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# A STUDY ON THE CONCEPT OF THE NATIONAL INTEREST OF HANS J. MORGENTHAU: AS THE STANDARD OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

by Ken Kiyono

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### Preface

There are few who do not wish to have a peaceful world, free from wars and strives, for their posterity as well as for themselves regardless of their political affiliation. However, as far as the world is, as it is, divided into many nations or blocs of nations, such as the East, the West and Afro-Asian, the realization of such a peaceful world seems far from being possible in the near future. Even though the United Nations Organization was established for the purpose of ending power politics and ushering in a new era of international collaboration in 1945, yet against every hope and expectation it has not been able to function so well as supposed or intended in its inception. Thus the world has

fundamentally remained just the same as before. In other words, we still live in an age of power politics and are consciously or unconsciously being drifted to an inevitable end, that is, a war of annihilation, unless we find a way out. Against this background, seems the concept of the national interest of Hans J. Morgenthau as the guiding principle for American foreign policy to offer a way out. So in this paper the writer would like to call your attention to some important points of his idea by using mainly his early treatises.

## I . What is the National Interest ?

According to Morgenthau, the idea of the national interest in general resembles the constitution of the United States of America in two points, such as the general welfare and due process clauses. It includes "a residual meaning"<sup>1</sup> which is immanent in the idea itself, but over and above this minimum requisite, "its content can run the whole gamut of meanings which are logically compatible with it."<sup>2</sup>

Thus the idea of the national interest has two factors. One is rationally demanded and, therefore, of necessity. The other is changeable and decided by situations.<sup>3</sup>

In a world consisting of many competing and opposing nations for power, their survivals are their necessary and minimum requisites. "Thus all nations do what they cannot help but do: protect their physical, political and cultural identity against encroachments by other nations."<sup>4</sup>

While the concept of interest is indeed the substance of politics and is, therefore, perpetual and uninfluenced by time and place,<sup>5</sup> the national state is a historical product and is not anything but changing. So the relation between interest and the national state

is changing with vicissitude of time and place. "As long as the world is politically organized into nations," the necessary element of the national interest, that is, the survival, is "the last word in world politics."<sup>6</sup> In other words, the foreign policy based on the survival is easily supported by bipartisanship.

The situation is not the same concerning the changeable factors of the national interest. "All cross currents of personalities, public opinion, sectional interests, partisan politics, and political and moral folkways are brought"<sup>7</sup> to exert influence upon their decision.

The authenticity of the changeable elements of the national interest must be decided in the presence of "possible usurpation by subnational, other-national, and supranational interests."<sup>8</sup> On the first level, group interests of race and economy always try to exert influence upon the operation of American foreign policy, identifying their interests with the national interest. However, they have not always been successful in deciding the direction of American foreign policy.<sup>9</sup>

On the second level, there are two types of treason. One is the case of treason committed by individuals for a foreign government. The other treason is committed by minorities of race and ideology on behalf of a foreign government. Since the United States of America is composed of many different racial groups, there exists the danger of treason by minorities. In a country like America, disagreeing opinion is sometimes disproved as being influenced by a foreign interest, just as James Madison accused the Federalist as Anglophile and Francophobe.<sup>10</sup> However, this traditional tendency should not interfere in determining the national interest.

On the final level, the national interest may be usurped by supranational interests: "religious bodies and international organizations." The contest between "church and state for determi-

nation of certain interests and policies, domestic and international,"<sup>11</sup> has been intermittently fought throughout the history of the national state. While, especially in the United States of America, opposing views have been attacked as being influenced by Vatican, the foreign policy of the United States of America is said to be identical with that of the United Nations in order to give it a dignity. Thus, Morgenthau says, "What challenges the national interest here is a mere figment of the imagination, a product of wishful thinking, which is postulated as a valid norm for international conduct, without being valid either there or anywhere else."<sup>12</sup>

Once the national interest is established by defending against the above-mentioned usurpation, a reasonable order must be set among the essentials which constitute the national interest and among the resources which are available for the pursuit of those essentials.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, in order to make such a rational order possible, the difference between the necessary and the changeable elements of the national interest should be clearly understood <sup>14</sup> lest certain changeable elements should be presented as the necessary and the available resources should be, therefore, exhausted in such a confusion.

