherent, sustainable American foreign policy is a clear public sense of American interests.” The Commission’s fundamental point was correct in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse, but it is less correct today. It is perhaps even more important for the United States to develop a widely accepted set of vital national interests today because of the diversity of threats facing the nation. Suggesting such a need begs one question; how would the U.S. go about developing a set of vital national interests acceptable to both the political left and right?
**Background**

Nearly eight decades have passed since historian Charles Beard wrote, “Although employed as if it were a fixed principle, somewhat like the law of gravitation, the idea of national interest is, relatively speaking, a newcomer among the formulas of diplomacy and international morality.”

Today, the amorphous concept known as the “national interest” is employed by commentators, politicians, and scholars to support divergent positions on a host of public policy issues. In instance after instance, policies that are in direct contradiction to one another are advocated as necessary to promote the national interest. Today’s politicians and pundits all too often ignore the fact that the United States has a clear set of enduring national interests that transcend any sitting administration. Instead, they reflect what matters to the long term interests of the American people.

As Beard noted in 1934, those that employ the national interest rarely offer a concrete explanation of the concept or its specific elements. Because there is no framework for understanding the enduring nature of a nation’s interests — particularly its vital interests — they are often misunderstood by both policy makers and the public. In the case of the United States, this has left the nation without a clear set of interests that transcend administrations and serve as a near-constant force in American foreign policy. This has left the United States in the position of being reactionary in its foreign policy. Thus, when a problem arises in the Middle East or Asia, the United States — particularly when budgets are tight — turns away from Europe without much thought to the long term consequences of such a move.

In contradiction to the views of Joseph Nye, who argues that the national interest is, “simply what citizens, after proper deliberation, say it is;” the national interest and the specific interests (vital, major, and peripheral) that comprise it have developed over many years and endure across presidential administrations. The national interest is not defined by a sitting president’s political agenda or an immediate crisis. Specific interests — such as the importance of the NATO alliance — may rise or decline, but this is often a slow process. Absent such a clearly defined and ordered set of interests, presidents cannot develop foreign policies that consistently advance American interests.

**Understanding the national interest**

In *The Idea of National Interest*, Beard traces the development of national interest from Europe during the feudal period, when national honor was linked with the honor of the monarch, to the present. As monarchies disappeared in the aftermath of the Great War and democracies were born, national honor faded and national interest took its place. According to Beard, two “fundamental relevancies” are at the heart of national interest. The first of these is territory, or, as Hans Morgenthau later called it, “survival.” The problem with America’s reactive foreign policy is that absent a clear threat to the United States territory originating in Europe, the Continent is certain to decline in relevance as an American president moves from international crisis to international crisis.
The second relevancy dates to the earliest days of the republic — commercial interests. Again, absent a clear threat to American business from Europe, an American president has little reason to be concerned with European affairs. This decline in relevancy is growing as Asia increases in commercial importance to the United States.

Looking back, however, America’s first president offered great wisdom to future generations, wisdom that remains useful even at a time when the United States serves as the most powerful nation in the world and the guarantor of global security. When George Washington published his farewell address on 17 September 1796, he laid out a concept of U.S. foreign policy designed to preserve the national interest. His recognition of interstate commerce’s importance is exemplified in his famous statement: “The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations, is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop.”

Washington went on to add that the United States should be a “friend to all and enemy of none” as the nation sought to “avoid the entangling alliances of Europe.” A policy of commercial internationalism and military non-interventionism was largely followed by the United States until the 20th century. During the half-century long Cold War, two generations of Americans grew to adulthood during a time in which the United States maintained an average of 535,000 troops overseas — with most of them in Europe. Today, perhaps more than ever, it is important for American presidents to exercise the restraint advocated by Washington when contemplating the use of military force. Given the widespread unpopularity of recent American military action across Europe, this is a point many Europeans should support.

With the Cold War’s end, President Bill Clinton sought to redefine the national interest during the 1990s by combining commercial internationalism with the spread of democracy and international institutions. Many American troops returned from Europe and Asia. Much like the approach to foreign policy and the national interest prior to the Cold War, President Clinton exploited the “peace dividend” and focused on expanding America’s commercial ties and influence. With what Francis Fukuyama described as the “end of history,” liberal internationalism attempted to unseat realism from its perch atop the foreign policy hierarchy. Like his predecessor, George W. Bush was from the liberal internationalist school. Where President Clinton sought to make the world safe for democracy through globalization, President Bush sought to do the same through kinetic democratization.

**Vital Interests**

While there are other conceptions of the national interest, strategists Dennis Drew and Donald Snow offer what is perhaps the most straightforward explanation of the concept. They suggest that the national interest has three components: vital, major, and peripheral interests. Drew and Snow define a vital interest by two basic characteristics. First, compromise of a vital interest is not acceptable. Second, the resort to war is a legitimate action in the defense of a vital interest.
Samuel Huntington held a similar view defining a vital interest as one that is worth expending “blood and treasure.” As James Thomson suggests, “Vital interests arise from an enduring combination of the nation’s geographic position, political culture, economy, and power.” A third characteristic of vital interests is continuity over time. Rarely does a vital interest develop overnight nor is it common for the nature of a vital interest to fluctuate significantly. More commonly, vital interests are near-constant and enduring in their importance to the nation.

