



On National Interest and Foreign Policy: A Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract

This is a conceptual paper that explores the relevance of national interest to the understanding of foreign policy projection of nation-state in the field of international relations. The overall objective of the paper is to examine the conceptual meaning of national interest, its relevance and usefulness to the foreign policy of nation-states in their dealings with other states in the international system. The problem of interpretation and misinterpretation by scholars, leaders and decision makers alike on how national interest influences and direct the nature and pattern of nation-state's foreign policy has been in contention for long. In reality it has been observed that most statesmen and political elites do abuse the term by substituting it with "personal interest," with little or no regards for the public opinion. The study applied descriptive method of content analysis. Data were gotten from secondary sources like textbooks, academic journals and internet sourced materials. As a way forward the paper suggested that state agents should always endeavor to carry the public along on vital issues that affect foreign relations, through constant information, recruitment of qualified personnel, and capacity building for those in charge of managing the nation's foreign affairs.

Keywords: National Interest, Foreign Policy, Nation-State, International System, Decision-Makers, Public Opinion

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I. Introduction

The relevance of national interest in any country's foreign policy cannot be over emphasized as it (national interest) generally assumed to be the ends of foreign policy (Adeniran, 1982). In other words, foreign policies are regarded as the means towards

the attainment of the national interest. It is essential therefore, for us to understand the components of Foreign Policy as it supposed to be the means for the attainment of national objectives or goals which summed up to constitute the national interest. However, problem with national interest is that many view it as only a word with little or no meaning in reality when it comes to strategies employs by

nation-states in dealings with one another in the international system. Many equates national interest with “the interest of political elites or even individual decision makers acting on behalf of nation-state they represent. Hence, the main thrust of this paper is to examine the relevance of the concept of national interest to the foreign policy projection of nation-state in the field of international relations. Among others, the paper answers questions on: definitions and conceptual meaning of both terms; national interest and foreign policy, the relationship between the two concepts, and lastly its relevance and future usefulness in understanding inter-states relationship. To achieve its aim, the paper is segmented into five main parts: introduction, the concept of national interest, concept of foreign policy, nexus between foreign policy and national interest, conclusion and recommendations.

II.The Concept of National Interest

National Interest is perhaps one of the most controversial concepts in international relations. This is due to several factors which the term had been subjected to. First, the concept has been, and continues to be subject of various interpretations/misinterpretations by both analysts and practitioners. Second and closely related to the first point is the abuse of the concept particularly by statesmen and decisions makers all over the world. Third, the concept is not easily susceptible to analysis. Finally and closely related with the last factor, is the fact that there is as yet no universally acceptable single definition of what constitutes the national interest of a state. The concept means different things to different analysts and practitioners. The cynics have even argued that there is nothing like the national interest of a state; that the national interest is nothing more and nothing less than what policy elites at any time say it is. Adeniran, (1982) asserted that:

“When statesmen and bureaucrats are expected or are required to act in the National Interest, what is

meant is that they are being called upon to take action on issues that would improve the political situation, the economic and social well-being, the health and culture of the people as well as their political survival. They are being urged to take actions that would improve the lot of the people rather than pursuing policies that would subject the people to domination by other nations” (Adeniran, 1982, p.185). Morgenthau, (1973) sees National Interest as “the protection of physical, political and cultural identity against encroachments by other nations”. National Interest is simply about survival, he concluded. Frankel, (1982) considered ‘National Interest’ a singularly vague concept. It assumes a variety of meanings in the various contexts in which it is used and, despite its fundamental importance, these meanings cannot be reconciled. Hence, no agreement be reached about its ultimate meaning (Peu Ghosh, 2009).

At the home front (Nigeria), Akinyemi, (1987) posits “Nigeria’s national interest can therefore be identified as predicated on the nation’s military, economic, political and social security. Anything that will enhance the capacity of Nigerians to defend their national security must be seen as being in the national interest. Anything that will promote Nigeria’s economic growth and development is in the national interest. Anything that will make Nigeria politically stable is in the national interest. Conversely anything that will make Nigeria militarily insecure, that will militate against the country’s growth and development and which will make it politically unstable is against the national interest” From the above, it means that if Nigeria’s security interest should be better served by maintaining silence over certain international developments, so be it.