Furthermore, the concept of the national interest preconceives neither a peaceful and harmonious world based on the eighteenth century idea of "enlightened self-interest"<sup>15</sup> nor the unavoidable-ness of war as a result of "the pursuit by all nations of their national interest."<sup>16</sup> Contrarily, "it assumes continuous conflict and threat of war, to be minimized through the continuous adjustment of conflicting interests by diplomatic action."<sup>17</sup>

In this way, Morgenthau here discusses what the national interest is in the face of the actual world of power politics. The survival among nations is the central element of the concept of

the national interest, around which other elements are fashioned according to circumstances.

## I

- 1) Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Another 'Great Debate': The National Interest of the United States, "The American Political Science Review, XLVI (December, 1952), 972. Hereafter cited as APSR XLVI.
- 2) Ibid.
- 3) Ibid.
- 4) Ibid.
- 5) Hans J. Morgenthau, Politics among Nations 4th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967) , P. 8 . Hereafter cited as PAN
- 6) APSR XLVI, 972.
- 7) PAN pp. 8—9 .
- 8) APSR XLVI, 973.
- 9) Ibid., 974. The concept of the national interest was used from the economic point of view by Charles A. Beard in his book, The Idea of National Interest: An Analytical Study in American Foreign Policy.
- 10) Ibid., 975.
- 11) Ibid.
- 12) Ibid., 976.
- 13) Ibid.
- 14) Ibid., 977.
- 15) Ibid., 977—8 .
- 16) Ibid., 978.
- 17) Ibid.

## II. The National Interest vs. Moral Principles

Throughout the history of the national-state system the contest between the national interest and moral principles has been striven for domination over "minds and actions of men."<sup>1</sup> These two doctrines of political action have profoundly influenced the conduct of American foreign affairs from its very start.<sup>2</sup>

When a Proclamation of Neutrality was issued by George Washington on April 22, 1793 declaring that the United States would not join either side of antagonists in the war then waged by Austria, Prussia, Sardinia, Great Britain and the United Netherlands against revolutionary France, American public opinion was raged against it because of being contrary to moral principles, such as American obligation of the treaty with France, gratitude for the French assistance, and the affinity of republican institutions.<sup>3</sup>

In defense of that proclamation and against these moral principles Alexander Hamilton appealed to the national interest of the United States. "Must a nation subordinate its security, its happiness, nay, its very existence to the respect for treaty obligation, to the sentiment of gratitude, to sympathy with a kindred political system?"<sup>4</sup> To this question Hamilton answered with an absolute negation. Thus he put "the legalistic and moralistic arguments of the idealistic opposition into the context of the concrete power situation in which the United States"<sup>5</sup> found itself on the international scene and asked: "If the United States were to join France in a war against virtually all of Europe, what risks would the United States run, what advantages could it expect, what good could it do to its ally?"<sup>6</sup> Such are questions which a nation must ask when she confronts the choice between war and peace even in our time.

The second period was introduced by Thomas Jefferson and John Q. Adams. Even though they followed the Hamilton's way of thinking in the conduct of their foreign policies, yet they tried to justify their actions on the international scene with moral principles. Thus "a discrepancy between political thought and political action"<sup>7</sup> was characteristic of this period, however, "it so happened that by a felicitous coincidence what the moral law demanded of the United States was always identical with what its national interest seem to require."<sup>8</sup>

