

# A USEFUL CONCEPT OF NATIONAL INTERESTS AND GOALS

## INTRODUCTION

As you learned from “The Fundamentals of POLT 403,” the purpose of policy is to cause changes in the existing situation that are beneficial to the state and its people – getting from A to B.

SITUATION → POLICY → IMPLEMENTATION → OUTCOME → CHANGED SITUATION

From the analysis of the situation will arise goals and objectives the achievement of which are believed necessary to cause the changes that are beneficial. The implementation of the policy is aimed at those goals. A superb application of very effective instruments to the wrong or a poorly chosen goal is a terrible misuse of resources. Worse, the desired benefits are not achieved. There is a failure to achieve an important, perhaps vital, goal. In some circumstances, this failure will not be critical. If, however, at issue is the survival of the state, protection of its people, or significant improvements in human development, the failure may be disastrous. An effective foreign policy requires the ability to use power well to achieve the necessary goals. How the state selects those necessary goals is a critical aspect of foreign policy, a part of a state’s abilities to make the appropriate decisions and to manage all aspects of foreign policy.

The purpose of this reading is to introduce you to the concept of national interests. The intent is for you to be able to determine what you believe -- **what you believe** -- should be the appropriate foreign policy goals of the United States.

## NATIONAL INTERESTS AND GOALS

President Kennedy -- "every nation determines its policies in terms of its own interests." This statement begs the questions that bedevil policymakers and the public -- what are our interests and how do we find them?

Some believe there are interests that are irreducible and immutable. In other words, there are North Stars that should guide national policies and behavior. Even if this were true, the problem remains how to find these North Stars. In reality, goals emerge from the rough and tumble of policy development. Even when a clearly defined, accepted by most, goal arises, it will not be legitimate to all and may prove to be a poor guide to action. Usually there are many competing goals, all deserving consideration, some requiring close scrutiny. How a country defines its goals depends on its political system, which determines who participates, what is considered, and how decisions are made. This is a political, therefore very subjective, process.

Nevertheless, the concept of national interests and goals is a fundamental building block of policy making. Given that the purpose of policy should be to pursue what is best for the state and its people, the first step must be to decide what is it we critically need. Then the task is to design policies to achieve these goals. The interests/goals (the ends) become the focus for the

implementation, where we allocate resources and use the instruments of power (the means).

## THE CORE NATIONAL INTERESTS

When considering policy, it is very useful to focus on the primary area of concern. Is there a threat our people? Or is there an issue that may affect the economic well-being of our people. Or is there an opportunity to advance the spread of our values? Narrowing the focus of our analysis will help simplify our analytical efforts. What one considers if there is a security threat will be very different from what should be considered if the issue involves education or trade.

**There are three core national interests.** Although these core national interests are the same for all states, those below are written in terms appropriate to the United States:

1. The physical survival and safety of the United States and its people, national security broadly defined
2. The human development of the American population, which includes the economic well-being of the United States and its people
3. The survival of the political and cultural values of the United States and its people

The first core national interest has been traditionally viewed as defending the United States against aggression by the armed forces of other states. At issue was state-versus-state behavior. Germany and Japan failed to achieve this goal in World War II, and the United States was successful in the Cold War. In this way, the core national interest was believed to be **the physical survival of the United States and its people by protecting from attacks by states**. After 9-11, however, it became more obvious that security required protection from attacks by non-state organizations. Therefore, one should define national security as **the physical survival of the United States and its people by protecting from attacks by states and non-states**. Both of these definitions, however, are about **national security narrowly defined**.

**National security broadly defined** takes into consideration that Americans can be physically harmed not only by unfriendly states and people, but also by a variety of other forces, which are not under the control of states and people. For example, the 1918 influenza epidemic killed some 675,000 Americans, more deaths than we suffered in all the wars since 1900 combined. Therefore, the broad definition of national security includes protection from transnational forces, such as the environment, weather, famine, and disease -- **the physical survival and safety of the United States and its people by protecting from all physical threats**.