Historically, preservation of the nation’s commercial interests was seen as the sine qua non of vital interests because they were and are the foundation for economic prosperity. However, territorial integrity, which has long been equally important, rose to great prominence during the Cold War as the fear of nuclear war captured the Western conscience. Thus, the U.S. focused on European security through NATO. In the generation since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has found no peer competitor capable of challenging its enduring vital interests. Neither Afghanistan nor Iraq posed an existential threat to the United States, just as Al Qaeda and its affiliates were/are limited in their ability to threaten the survival of the nation and its citizens. Thus, the debate over vital interests has strayed beyond its traditional bounds. Yet these interests (commerce and territory) should serve as a long standing beacon guiding the ship of state and military strategy.

**Major Interests**

Of lesser import than vital interests, major interests do not require a state to resort to war if threatened. Here an interest involves a situation where “a country’s political, economic, or social well-being may be adversely affected but where the use of armed force is deemed excessive to avoid adverse outcomes.” Many interests fall into this category and can be addressed in a number of ways. The United States frequently employs diplomatic and economic tools to secure its major interests. While the nation may resort to the use of limited force, major interests are of insufficient value to warrant a large-scale military response. Neither does their defense call for placing a significant financial burden on the nation. Where European stability and security was a vital interest during the Cold War, if the United States had a clear set of national interests, Europe would likely find itself in a position where American rhetoric suggests Europe remains a vital interest, but where American actions suggest the Continent is no more than a major interest. Clearly, Europe’s importance, both strategic and economic, to the United States, has declined significantly.

It is important to note that the distinction between a vital and a major interest is often unclear and is often subject to debate. There is no easy formula for determining vital, major, or peripheral interests. Clarity, in many instances, only comes when an adversary acts provocatively, forcing decision makers to weigh the costs and benefits of possible actions.

**Peripheral Interests**

Peripheral interests are of least significance to a nation. They are related to the cultural and moral preferences of the nation and its citizenry, but are not of sufficient national significance to solicit more than a negligible response to their violation. Responses to the violation of a
peripheral interest can include the reproach of elected officials, influential individuals, or powerful organizations. They do not, however, warrant a significant diplomatic, economic, or military response in most cases. They can lead to symbolic acts or threats of greater action.

The United States’ reaction to human rights atrocities in Darfur, Sudan, is a typical response to the violation of a peripheral interest. Although Americans expressed strong disapproval of what took place, neither the president nor Congress undertook strong economic sanctions or ordered the military to stop atrocities. Such acts of inhumanity violate the cultural and moral norms of Americans, but they do not offend the nation sufficiently to warrant a strong response.

Future Interests

With more than two centuries having passed since independence the United States continues to pursue interests that, by-and-large, remain mostly consistent over long periods of time. In many respects, two centuries of growth and change only served to clarify a set of core interests and what is and is not “in the national interest” — even if there is no firm understanding of these interests by the nation’s policy makers. By reinforcing the enduring nature of the nation’s interests, events such as World War I & II, the Cold War, and the attacks of September 11, 2001 have not fundamentally reshaped what matters most. Rather, they have clarified the consistency in what has mattered all along. Advances in technology and changes within the geostrategic environment have played their part in the development and reshaping of the national interest.

However, a persistent absence of a clearly defined and widely accepted set of vital, major, and peripheral interests, at least since the end of the Cold War, has left American foreign policy to drift in the winds of change as presidential administrations have come and gone over more than two decades. Whether it was the foreign policy initiatives of George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, or Barack Obama, the partisan political objectives of a given administration took precedent over any objective effort to defend interests that preceded their arrival in Washington. In other words, it is time for the American people to demand that their elected officials engage in a public debate as to what comprises the nation’s vital, major, and peripheral interests. It is not solely for the benefit of the American people and their leaders that clearly defined interests are necessary. American allies, friends, and enemies often base their defense and foreign policy decisions on their perception of likely American action in a given circumstance. Absent a clear understanding of what matters to the Americans, it is difficult to make such decisions effectively.

Critique

While some readers may question the need for a clearly defined and ordered set of national interests, they are likely to agree that a vigorous debate concerning the national interest is a necessary undertaking for a free and open society — American or European. Some critics of a clearly defined set of national interests will argue that by defining interests, American presidents will face constrained foreign policy options. By clearly defining what matters and
how much it matters (vital, major, or peripheral) a president will have less freedom of action in responding to external events. This is true, but requiring the president to demonstrate to the American people that his foreign policy is decidedly geared toward defending the nation’s enduring interests is a positive result of a clearly defined and widely accepted set of national interests. American history is replete with examples of past presidents undertaking unwise and ill-considered foreign and military policies that, in hindsight, should have been avoided and could have been had a clearly defined and accepted set of interests guided their decision making.

**Conclusion**

Although the *National Security Strategy* purports to describe the national interest, it is more accurately described as a partisan political document designed to describe a sitting president’s foreign policy agenda. With its primary purpose to offer the world a glimpse into American defense and foreign policy, it largely fails to offer much real insight. Knowing what matters most to the United States and how much it is worth is critical for European leaders and other allies. Without such information it is difficult to determine exactly how relevant NATO remains and whether the United States really would trade Boston for Berlin, if the United State were called on to defend Germany in a nuclear conflict. At present, what matters most to the United States is really anyone’s guess.

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6. Huntington defines the national interest as “a public good of concern to all or most Americans.” Samuel P. Huntington, “The Erosion of American National Interests”, in *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 5 (September/October 1997): 35.
7. One recent volume is dedicated to examining the various understandings of national interest within various schools of thought. Scott Burchill, *The National Interest in International Relations Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

12. The Commission on America’s National Interest offered four levels of U.S. national interest: vital interests, extremely important interests, just important interests, and less important interests. The Council on Foreign Relations has also polled its members periodically in an attempt to gauge consensus on national interests.


17. Ibid.