During the final decade of the Napoleonic Wars, Jefferson's view in respect to international affairs was reflected in his kaleidoscopic utterances. According as situations had changed in Europe, he sometimes wished French victory and some other time wanted Great Britain to hold the balance of power. In other words, he was much preoccupied with "the ever-changing distribution of power in the world than...immutable moral principles."<sup>9</sup> Only after a peace was established in Europe by keeping the balance of power more or less intact, Jefferson began again to pursue moral principles.<sup>10</sup>

From this trend to which Jefferson easily gave in, Adams was just about exempt. He had been educated in the Hamiltonian tradition of the first period of American foreign policy and had demonstrated his statesmanship in "an atmosphere saturated with Jeffersonian principles."<sup>11</sup> Through this experience he had succeeded in merging two elements, his moral principles and national interest of the United States into "a harmonious whole."<sup>12</sup> Namely, his moral principles and traditional interest worked in unison.

It was characteristic of the third period that the national interest was no longer justified by moral principles as in the second period, but it was replaced by them as a pointer for

action. This period was represented by Woodrow Wilson who not only neglected the national interest, but was openly against it due to his moral principles.<sup>13</sup>

In his speech at Mobile on October 27, 1913, he stated:

It is a very perilous thing to determine the foreign policy of a nation in terms of material interest. It not only is unfair to those with whom you are dealing, but it is degrading as regards your own actions.... We dare not turn from the principle that morality and not expediency is the thing that must guide us, and that we will never condone iniquity because it is most convenient to do so.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the war years he had repeated the same theme again and again.

Nonetheless, when Wilson confronted with the First World War, he could not help following the call of the national interest even though he could not understand the danger, with which the United States had faced, in other than moral words. In other words, he executed the correct policy, but he did it "for wrong reasons."<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, Wilson thought that after the destruction of Germany a world of new order free from power politics—the balance of power could be without doubt realized according to his own plan.<sup>16</sup> After the war, however, the new balance of power emerged on the international scene against Wilson's wish.

The interwar years were dominated by the so-called isolationism. By having rejected the Wilsonian moralism and internationalism and recoiling from international affairs, the isolationists of the twenties and thirties believed that they were restoring the early Hamiltonian tradition of American foreign policy. But they did not truly understand the real meaning of the policies of the Founding Fathers. Both that the United States could hold the detached

and predominant position in the Western Hemisphere and that she could keep herself free from involving in European affairs were neither a natural fact nor the consequence of her mere doing-nothing policy. Those were "the result of political conditions outside the Western Hemisphere and of policies carefully contrived and purposefully executed in their support."<sup>17</sup>

The fifth period began with the revival of Wilsonianism and the triumph of internationalism over isolationism in the late thirties. When the United States was confronted with the crisis of the national interest, Franklin D. Roosevelt defended it on moral grounds. However, the war progressed in favor of the United States, the American Leaders began to think and act just as Wilson had done under similar conditions. "That is to say, they thought and acted in moral terms, divorced from the political conditions of America's existence."<sup>18</sup>

In this way, they believed, like in the First World War, that after the destruction of the evil emanating from Germany and Japan a new world would emerge and put an end to power politics.<sup>19</sup> As this way of thinking had been prevalent at the time, nobody in the West except for Winston Churchill could visualize a world to come after the war.<sup>20</sup>

For this reason, moral indignation was intensely felt by those believers of a new order when a new balance of power, namely, a balance of terror had emerged out of the old one in much more rigid and dangerous form. However, this was the result of negligence with which they, in their moralistic contempt, had imperiled the national interest in their charge. Morgenthau holds a firm belief "that a new balance of power will rise out of the ruins of an old one and that nations with political sense will avail themselves of the opportunity to improve their positions within it, is a law of politics...."<sup>21</sup>