The second core national interest has also been traditionally viewed narrowly as the economic well-being of the United States on the belief that economic well-being meant a high standard of living and a high quality of life. While economics is a major factor in creating the standard of living or the quality of life of Americans, it is not the only factor. Health, life expectancy, poverty, and education are other measurable factors, and there are many less precisely defined factors that can be captured well by the Declaration of Independence's "pursuit of

happiness.” Therefore, the second core interest is defined as -- **the human development of the American population, which includes the economic well-being of the United States.**

The third core national interest is difficult to define with any precision. What are these important political and social values? Is the interest focused on maintaining the status quo or does it accept adaptation and change? Is it only about what happens inside the United States or does it require the spread of our principles and values elsewhere? Whereas one can see or sense a threat to national security or the opportunities for human development, the threats and opportunities involved with national principles and values are less obvious. Moreover, although the concerns about security and well-being can be very subjective, concerns about principles and values are fundamentally subjective. These concerns arise out of the various ideological attitudes among the population and are difficult to define as “national” in nature. We can see this in the continuing debates over how to interpret our Bill of Rights. Some see globalization is a threat to our values, while others view it is an opportunity to spread those values. American foreign policy has long supported three aspects of our value structure – democracy, human rights, and aid to those in need.

Obviously, the three core national interests do not stand alone. They are interrelated and interdependent. They each capture, however, a main focus of concern or interest – what is it that we are seeking or that we need. Some believe that there is a primary core national interest – national security – and that all other core interests and goals are subordinate. This can lead to a view that all subordinate goals and means under national security are more important than the goals and means necessary for the other core national interests. We in the “Live Free or Die” state should see the fallacy of that view. A state and its people must prioritize between and among the hierarchies.

In considering goals and their relationship, it is useful to be specific about the primary focus of the goal, thus the need for a link to a primary core national interest.

## **A HIERARCHY OF GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

Every foreign policy of the United States should be focused on one or more of those core national interests. However, these give us only a general idea of what needs to be done. There must be greater specificity of purpose, if our government is to design useful policies or, for ourselves, if we are to analyze and judge what that policy should be.

With the core interests as North Stars, we can develop hierarchies of subordinate goals and objectives for each, from the very general to the very specific. The very general are almost core interests. As we get closer to the very specific, the objectives become less goals and more ways (the means) to achieve goals. An example:

- 1) national security narrowly defined requires
- 2) no use of weapons of mass destruction against the U.S., which requires
- 3) no use of such weapons by small states against the U.S., which requires
- 4) no use of such weapons by North Korea against the U.S., which requires

- 5) no use of nuclear weapons by North Korea against the U.S., which requires
- 6) the means to ensure that North Korea has no nuclear arms, or to deter North Korea from the use of such arms, or to build an anti-ballistic missile system to defend against small scale attacks. At this point, the hierarchy has clearly become less goal-like and more means-oriented.
- 7) Each of these means requires subordinate means in order to be implemented.

Statements two through five are goals and objectives. They are subordinate to the core national interest or can be considered as intermediate goals between the core national interest and the specific means to achieve that interest. They are what we believe, if achieved, will cause the changes we seek that are necessary for the maintenance or achievement of the core interest of national security.

In this case, all of us probably can see that the first five statements in this hierarchy are necessary. When we get to the sixth point, our consensus disappears because these are not goals and objectives, but means, ways to achieve the interests and goals. Often there is agreement on the goals, but great disagreement over how to achieve those goals.

### **WHAT ARE THE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES NECESSARY TO ACHIEVE OUR CORE INTERESTS?**

This is the crucial question.

In this course, while we will try to discover what the United States believed or believes to be its goals, **the primary focus is on what you believe should have been or should be the goals.** To determine what the United States believed or believes is difficult. In the first case, we can rely on historical analysis of the available evidence. Few of us have the time to weigh the evidence independently. In the second case, useful information is lacking, and the government may not be in agreement on or understand what it is trying to achieve. Moreover, the process of creating foreign policy does not follow a simple decision-making process. No decision maker, much less someone outside the black box of the government such as us, has the capacity to analyze well all the available information, and no policy making process has all the information necessary to make a fully rational decision about goals. Therefore, some would argue that, since we cannot know enough, we should leave the thinking to those who do know, those in the foreign policy decision-making process. Where does this leave us? Do we abdicate our responsibilities as citizens?