Despite the controversy that surround the concept of national interest, efforts were made by scholars to provide a bare meaning of the concept. This has been tried from subjective and an objective angle. The former interprets national interest as “a constantly

changing pluralistic set of objective preferences”, the latter assumes that national interest can be objectively defined, or at least, can be examined with the help of some objectively definable criteria. Rosenau, (1968) had proposed a distinction between the use of the concept for the purpose of political analysis and that of political action. He was of the opinion that as an analytical tool, it can be employed to explain or evaluate the sources of adequacy of a nation’s foreign policy, and as an instrument of political action, it can serve as a means for justifying, denouncing or proposing policies.

Definition wise, Buzan and Jones, (1981) defines national interest as the interest of a “non-assignable groups”, that is; interest which we cannot identify with a particular group in the state. Frankel, (1971) provided more explicit definition of the term, national interest as “the total sum of interests and policies actually pursued”. Recognizing the vague and controversial character of the concept and the fact that it is often abused in political usage, Frankel asserts, nonetheless, that it is “the most widely used and generally intelligible shorthand description of all the purposive elements in foreign policy. For analytical purposes, he identifies three levels at which the concept is used. These are the aspirational, operational, and polemical levels, although these categories sometime overlap. Used at the aspirational level, the concept of national interest refers to some ideal set of goals which a state wishes to achieve if the opportunity arises either through favourable changes in the international environment or in the power of the state. The former Soviet Union desire during the cold war era, to promote the formation of one global socialist government falls within this category. While aspirational interests are generally long term and ideological, operational interests refer to the policies being actually pursued. At the polemical level, the concept is used in political argument to explain, rationalize or criticize international behaviour, that is; “to prove oneself right and one’s opponent wrong”

Classification of National Interest

Holsti, (1983) on his own provided a concise classification of elements of national interest. He classified interest into three (3) main categories namely; Core Interest and Values, Middle range objectives and Long range goals respectively. He defines core values and interests as “those kind of goals for which most people are willing to make the ultimate sacrifices. According to Holsti core values are articles of faith which the people of a nation accept uncritically. Core values are more concerned with the self-preservation or survival of a political entity. Hosti regards core interests and values as short-range objectives because other goals cannot be achieved unless the political community maintains its existence. For this reason, the cardinal objective of any foreign policy is the protection of the state’s territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence. Sometimes “core interests and values” are interpreted as transcending the defence of the territory of a state to include the protection of neighbouring territories because of their strategic values as potential sources of threat to its own territorial integrity or sources of raw materials vital to the needs of its people as well as considerations of ethnic and religious affinity. In simpler words; core interest and values are non-negotiable. It is values for which people are ready to die if such interests are threatened.

Holsti postulation sees middle-range objectives as government’s efforts to meet the welfare needs of their peoples and promote the economic development of their countries. These objectives are usually pursued through international action such as opening up overseas markets for imports and exports, securing foreign aids, etc. long-range goals relate to visions usually expressed in ideologies concerning the reorganization of the international environment. The underlying purpose is to bring a new world order consistent with given expectations and objectives. In the same vein, Morgenthau, (1973) distinguishes between the “irreducible” and

“variable” elements of national interest. The survival of a nation in its identity is the irreducible minimum while the variable element encompasses “all the cross currents of personalities, public opinion, sectional interests, partisan politics,” etc

In order to be more explicit in examining the interest which a nation seeks to secure Robinson, (1967) presents a six (6) fold classification of interests which nations try to secure.

1)The Primary Interests: These are those interests in respect of which no nation can compromise. It includes the preservation of physical, political and cultural identity against possible encroachments by other states. A state has to defend these at all costs. These sets of interests are also called vital interest.

2)Secondary Interests: These are less important than the primary interests. Secondary interests are quite vital for the existence of the state. This includes the protection of the citizens abroad and ensuring of diplomatic immunities for the diplomatic staff.

3)Permanent Interests: These refer to the relatively constant long-term interests of the state. These are subject to very slow changes. The U.S Interest to preserve its sphere of influence and to maintain freedom of navigation in all the oceans is the examples of such interests.