Finally, since the end of the Second World World War, the United States has tried to adjust herself and to cope with new problems rising from political conditions of the world. In the process, however, there is a tendency to equate political moralism based on abstract principles with morality and political realism, national interests with immorality. This antithesis which is of course indefensible has frustrated "American foreign policy in thought and action."<sup>22</sup> The juxtaposition is therefore, not between moral principles and national interests but between "one set of moral principles, divorced from political reality, and another set of moral principles, derived from political reality."<sup>23</sup> Thus "a foreign policy derived from the national interest is in fact morally superior to a foreign policy inspired by universal moral principles."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, since in international politics there is no real society which is able to guard the existence and to further the interests of individual nations, it is a duty for them to look after their own interests.<sup>25</sup>

This discussion may sound like presupposing a world of Thomas Hobbes, however, Morgenthau does not anticipate it. He differentiates his position from that of Hobbes. The writer will discuss this in the last section, No. IV.

## II

- 1) Hans J. Morgenthau, "National Interest and Moral Principle in Foreign policy, The Primacy of the National Interest," The American Scholar, XVIII. (Spring, 1949), 208. Hereafter cited as AS XVIII.
- 2) Ibid.
- 3) Hans J. Morgenthau, "The Mainsprings of American Foreign Policy: The National Interest vs. Moral Abstractions," The American Political Science Review, XLIV (December, 1950), 840-1. Hereafter cited as APSR XLIV.

- 4) Ibid., 844.
- 5) Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson (ed.), Principles and Problems of International Politics 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), p. 37. Hereater cited as Morgenthau and Thompson.
- 6) Ibid.
- 7) APSR XLIV 844.
- 8) AS XVIII 209.
- 9) APSR XLIV 845.
- 10) Ibid., 846.
- 11) Ibid.
- 12) Ibid.
- 13) AS XVIII 209.
- 14) Ibid.
- 15) APSR XLIV 848.
- 16) Ibid., 849-50.
- 17) Ibid., 850
- 18) Ibid., 851-2.
- 19) Hans J. Morgenthau, The Decline of Democratic Politics (Chicago and London: The Unity of Chicago Press, 1964) ,pp. 68-69. Hereafter cited as DDP.
- 20) Ibid., pp. 328-341.
- 21) APSR XLIV 853.
- 22) Ibid.
- 23) Ibid., 853-4.
- 24) Ibid., 854.
- 25) Ibid.

### III . The Balance of Power as the National Interest

Morgenthau as David Hume<sup>1</sup> declares that the balance of power is a universal law of international politics and as Alfred Vagts<sup>2</sup> maintains that it has been "the guiding principle of American foreign policy."<sup>3</sup>

In the fourth century B. C. Kautilya looked upon the traditional Indian politics as the balance of power and those statesmen of Greece and Italy and those emperors and popes of the medieval age practiced nothing but the balance of power. In the process, those nations which either disregarded or used it erroneously underwent downfalls and even annihilations, while the nation which put it to use most wisely and constantly, namely, Great Britain held supreme power for extraordinary length of time.<sup>4</sup> Thus the historic facts prove the universality of the balance of power.

From the very beginning, the United States has always striven to hold a predominant position in the Western Hemisphere. The early American leaders soon came to know that since any American nation or nations was not strong enough to challenge the United States, it could keep its supremacy as long as the Western Hemisphere was successfully isolated from non-American nations.<sup>5</sup>

A menace to the United States could only come from outside the Western Hemisphere, that is, traditionally from Europe. So the United States had always tried to deter the growth of circumstances in Europe which would have very likely encouraged European nations to interfere in American affairs. Such circumstances would come to being if the balance of power had been broken in Europe. "It is for this reason that the United States has consistently — the War of 1812 is the sole exception — pursued policies aiming at the maintenance of the balance of