While we do not have all the information, neither do those in the decision-making process. Moreover, we have our views of what ought to be and these will often differ from those in government. Our hopes and values, our priorities and concerns may lead us to different conclusions as to what should be the goals. All of us work in accordance with bounded rationality. We must try to make the most rational decisions with limited information, limited time, and limited means of analysis. **We may not know what Washington believes it knows, but we can, better than Washington, consider issues from our own perspective. This is what much of this**

**course is about -- analyzing issues and developing our own views. In most cases, it starts with the development of what you believe to be the goals and objectives.**

As the American government began discussing Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, a presidential advisor exclaimed, "This was an event that affects vital American interests. What are we going to do about it?" Among the many concerns that were discussed were the disruption of the flow of oil supplies, an imbalance of power in the region, the danger to Americans in the area, and the broader threat to stability of the entire Middle East, in addition to the brutal invasion of a state that was a flagrant challenge to what the U.S. hoped was to be "the new world order." One can see elements that are directly related to all three core national interests. Each of the concerns could have been stated as goals or objectives linked to the core interests.

Thus in the Persian Gulf case, we could speak about ensuring an adequate flow of oil supplies, maintaining the balance of power in the region, ensuring the safety of Americans in the area, keeping the situation from affecting the rest of the Middle East, and maintaining the principle of no aggression by forcing Iraq to leave Kuwait. But what were the American fundamental goals in this situation? Above we saw that we could probably agree on a hierarchy of goals statements up to the point of considering what to do. In the case of the Persian Gulf war, we can see how oil, safety, Middle Eastern balance of power, and principles are linked to core national interests, but can we agree that any of these are necessary to the achievement of the core national interests? Not only is there often great disagreement over how to achieve the national interests, there is often fundamental disagreement over what the subordinate goals ought to be.

## **DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN NECESSARY AND OTHER GOALS**

A concern is how to distinguish between goals that are important and necessary to act on and those of lesser importance. When we discussed North Korea's threat, we had a hierarchy of goals. Two through five are necessary to achieve the core national interest. In the Persian Gulf case, the United States believed it was necessary to act decisively and quickly, but why the long delay in acting in Bosnia, and the lack of action in Rwanda? Why the concern about human rights in Kosovo and the limited response to human rights violations in other areas? Why effective military action in Afghanistan and then inadequate follow-up politically and economically? Part of the answer is prioritization -- some interests are or appear to be more important than others. (Part of the answer is disagreement about interests, discussed above. Part is the calculation of the ability to be effective, something we will return to later in this course.) Not only is there often great disagreement over how to achieve the goals and fundamental disagreement over what are the subordinate goals we need to achieve, there is often disagreement over which goals are more important.

All subordinate goals are not critical or vital. Therefore, you might wish to think in terms of four levels -- an A level where you believe the goal is necessary to the achievement of a core interest, a B level where you believe the goal is necessary, but of secondary nature, a C level where you believe the goal is helpful to achieve the core interest, but not necessary, and a D level where

what you are considering is closer to a means to achieve a goal than a goal. In the North Korea case, two through five are probably A level and the ideas in six are, depending on your analysis, probably B to C level. The means in seven are definitely D level, but can be colored by how critical they are to the achievement of the broader means. Remember that even if A level, a subordinate goal is only a necessary, but not a sufficient step to achieve the core national interest. It is probably only one of many such goals.