4)Variable Interests: Such interests are those interests of a nation which are considered vital for national good in a given set of circumstances. In this sense these can diverge from both primary and permanent interests. The variable interests are largely determined by “the cross currents of personalities, public opinion, sectional interests, partisan politics and political and moral folkways”.

5)The General Interests: General interests of a nation refer to those positive conditions which apply to a large number of nations or in several specified

fields such as economic, trade, diplomatic relations etc. To maintain international peace is a general interest of all nations. Similar is the case of disarmament and arms control.

6)Specific Interests: These are the logical outgrowths of the general interests and these are defined in terms of time and space. To secure the economic rights of the Third World countries through the securing of a New International Economic order (N.I.E.O) is a specific interests of many developing countries of the world.

International Interests

Besides these six categories of National Interests, Robinson also refers to three (3) International Interests:

- Identical Interests
- Complementary and
- Conflicting interests

According to Robinson, (1967) Identical Interests are those common to a large number of states; the second category, i.e. Complementary Interests refers to those which though not identical, can form the basis of agreement on some specific issues; and the third category Conflicting Interests includes those which are neither complementary nor identical. It should be known however, this classification is neither absolute nor complete. The complementary interests can, with the passage of time, become identical interests and conflicting interests can become complementary interests. Overall, the main purpose of the whole idea of national interest is in giving direction to long-term objectives of the foreign policy of a state and giving meaning to its actions in short-term context.

III. The Concept of Foreign Policy

The aftermath of thirty years war in Europe gave birth to a new international system. This new order was ushered in through the 1648 Westphalia Peace Treaty and made nation state the basic unit of interactions (Olajide, 2022). The need for constant and continuous interaction between sovereign entities resulted in the formation of ‘foreign policies’ with the aim of determining and identifying the decisions, strategies, and ends of interaction of a state with another (Haura, 2008). A state without a foreign policy, has been compared to a ship in the deep sea without any knowledge of directions. Thus, foreign policy leads a state in fulfilling its national interests and acquiring rightful place among comity of nations.

The term foreign policy has been defined in various ways by scholars; however, they are certain that it is concerned with behaviour of a state towards other states. Legg and Morrison, (1972) conceived the term ‘foreign policy’ as “a set of explicit objectives with regard to the world beyond the borders of a given social unit and a set of strategies and tactics designed to achieve those objectives. Herman, (2018) for instance, defined foreign policy as “the discrete purposeful action that results from the political level decision of an individual or group of individuals. It is the observable artifact of a political level decision. It is not the decision, but a product of the decision.” By this, it can be seen that Hermann defines foreign policy as the behaviour of states.

George Modelski, (1962) defines it as “the system of activities evolved by communities for changing the behaviour of other states and for adjusting their own activities to the international environment. Encyclopedia Britannica sees foreign policy as general objectives that guide the activities and relationships of one state in its interactions with other states. Collins English Dictionary defined it as policy pursued by a nation in its dealings with other nations, designed to achieve national objectives. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, (1999) conceive it as

the policy of a sovereign state in its interactions with other sovereign states.

Foreign policy is also perceived as general objectives that guide the activities and relationships of one state in its interactions with other states. Ojo and Sesay (1997), described the concept as “many of the goals, political, social, economic, etc., which states try to pursue in international system cannot be achieved within the territorial confines of the nation state. At times, states need the active cooperation, even assistance of other states in the system to achieve their national objectives. Because of this, a state necessarily has to be in communication with its external environment. It is the totality of this communication that is commonly referred to as foreign policy” (Ojo and Sesay, 1997, pg. 45). A foreign policy is a set of pre-established strategies designed and implemented systematically to manage a country’s relationships with other nations. They are structured guidelines that regulate international political dealings.