power in Europe. "6

The case of Jefferson is, for example, very interesting. Although in his speeches Jefferson was, due to his Francophile inclination, usually opposed to Great Britain and was, in general, insensitive to the balance of power, yet in his correspondences during the Napoleonic Wars, he continuously changed his attitude in proportion to the results of war. In the time when Napoleon seemed to have the advantage he wished the ascendancy of Great Britain and vice versa. That is to say, his viewpoints changed in accordance with the alternations of the balance of power.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover the United States intervened in the Second World War as well as the First World War with the purpose of protecting the national interest — the balance of power in Europe. In other words, both the First and Second World Wars were fought by the United States believing that the victory of Germany in Europe or the conquest of Europe by Germany would endanger the security of the United States in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, in the Cold War which has been waged between the East and the West the United States is again confronted with the great menace to Europe coming from the Russian ambitions of hegemony. It can be said, therefore, that the security of the United States in the Western Hemisphere would be exposed to danger if the Soviet Union conquered the whole of Europe adding all the riches and wealth of Europe to his own and became the nation outside the Western Hemisphere.<sup>9</sup>

Only since the beginning of this century, Asia has intensely attracted the attention of the United States. The Asian policy of the United States began with the so-called open door policy in China. While in the outset this policy seemed primarily to have a commercial meaning, it soon assumed a political and military meaning as well.<sup>10</sup> In other words, as in Europe the United

States realized that the security of the United States would be endangered by any other nation which could establish a hegemonic position in China. Therefore, the United States had always been against the effort of any great nation to include China into its sphere of influence. It was again the national interest of the United States to maintain the balance of power in the Far East. <sup>11</sup>

Thus Morgenthau identifies the balance of power in Asia as well as in Europe with the national interest of the United States. Even though foreign policies of the United States have been professed in moralistic or idealistic terms, yet the essence of them has been and is the balance of power — the national interest.

### III

- 1) Morgenthau and Thompson, pp. 104-9.
- 2) Ibid., pp. 178-209.
- 3) APSR XLVI 963-4.
- 4) Ibid.
- 5) Hans J. Morgenthau, The Impasse of American Foreign Policy (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 56. Hereafter cited as IAFP.
- 6) APSR XLIV 834-5.
- 7) IAFP p. 57.
- 8) Ibid.
- 9) Ibid., pp. 57-8.
- 10) Ibid., p. 58.
- 11) APSR XLIV 835-6.

#### IV. The Moral Dignity of the National Interest

In face of the accusation that the pursuit of the national interest by every nation would necessarily presuppose a world of Hobbes, Morgenthau refutes this criticism by differentiating his position from that of Hobbes.

His refutation consists of five points. The first point is the so-called "requirement of cosmic humility"<sup>1</sup> concerning the moral estimation of the actions of nations. To comprehend that nations are liable to the moral code is one thing and to claim to pretend what is ethically demanded from nations in a special circumstance is quite another. The statesman tends to identify the national interest with the moral principles of the universe. Thus this tendency causes the statesman to conclude that what nations do according to the moral principles is good and the opposition to it is inevitably bad. This is however, "morally indefensible and intellectually untenable and leads in practice to that distortion of judgment, born of the blindness of crusading frenzy, which has been the curse of nations from the beginning of time."<sup>2</sup>

The second point is with respect to the "effectiveness of the restraints which morality imposes upon the actions of states."<sup>3</sup> This point is well explained in the following quotation, which is rather long but is worth while to quote:

A discussion of international morality must guard against the two extremes either of overrating the influence of ethics upon international politics or else of denying that statesmen and diplomats are moved by anything else but considerations of material power.

On the one hand, there is the dual error of confounding the moral rules which people actually observe with those they pretend to observe as well as with those which writers declare

they ought to observe....

