



IN-DEPTH

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The Janus of “National Interest”: On the Realist’s Gambit in Foreign Policy

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A curious story recently appeared in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*: “[U.S. Companies Aid China’s Bid for Chip Dominance Despite Security Concerns](#).”

Curious, because this news came after many months of growing concern in America, voiced in both public and private channels, about the rise and intentions of the People’s Republic of China. And yet, stepping back, this story is perhaps not so curious after all, joined as it is by so many like it that speak to the tensions in America’s official and unofficial diplomatic and economic policies.

Whether it is [Apple making remarkable concessions](#) to PRC demands in order to push through a massive deal with China, or [Amazon scrubbing its website of negative reviews](#) for a collection of President Xi Jinping’s speeches, or [Intel issuing a formal apology](#) to Chinese authorities for having previously agreed to avoid using Xinjiang labor for its products—the engagement of major American businesses in China’s political economy (and vice versa) has been a regular source of stories if not controversies.

Nor is this dynamic limited to the tech industry. In recent months, BlackRock, Goldman Sachs, and JPMorgan Chase [have all deepened their exposure to Chinese markets](#). Indeed, as the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission noted in [its latest annual report to Congress](#), U.S.-headquartered multinationals and U.S.-based investors continue to treat China as a priority market, despite increasing public concern that their engagement contributes to Beijing’s geopolitical rise.

Yet stepping back further, such stories are especially noteworthy for arriving at a time of increased securitization and politicization of Sino-American relations, having brought enhanced scrutiny on the economic ties between U.S. businesses and mainland China. Such ties have been one of the

major features of the international political economy over the past quarter-century.

What is more, these same ties are now being reconsidered by much of the U.S. foreign policy establishment as having, in fact, contributed to the rise of a strategic peer competitor, growing its vast manufacturing base, transferring valuable intellectual property across key industries, and creating an unprecedented trade imbalance.

To explain this curious dynamic—that the United States would adopt or encourage policies contrary to its long-term interests—critics have attributed blame to flawed theories of international politics. In this telling, U.S. policymakers (among many others) in thrall to liberal beliefs in the value of positive-sum cooperation aided and abetted China’s economic growth.

The [strongest statement of this view](#) was put forward by Professor John Mearsheimer in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*:

Beguiled by misguided theories about liberalism’s inevitable triumph and the obsolescence of great-power conflict, both Democratic and Republican administrations pursued a policy of engagement, which sought to help China grow richer. Washington promoted investment in China and welcomed the country into the global trading system, thinking it would become a peace-loving democracy and a responsible stakeholder in a U.S.-led international order.

Of course, if true, this account represents a remarkable falsification of many baseline (neo-) realist theories (including Prof. Mearsheimer’s)—that *states are rational power-maximizers pursuing policies carefully attuned to their material interests*.¹ But is this proposition true? That is to say,



is one of the most significant developments in international politics over the past three decades at least partly attributable to the world's largest power prioritizing foolish idealism over its own vital interests?

One need not retreat to causal explanations of liberal illusions to understand today's geopolitical landscape. It suffices to refer to the recurring motto of Jean Renoir's masterpiece *The Rules of the Game*: "c'est que tout le monde a ses raisons." Perhaps, it was not only idealism but also a rational recognition of particular interests of different American stakeholders that led to the Western world's deep economic engagement with China, which is only now proving controversial given the current political climate.

The point is not, however, that corporate interests necessarily generate pro-China preferences; even now, the very same tech giants mentioned at the outset are attempting to stave off anti-trust legislation by [arguing that their market size and power are necessary](#) if the U.S. is to remain competitive against China. The point is rather that we cannot meaningfully comprehend the full landscape of international relations and (state) actors' strategic choices without also recognizing that the dynamics of interest-seeking and power-maximization are not limited to states themselves.

One can see this reality even more clearly by examining American policy in quite a different theatre: Afghanistan. As of early 2022, it is largely indisputable that America's (along with her international partners) venture in Afghanistan was a bust. We now know that Osama bin Laden [himself fled the country in December 2001](#), barely two months into the start of the invasion. Yet, [the United States spent over \\$2.3 trillion](#) (equivalent to approximately \$300 million per day) sustaining the occupation. And of course, the Taliban, routed at the outset of the U.S. attacks, is now again en-

sconced in power.

Despite these remarkable failures, it is just as indisputable that what proved a catastrophe at the national level was in fact highly profitable—both materially and professionally—for [many, many players](#). While local corruption on the ground in Afghanistan was recognized near the outset (at least by some), only very lately has it become widely apparent how prevalent rent-seeking behaviors were on the part of Americans and European institutions.