Frankel, (1977) asserted that “foreign policy consists of decisions and actions, which involves to some appreciable extent relations between one state and others.” In Frankel’s view, foreign policy involves set of actions that are made within state’s borders, intended towards forces existing outside the country’s borders. It comprises the formulation and implementation of a set of ideas that govern the behaviour of states while interacting with other states to defend and enhance their national interests. In the words of Laura, (2008) “A state’s foreign policy is totality of its dealings with the external environment. Foreign Policy is the overall result of the process by which a state translates its broadly conceived goals and interests into specific courses of action in order to achieve its objectives and preserve its interests.” Two functions of foreign policy can be extracted from Laura’s definition; first, foreign policy is to attain its conceived goals and second, to pressurize its national interests.

Huge, (1944) sees “foreign policy is a well-rounded comprehensive plan based on knowledge and experience for conducting the business of government with rest of the world. It is aim at promoting and protecting the interests of the nations. Foreign policies are drafted by governments to deal with international affairs adequately. These policies have different goals depending on the country’s interests. The purpose of it is to regulate the way the country interacts with the rest of the world, to guarantee that domestic affairs are properly safeguarded from outsiders and foreign goals are achieved. Depending on a country’s main agenda, which could be an economic, social or political agenda, the foreign policy is shaped to promote that agenda, to gain supporters and to increase international awareness and engagement.

Hill, (2015) view “foreign policy as the hinge of domestic and international politics.” There is also consensus among scholars that foreign policy serves as an intersection point of domestic and international politics. Thus, from here we can say that, the foreign policy of every state is influenced by mainly two determinants; international or external and domestic or internal factors. These are considered as factors which help in shaping and molding foreign policy. However, the linkage between international and domestic determinants has long been a widely debated topic in the field of international relations and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) in particular. While some argue that domestic politics and foreign policy are two ‘independent’ arenas of issue, others are of the view that foreign policy and domestic politics are ‘interdependent’ and could spill over into each other.

In fact, many view foreign policy as nothing but a continuation of domestic policy (Olajide, 2022, pg. 62). To this school of thought charity begins at home “you cannot give what you don’t have”. Foreign policy is a reflection or aggregates of domestic policies. While both school of scholars made convincing arguments, however, the level of

influence between domestic and international determinants of foreign policies varies from state and the political environment in which these states exist. In some cases, international factors play a major role, whereas in other cases, domestic determinants are more important. In clear term, two environment exists in foreign policy. External environment and Internal or domestic environment.

External Determinant Factors of Foreign Policy (External Environment)

Undoubtedly, the international environment plays an important role in shaping the foreign policy of every state. Since foreign policy in general is about the interaction of a state with another, this interaction only takes place at the international level and as such, cannot be ignored in analyzing the foreign policy of any state. As scholars in this school acknowledge the importance of both international and domestic factors, however, they argue that international factors play a more important role in determining country’s foreign policy. The main external factors that determine the foreign policy of a state are but not limited to: the international system or power structure, international law, international organizations, alliances, and military strength or arm race.

Domestic Determinant Factors of Foreign Policy (Internal Environment)

Like the external determinant factors, scholars agree that the internal environment of state also influence the nature and course of its foreign policy. Countries differ in size, socio-economic development and political regime. They also differ in their political institutionalization and societal structures, military and economic capabilities, and strategic cultures. In the same vain, public opinion, national role conceptions, decision making rules and personality traits of political leaders vary from one state to another. These differences according to Taner, (2018) “directly affect both foreign policy making

process and foreign policy decisions.” By this, the “stuff of foreign policy derives from issues of domestic politics as well as foreign relations.” Laura argued. In Kissinger, (1966) view, “the domestic structure is not irrelevant in any historical period. At a minimum, it determines the amount of social effect which can be devoted to foreign policy.” Therefore, there exist domestic factors that may shape the foreign policy formulation and implementation of states, which include; Culture and history, Geography, size and population (Geopolitical), Economic development and natural resources, Military capabilities, Political system, Personality and character of the leader, Political parties and interest groups, Press and public opinion, and Science and technology

In summation, foreign policy decision-making entails series of processes and involves different actors. It plays an enormous role in the international affairs of a state. Without a properly formulated foreign policy, a state is tended to lose its position and prestige in world affairs and will eventually lead to a decline in achieving its national interest, whereas the opposite is true of countries with well formulated foreign policies. Thus, full understanding and deep knowledge of the meaning and concept of the term foreign policy is quite important for both policy makers, students and researchers.