## **THE SPAN OF INTERESTS AND GOALS**

The three core national interests provide a spread, or a span, of interests, from the safety of persons to the survival of our values. The hierarchy of interests, however, focuses our attention on a series of subordinate goals and means that we believe are necessary to achieve the core interest. There are many hierarchies underneath each core interest. For instance, the core interest of national security narrowly defined is not achieved by only handling North Korea. There are other subordinate goals related to the weapons of mass destruction with their own hierarchies involved in achieving that core interest, such as non-proliferation and the other efforts to manage weapons of mass destruction. Additionally, there are all the other subordinate goals related to security, such as those aimed at terrorism, the rise of China, and the threats of failed states. And each core interest has, similarly, such hierarchies. One can consider the entire set of hierarchies as a broad span of interrelated interests.

There is a tendency to focus on the problem at hand and to neglect the impact of actions being implemented to achieve one subordinate goal on the other core national interests and other subordinate goals that are important. A government agency concerned about weapons of mass destruction may not realize or may downplay the importance of international economics, for instance. The means believed necessary in one case may not be compatible with the interests and means in the other. An obvious example is the need to consider all three core interests when dealing with China. This often causes conflict among those who seek greater human rights, those who seek improved relations for security, and those with economic concerns.

The span of national interest also needs to include domestic concerns. To differentiate between external goals and domestic goals, one could use national interests for external affairs and public interests for domestic. The division is helpful, but if one is not careful, one could forget that the United States and its people are a unity and that what is necessary for that unity cannot be easily divided into two. Therefore, although it is useful to think in terms of domestic and foreign goals, one must consider the impact of these on each other. Thus, the span of national interest must include the domestic, public interests.

The diagram below, involving US hierarchies in the Cold War, illustrates some of the issues involved in considering span of interests.

### **National Interest Narrowly Defined Requires**

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <b>No state in opposition to the US in control of Western Europe</b></li> <li>◆ <b>The USSR does not control Western Europe</b></li> <li>◆ <b>The means to contain the USSR in Europe</b></li> <li>◆ <b>The military means to contain the USSR in Europe</b></li> <li>◆ <b>The North Atlantic Treaty Organization</b></li> <li>◆ <b>NATO's strategic concept</b></li> <li>◆ <b>Flexible response to deter USSR actions</b></li> <li>◆ <b>Adequate conventional forces &amp; a credible threat of 1<sup>st</sup> use of nuclear weapons</b></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <b>No use of WMD against the US</b></li> <li>◆ <b>No use of WMD by the USSR against the US</b></li> <li>◆ <b>No use of nuclear weapons by the USSR against the US</b></li> <li>◆ <b>Deterrence of the use of nuclear weapons by the USSR against the US</b></li> <li>◆ <b>Mutual deterrence of use of nuclear weapons, because of nuclear parity</b></li> <li>◆ <b>No 1<sup>st</sup> use of nuclear weapons by either the US or the USSR</b></li> </ul> |
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The means chosen to try to achieve the two goals subordinate to the core national interest were not compatible. This caused significant problems with the implementation of the two policies. An option was to not rely on nuclear weapons as part of NATO's strategic concept. This was not possible because the European allies saw a conflict between creating adequate conventional forces with their core national interest of the well-being of their people. Also, many saw an effort based only on a conventional capability as weakening deterrence. The threat of 1<sup>st</sup> use, from this perspective, was a necessary component to the strategy. Others believed that the emphasis on the military means to contain the USSR invited a military response and neglected the benefits of other instruments of power.

### **THE STATEMENT OF A GOAL SUBORDINATED TO A CORE NATIONAL INTEREST**

A statement of a subordinate goal to a core national interest has two primary parts -- an assertion and support for that assertion -- and a secondary part -- a statement as to how the interest may be linked to the needs of all or most Americans.

The statement begins with an assertion in the following form: "(X) is a subordinate goal necessary to the pursuit/achievement/sustainment<sup>1</sup> of (Y), a core national interest." Example: no state has the means to use a weapon of mass destruction against the United States is a subordinate goal necessary to the achievement of the core national interest of the physical survival and safety of the United States.

-- In order to be useful as a goal, (X) must be focused on what we want to make happen. It must be something that is attainable. It must be stated in concrete terms. It must not be a statement of the problem, the threat, the opportunity, or on how might we go about pursuing it.