As the *New York Times* [noted only last year](#), "Only about 12 percent of U.S. reconstruction assistance given to Afghanistan between 2002 and 2021 actually went to the Afghan government." Defence contractors, consultants, and private security firms received a veritable windfall from the War on Terror.² This particular dynamic is proving relevant yet again as of this writing with the delivery of "lethal aid" to Ukraine. Nor is profiteering necessarily limited to the period of active engagement in foreign conflicts. Stanley McChrystal, David Petraeus, Lloyd Austin, and Jim Mattis, among many others, all used the military-industrial complex's proverbial revolving door to find highly lucrative positions in the finance and defence contracting sectors following their re-entry into civilian life.³

Meanwhile, throughout the duration of the Iraq and Afghanistan occupations, military and civilian leaders consistently [misrepresented](#) both the [possibility of success](#) for the missions and the [severity of the threats](#) faced by the United States to ensure the continued flow of public funds. Though they may themselves have been believers in the ultimate value of the missions in question, the bureaucratic incentives at work essentially hindered either democratic transparency or open deliberation concerning the larger national interests at stake.



None of this is to say that those advocating policies of occupation, democratization, and nation-building were necessarily cynical or venal in their motivations. Indeed, going back to September 2001 (and beyond that to the various Clinton-era interventions of the 1990s), it is clear that there existed a widely-appealing conviction among the power elites in Washington that enshrined democracy promotion and human rights as the missionary purposes of U.S. foreign policy. The point is rather that such ideals were insufficient on their own to both give rise to and sustain those policies over two decades, and the realists who lament them are (ironically enough) over-emphasizing ideational factors at the expense of bureaucratic and private incentives, let alone good-old path dependency.

Moreover, while one can certainly point to various streams of pious rhetoric concerning U.S. goals in Afghanistan across the nearly two decades of our presence there, the cold reality is that those issuing such statements were rarely in positions of sacrifice. However sincere the rhetoric, the costs were borne by those closer to the ground. And even there a narrative of idealistic ambitions ending in tragic failure cannot fully account for the reality of actual behaviours on the part of both occupiers and occupied.

To more fully capture that reality, one would also have to consult stories such as [these](#), in which a complex overlay of public and private interests across the United States and Afghanistan found common advantage in securing mutually beneficial contracts, at the expense of the ordinary Afghans who were the notional beneficiaries of our policies in the first place.

Of course, one can not help but notice that these stories only began to accumulate toward the end of our very long presence in the Middle East and Central Asia. But the lack of interest from legacy media organizations in real, investigative journal-

ism about the failures of the U.S. ‘nation-building’ in Afghanistan fits into the larger story. As one of the lead reporters for the *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project* declared in a [follow-up statement](#), no major American periodical would take up the story of America’s role in Afghan political corruption—all rejected it before it was finally picked up by an independent corruption watchdog group.

But it was not just adherence to utopian idealism in American foreign policy nor a disinterested support for the rules-based international order only that prevented major media outlets from running such stories. There was also the desire to avoid a backlash from government and military contingents, as well as [the ordinary and dreary horse-trading](#) that grants journalists continued access to their sources who walk the halls of governmental power. And, at the risk of being cynical, there was perhaps some degree of calculation that the public interest in these stories was insufficient to justify the blowback that would likely ensue.

Political scientists may refer to concepts like “multi-level games” to try to make sense of this morass. But ordinary language suffices to explain it: at every level, from government bureaucracy to elected officials to defence contractors to journalists and so on, relevant actors looked after their own interests, and disaster ensued—for Afghans and Americans alike. Yet, like so many stories from the past two decades of U.S. foreign policy—the Afghanistan debacle is *not*, exclusively, an account of starry-eyed dreamers misled by false theories of how the world operates. Alas, the problem is much subtler.

It is easy enough for both supporters and critics of establishment policies to focus their attention on morally charged rhetoric apropos of *progress* issued from official channels. Like some progressive-minded celebrities who advocate for eco-



conomic justice while squirrelling their own assets in tax havens, government talk of universal rights and humanitarian causes differs significantly from realizing them in practice. In actuality, theoretical grandstanding and rhetorical sanctimony pale in comparison to practical and private considerations, with the latter being far more predictive of results and behaviours.

Regardless of the sincerity behind the many evocations of an interconnected world, the global village, international community, and so on, their advocates remain heavily conditioned by state-based conceptions of *security*. Whether it be peacekeeping or women's rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs), multinational corporations (MNCs) looking to open up new capital markets, or those most ardently waving the cosmopolitan flag—the most consequential non-state actors in the modern era have almost universally hailed from Western liberal democracies with powerful central governments ready to exercise authority on their behalf, irrespective of where these entities nominally operated or which liberal banality they had taken up as cause.