On the other hand, there is the misconception, usually associated with the general depreciation and moral condemnation of power politics, discussed... that international politics is so thoroughly evil that it is no use looking for moral limitations of the aspirations for power, on the international scene. Yet, if we ask ourselves what statesmen and diplomats are capable of doing to further the power objectives of their respective nations and what they actually do, we realize that they do less than they probably could and less than they actually did in other periods of history. They refuse to consider certain ends and to use certain means, either altogether or under certain conditions, not because in the light of expediency they appear impractical or unwise, but because certain moral rules interpose an absolute barrier. Moral rules do not permit certain policies to be considered at all from the point of view of expediency. Certain things are not being done on moral grounds, even though it would be expedient to do them. Such ethical inhibitions operate in our time on different levels with different effectiveness. Their restraining function is most obvious and most effective in affirming the sacredness of human life in times of peace.<sup>4</sup>

The third point is as to the dealings between political actions and universal moral principles. These universal moral principles are applicable to the actions of states only after they have been "filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place."<sup>5</sup> Political action must be judged by both individual and state by means of universal moral principles, such as that of freedom. However, even though the individual can make a sacrifice of himself for the purpose of defending the principle of freedom, yet the state cannot allow freedom to obstruct the political action

which has been successful and encouraged by another moral principle of national survival. Political morality is inseparable from "prudence," that is to say, inseparable from the deliberation of the political outcomes of seemingly moral action.<sup>6</sup>

Thus Morgenthau quotes a passage from Lincoln who understood this saying :

I do the very best I know, the very best I can, and I mean to keep doing so until the end. If the end brings me out all right, what is said against me won't amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference.<sup>7</sup>

The fourth point is the difference between the realist and the utopian. A moral determination in politics does not mean a mere selection between a moral law and a rule of political action which is morally unrelated or is not moral. But a moral determination means always a selection among various moral principles, one of which is given priority over others. "To say that a political action has no moral purpose is absurd; for political action can be defined as an attempt to realize moral values through the medium of politics, that is, power."<sup>8</sup>

When the realist and utopian encounter a choice between the furtherance of universal freedom, which is a morality, at the expense of security of their country and, accordingly of freedom in it, and the advancement of security of their country and freedom in it, which is another morality, to the injury to the furtherance of universal freedom, they reach a parting of the ways. In other words, the utopian will not meet the problem straight and beguile himself into thinking that he can accomplish both moralities concurrently. On the other hand, the realist will take both moral and practical approach and will select the advancement of security; for otherwise no one else will and if he

exposed security and freedom to danger, the principle of universal freedom will be damaged.<sup>9</sup>

Finally the realist differentiates between his moral feelings and the interests of politics. Morgenthau illustrates this by quoting again from Lincoln:

If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save Union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors; and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.

I have here stated my purpose according to my view of official duty; and I intend no moderation of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free.<sup>10</sup>

Thus Morgenthau discusses the difference between the realist and the utopian in their respective approach to the problem which every nation must solve. He warns that makers of foreign policies should not confuse the national interest based on realistic evaluation of conditions with mere moral principles derived from unreal evaluation of circumstances. He concludes that a foreign

policy, which is made according to the national interest, is morally superior to that, according to mere moral principles.

#### IV

- 1) APSR XLVI 984.
- 2) Ibid.
- 3) Ibid.
- 4) PAN pp. 224-5.
- 5) Ibid., p. 10.
- 6) Ibid.
- 7) Ibid.
- 8) APSR XLVI 987.
- 9) Ibid.
- 10) Ibid., 982.

#### Conclusion

In this paper the writer tried to point out some important subject-matters about the concept of the national interest which had been ably propounded by Hans J. Morgenthau. Even though his idea has met severe criticism from his opponents, yet it seems to propose some reminders to those who are engaged in making foreign policies regardless of their nationalities.

In process of foreign policy-making, policy-makers are inclined to moralistic and idealistic approaches by confusing what it is with what it ought to be or what it should be. This confusion is, therefore, most likely to lead to another confusion.

Since the world is, however, divided into various nations based mainly on nationalism — especially new nations, which have recently emerged on the international scene, based on even more so rigid nationalism, there seems to be little hope of

realizing a peaceful and harmonious world as long as they remain as they are. Thus, relationship between nations necessarily relies on compromises and understandings between them. In this sense, Morgenthau, the writer believes, suggests some solutions to the problems which every nation must face.