

From the History of International Relations (IR): War, National Interest, and the League of Nations

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In broad terms, the national interest refers to the goals of foreign politics, objectives, or policy preferences that benefit a nation or society as a whole. That is the foreign policy equivalent of the public interest. However, the concept of national interest is practically vague and contested. The concept is most widely used by realist theorists, for whom it is defined by the structural implications of the anarchy in IR and, therefore, the concept of national interest is closely linked to national security, survival, and the pursuit of power.

Nonetheless, for those theorists dealing with the phenomenon of decision-making procedure, the national interest refers to the strategies and goals which are pushed by those politicians who are responsible for the conduct of national foreign policy. This may mean, however, that it degenerates into mere rhetoric. Alternatively, the concept of national interest may refer to the goals of foreign policy that have been endorsed by the democratic process. In many practical cases in modern history, ethnocentrism was directly linked with the concept of national interest even to the degree to be the synonym. Ethnocentrism is a policy in which the actions and/or intentions of its own or other national groups or individuals are evaluated by the application of cultural, political, or in general civilizational values and theories drawn from the observers' own culture and experience.

It was traditionally thought that national interest was a legitimate goal of the nation and other forms of states in their war practices. In other words, for centuries warfare was legitimized by proclaimed formal national interest, especially of national security. Historically, many of the European states have been regularly in warfare with each other especially the neighbors for the sake to get land, different dynastic claims, or, for instance, colonial gains. Nevertheless, in all of the such and similar cases, resorting to warfare was a generally accepted mechanism for keeping the balance of power or establishing a hegemony but under the moral and legitimate umbrella of the protection of national interest.

The term and concept of balance of power are used in different ways. As a policy, the

balance of power refers to a deliberate attempt to promote a power equilibrium, using diplomacy, or war, in order to prevent any state or political actor to achieve a predominant position. However, as a system, the balance of power refers to a condition in which no one state predominates over others, tending to create general equilibrium and prevent the hegemonic ambitions of all states. Nevertheless, neo-realists argue that the international system tends naturally towards equilibrium because states are particularly fearful that the other state would be a hegemon.

Up to the late 19th century, in fact, it was no developed legal constraints of war when it was agreed on the general law on the war in order to limit the use of some of the nastier technological possibilities for both making and using weapons.

The situation changed after 1918 as a consequence of the unexpected cost and carnage of the Great War (1914–1918) when some international mechanisms to prevent war were established including the institution of the League of Nations. The League of Nations was established at the end of WWI by those Great Powers who won the war meeting at the Paris Peace Conference with the strongest support by the personality of US President Woodrow Wilson. However, due to the post-WWI policy of isolation, the US Senate did not ratify the US membership in the League of Nations and, therefore, the post-war strongest nation-state became out of a new global security mechanism. Moreover, among all post-war Great Powers, only the UK and France became members of the League during its existence while other Great Powers of Germany, Italy, Japan, and the USSR either joined the organization late or resigned or even did both.

Image: Abyssinian soldiers in 1936



The task of the League of Nations was to prevent military aggression in global politics by applying a system of collective security. Therefore, it was hoped that all potential aggressors are going to be either deterred or at least effectively punished by the collective international security body of the League or, more precisely, its leading nations – the UK and France. However, this great illusion became visible in the 1930s starting with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 when the Great Powers of the UK and France became unwilling and probably unable to impose effective sanctions on the aggressor.

The case of Manchuria was soon followed in 1935 by the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in whose political fate no other Great Power had some direct interest. Both cases became the decisive test of efficiency for the League of Nations which failed and, therefore, left the open room for the start of WWII. Neither the UK nor France got sufficient international support for the imposition of some serious and effective measures against the aggressor except partial economic sanctions which, however, had been lifted in 1936.

The Brits were happy not to risk the loss of even a small part of its fleet in the conflict with Italy when the British colonies in Asia-Pacific have been menaced by expansionist Japan and when the USA still followed the policy of isolation and neutrality. Similar to London, Paris held that the campaign against Italy for the colony in East Africa would be abortive at the time when all the French army was needed to prevent possible early conflict with Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, Abyssinia became consequently incorporated into the Italian colonial empire in 1936. In fact, as an imagined institution to resist the aggression and warfare in IR, the League of Nations effectively stopped to function and formally continued to exist in a phantom condition till 1945 when became officially replaced by the OUN.

In essence, the collective security mechanism of the League of Nations failed to exterminate war from the practice of nation-states to protect their national interest. After 1945, a stronger international legal system and regime against war and the use of weapons has been created including the supranational institution of the Organization of the United Nations (the OUN) as well as based on an idea and the concept of collective security. Therefore, after WWII, formally, the war became illegal for almost all purposes except self-defense and collective security. At the same time, war became increasingly perceived as not moral practice in the IR. Nevertheless, practically, the national interest still is playing the focal role in contemporary wars as it was clearly stated, for instance, in US President Bill Clinton's speech to the nation after the Kosovo War in mid-June 1999. The justification of wars in both Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 following the case of 9/11 in 2001 started to move the criteria of warfare to the direction of making pre-emptive and preventive attacks more publicly acceptable in the eyes of a nation.

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