Rhetoric aside, few if any of these die-hard cosmopolitans would be prepared to surrender the passports issued by nation-states—almost universally understood to be the legitimate provider of real security for both persons and bank accounts. Conversely, foreign governments routinely welcome American and European investors, multinationals, and retailers and manufacturers looking to source goods or labour from cheaper (often non-Western) jurisdictions precisely because the global capitalist class operates out of countries with stable currencies and the rule of law.

Since America's withdrawal from Afghanistan last year, observers have either hoped or lamented—depending on their policy preferences—that it might presage a new era of realism and restraint

in U.S. foreign policy. But one doubts whether the present optimism could long endure. After all, *realism* signals an inherently skeptical—if not tragic—disposition, and no perspective that draws on it as fount could easily harmonize with the sunny optimism that has been the American birthright ever since Thomas Jefferson included the pursuit of happiness among the rights of man.

This would suggest that self-proclaimed realists merely have a PR problem, when in fact their biggest shortcoming is not rhetorical but logical. The central premise that unites a variety of realists—who may otherwise disagree on various matters of policy and politics—is that there is a verifiable, if not always pleasant, reality to human affairs and we ignore it at our peril. And like Kipling's "The Gods of the Copybook Headings", it *returns* one way or another.

Of course, not all realists may endorse the tragic state that underlies the human condition, but there is little use lamenting it or pretending things are otherwise. As Friedrich Nietzsche put it:

Do you suppose perchance that these little Greek free cities, which from rage and envy would have liked to devour each other, were guided by philanthropic and righteous principles? Does one reproach Thucydides for the words he put into the mouths of the Athenian ambassadors when they negotiated with the Melians on the question of destruction or submission?⁴

And yet, the world so often fails to operate on or even acknowledge this Nietzschean wisdom: states bury their resources in ideologically-motivated interventionism and regime change wars, or emphasize humanitarian and environmental causes at the expense of core security interests, or empower and enrich strategic rivals on the belief



that cooperation and mutual gain can prevail over geopolitical competition. And so on.

Seva Gunitsky, a political scientist at the University of Toronto, [complained of this tendency of realists](#) to make recourse to liberal motivations in an effort to explain phenomena they dislike. The tension here is clear: if states obeyed the iron laws of history, we should in fact see more favourable outcomes. That they do not, however, strongly suggests those laws are made of something less sturdy than iron. Consequently, realists, who are supposed to be the maestros of *is*, end up spending most of their time arguing from the vantage point of *ought*.

Here then lies the problem: the Thucydidean trifecta of *fear*, *honour*, and *interest* may be the lodestars of political life, but they do not straightforwardly account for the behaviour of states themselves. Not because states necessarily have different motivations, but because their size, power, and complexity mean that their desiderata too rarely translate into outcomes. This is true for all modern states but even more so a global superpower like the United States—insulated as it is from the consequences of its choices owing to its massive wealth, geography, and security (surely, no individual or corporation could spend the equivalent of \$2 trillion over two decades with so little to show for it without going bankrupt).

This is why any articulation of the national interest is ultimately a normative claim and not simply a descriptive one. It is an attempt to state clearly what goals *should* guide the actions of the country; it is not simply a matter of disclosing an existing (or objective) reality. And furthermore, it is an attempt to set national concerns over and above parochial, local, and personal ones.

Every nation, in reality, is a composite of diverse individual and institutional actors—both public

and private—and their several, often disparate, interests all interfere with the neat business of ascribing clear-cut interests and motivations to nation-states as a whole. This does not mean that “national interest” itself is a chimera—it rather means that identifying, prioritizing, and promoting vital national interests are all the more important, given the plethora of alternatives; and that doing so is also the work of politics done in real-time and not just analysis done in the Ivory Tower.

All of which is to say that achieving a posture of genuine realism and restraint is as much about domestic policy (and sorting out friend-enemy distinctions at home) as it is about foreign policy (deciding on allied and rogue nations abroad). And just as it took more than a few years for our post-9/11 crusades toward nation-building and democracy promotion as a *nationalist* project to unravel as they have, thereby denigrating “national interest” itself—it will likely take still more years to restore the concept back to its pride of place.



Endnotes

1 Obligatory qualification: many self-proclaimed realists do not necessarily hold this position, including perhaps the most famous one of all, Kenneth Waltz.

2 This particular dynamic is proving relevant yet again as of this writing [with the delivery](#) of “lethal aid” to Ukraine.

3 Though as this [hardly unique example](#) suggests, profiting through association with

domestic businesses barely scratches the surface of what former public servants can get up to when the financial incentives are right.

4 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, tr. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, §429.

Acknowledgements

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