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<sup>1</sup> Use any appropriate term.

Examples:

- 1) peace on the world is probably not an attainable goal,
- 2) maintaining good relations with China is not concrete enough, at least because it begs the definition of “good”;
- 3) terrorism as a goal refers to the problem and not what we want, and
- 4) developing a vaccine for AIDS is a means, not a goal.

-- The subordinate goal should be something that if achieved would further significantly the core national interest. Example: the existence of an effective ozone layer is a subordinate A level goal because it is necessary to the core national interest of the physical survival and safety of the United States, national security broadly defined. While less general than a core interest, a subordinate goal should remain general. It should not be so specifically focused that it is something that is very close to being a means, which may be necessary to achieve the subordinate goal. Example: reducing the emissions from automobiles and power plants is a means, not a subordinate goal. If in doubt, look to see how the goal or means is related to the next item up in the hierarchy and see if what you are considering is necessary or not.

-- Although your subordinate goal interest may be linked to all three core interests, use only the one core interest most likely to be affected or the one that captures best the main focus of your concern.

Next comes your support for the assertion. This is a discussion of why (X) is necessary to the core interest ( Y). Although you cannot prove your assertion, you can provide yourself, your reader, and me an understanding of your reasoning why this subordinate goal is important. This part of the statement of a subordinate goal is critical. Without it, your assertion is of little value.

**Usually a sentence or two is enough to make your point.**

-- Included should be a prioritization based on the A-D level approach discussed above. Example: no state unfriendly to the United States dominates East Asia is a subordinate A level goal because it is necessary to the core interest of human development of the American population, specifically the economic well-being of the United States. You must explain why you have chosen the level. **This will require another sentence or two.** You might wish to note that the level may change under certain conditions. Example: the existence of democratic political systems in foreign states is a subordinate C level national interest that may be necessary to the survival of the political and cultural values of the United States, because the expansion of democratic states will improve the quality of political behavior throughout the world. If the theory of peaceful democratic states is correct, however, the existence of democratic political systems could be a subordinate A level goal because it could be vital to the achievement of the core interest of national security, narrowly defined.

Then comes a brief discussion as to how (X) is linked to the needs of all or most Americans. It should answer how the “interest” affects or could affect positively all (most) Americans directly -- their physical survival and safety, human development, or political and cultural values. If it does not directly affect positively all or most Americans, it is probably not a significant goal. Example: the sugar embargo on sugar from Cuba is doubtful as a subordinate

goal because, besides being a means, it does not likely have a positive direct effect on most Americans. Likewise, the statement that what is good for General Motors is good for America (Said many years ago by the CEO of GM.) is doubtful to be a good guide to a national goal. Again, you cannot prove your linkage, but you can consider that linkage and show the reader your reasoning.

The purposes of this three-part statement are to force you to think critically about what you are calling a subordinate goal and then to guide your development of that “North Star” so you can focus your thinking and analysis. If you have a poorly conceived subordinate goal, your analysis will probably be worthless.

Armed with a goal you believe in and understand, you can then consider how to apply the resources and the instruments of power to achieve that goal. The core interests and the subordinate goal guide and focus your analysis, in which various courses of action are weighed, resources allocated, and instruments of power used.

EFFECTIVE USE OF POWER toward APPROPRIATE GOAL ➔ END RESULT

### **SOME CLOSING THOUGHTS**

When considering a foreign policy issue always ask: What do we want and why? What should we want and why? What do we need and why?

When you hear someone say something is in America’s national interests, ask why they hold that view. Judge the quality of their “national interest” by the quality of their reasons supporting why. Usually, when you hear the term used it is without any supporting statements. It is usually only an assertion.

Remember if you cannot tie the goal directly to the needs of all or most Americans it is probably not a goal subordinated to a core national interest.

There are some who believe that discussing core national interests and goals leaves out issues of morality. It can. Your choice of goals and your analysis, however, is where you may or may not raise issues of morality.