IV. Nexus between National Interest (N/I) and Foreign Policy

Having examined in details the meaning of National Interest and Foreign Policy, it is the relationship and relevance of one to the other that we now turn.

In most simple terms, the main purpose of foreign policy is to protect national interests and promote them to the best possible advantage. The concept of ‘National Interest’ emerged with the evolution and arrival of the nation-states on the world scene during the modern period of world history. As already stated, national interest is what the states seek to

protect or achieve in relation to each other. Different nations chart their own course in international relations and arrange their priorities according to their national interests.

Foreign policy is then “the strategies or plan of actions” designed by state to pursue or achieve those objectives. In other words, one is a means (Foreign Policy) and the other an end (National Interest). On the other way round, the ‘end justifies the means’. That is, the National Interest or values of a state go a long way to determine the strategies or plans, designed by state to achieve such. It should also be known that whatever the strategies or plans a state may come up with, are also to a large extent determined by certain factors. States are constrained or enabled by certain factors which determine their choices of strategies or plan of actions. These factors (enumerated above) are summarized as geo-political, economic and military determinant factors. For instance a country that is not militarily capable and independent in military hardware production cannot pursue an aggressive policy in her relations with other states. To a large extent, the foreign policies of states are product of national values which states always project to the external environment. One cannot be without the other. The pursuit of National Interest shapes foreign policy, and foreign policy can also shape the pursuit of national interest.

On the part of scholars, national interest is whatever the political leaders say it is at any given time. The relevance of national interest in any country’s foreign policy cannot be over emphasized as it (national interest) generally assumed to be the ends of foreign policy. In other words, foreign policies are regarded as the means towards the attainment of the National Interest. It is essential therefore, for us to understand the components of Foreign Policy as it supposed to be the means for the attainment of national objectives or goals which summed up to constitute the National Interest. In reality however, the interest of the majority (public opinion) which

the real meaning of the word “national interest” convey may not be the outcome of government decision(s) in response to external environment. Rather, the worldview of the head of government and his personal experiences becomes the government “policy” in state’s foreign relations. This abuse is most common with leaders from the third world countries, especially in Africa. Falola, (2001) conclude “in African states there is relatively little (or no) delegation of authority in matters concerning foreign policy and that foreign policy decision-making is focused on the president.” Zartman, (1966) argues that “even minute decisions may be made by the president whose prestige in Africa and experience in dealing with other leaders give him a special competence.” He contends further that the president’s “whims and convictions may become the mood of his country’s policy and his friendship and acquaintances mark its limits.” This description is to some extent applicable to most African states.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, foreign policy has some goals which it attempts to achieve in international relations. It is a tool for the realization of a particular objective. The National Interest is that objective which foreign policy seeks to achieve. However, the usefulness and relevance of the national interest as general guide to foreign policy does not go beyond the stage of relating what is pursued and achieved and had been considered to be the national interest by the statesmen at any particular time. In reality, national interest of any state should embraced all round development that will elevates the political, cultural and socio-economic lives of the people. In most cases however, a change in government to a large extent means a change in policies pursued by the government. In extension, interest pursued by leaders/decision makers may not reflect the general wishes and aspiration of the majority in a given state. Still, to a large extent the preference of one administration may differ to others, as in choice of policies, in any given state, the national interest will

still remain unchanged. In earnest, irrespective of changes in governments, the national interest of a state remain constant. Preference of leaders and decision makers may change, national interest remain whatever it is. It is only the feedback (response) from the international/external environment that can alter the national interest of states. When this occur, it doesn’t suggest a fundamental change in national interest but rather, it is the value preference of decision makers that changed, while national interest still remain constant.

For the national interest to be relevance, and play active roles in shaping the foreign policy of nation-state in the international system, statesmen and decision makers need to put into consideration the pulse of the populace on matters of foreign relations. In a situation where the public is not on the side of the government, due to lack of information, government should redirect public opinion to align with the government position. It is also suggested that state agents should always endeavor to carry the public along on vital issues that affect foreign relations, through constant information, recruitment of qualified personnel, and capacity building for those in charge of managing the nation’s foreign affairs.

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