National Interests and Military Power

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Many academics and analysts explain state dynamics in terms of power. Power is a complex concept associated with the idea of influencing actions or decisions. It is used through what is called soft-power strategies or through hard power. For a state, power means wealth, resources, security, and dominance. Yet power is not just complex; it is also problematic. Military power, for example, is intended to project superiority. Economic power can be similarly threatening, when governments use financial aid or impose economic sanctions with the aim of influencing or, worse, weakening an opponent. The Realist School, the dominant approach in international relations, assumes states not only struggle for power, but also seek to maximise it. They use it at national or international levels, and in its various economic, political, or military forms, depending on the situation.

The main role of military power is to protect a state's territory, citizens, and institutions within the constitutional mandate of the armed forces. However, states also use military power beyond its natural scope of defence and security. The notion of defence and security has changed and its sphere of influence and action has expanded. The old Clausewitz' dictum continues to be relevant, that "*war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means*"[1]. Military power therefore serves the purpose of showing superiority to competitors or partners and discouraging any attempt to challenge a dominant role at international level. As the Realists would put it, if interest is expressed in terms of power, then the strong link between the political and economic elements of foreign policy with military power would be evident. Foreign policy, however, should be sustained by other key factors, such as diplomacy, cooperation and responsibility. While such a focus could trigger a moral reflexion on human nature, our attention here is focused rather on the discrepancies between the current international order and the prospects that international law can provide.

The UN Charter prohibits the use of force. There are exceptions to this general prohibition, which are self-defence or in the case where there is a UN Security Council Resolution allowing its use under specific conditions if a situation challenges international peace and security. During the Cold War era, when the two superpowers, US and USSR, divided the international system into two blocks, international relations relied almost entirely on the military aspects of containment through deterrence and compelling others to comply. After the bipolar system collapsed, the UN Charter has had more opportunity to express its ideals of cooperation and friendly relations among states. If those principles were fully applied, they could generate a different international order. Where is the problem?

The UN Charter guarantees territorial integrity and self-defence. However national security, defence or interests are often interchanged and the separation between military power as the apparatus for physical security and defence as opposed to its use in foreign policy is very subtle. More often than not, states have a tendency to prioritise their interests. Though the protection of national interests and security is mostly legitimate, when it operates in opposition to international or common interests it contradicts the principles set out by the UN Charter and by all the norms of international law derived from it. This issue will be very briefly examined here.

It was in the year 1951 when Hans Morgenthau wrote his famous book "In defence of the National Interest"[2]. As one of the founding fathers of the realist school, his view was very well articulated in the affirmation that "*a foreign policy derived from the national interest is in fact morally superior to a foreign policy inspired by universal moral principles*". Hans Morgenthau, a jurist, expert in international relations and a philosopher, centred his analysis on the assumption that in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the rising power of the Soviet Union was a threat to the freedom of the Western World. He conceived interest and power as forces innate in human beings and in the behaviour of states. Peace and balance in the international order could only be achieved by restraining the desire of each state to dominate others through an image of strength. Morgenthau assumed that at the very heart of foreign policy each state pursues its national interests and acts in terms of power. Even in detailing the rules diplomacy should follow, he viewed military power as an effective instrument of foreign policy, although not its master. His analysis of interest and power became fundamental in the discipline of international relations.

National interest represents the ambitions that a country seeks to achieve in economic, military, political or cultural affairs at domestic and international level. Globalization has multiplied the scale of this category in the struggle for resources and dominance. The idea of the protection of a particular interest as opposed to a more universalistic approach of the social, political and economic order is not new in human history. It took centuries to develop into a specific political paradigm. Hellenism developed the idea that the world was governed by a universal "logos" involving the whole natural order. The social and political paradigms were shaped by the vision that from chaos everything would be transformed into "cosmos". On the other hand this universality was organically conceived to exist within the boundaries of the "polis". Precedence was given to the notion of unity as the prevailing element over distinction. The concept of individuality made no sense at that time. The Roman Empire opened the vision of Hellenism to a notion of universalism that included the Empire.

It is with Christianity that universalism acquired a metaphysical foundation, illuminated by Revelation, allowing it thus to permeate the natural order and all existing relations. The notion of "cosmos" was interpreted as a universal order that mirrors this metaphysical unity, even though it was characterized by a plurality of entities interacting within the *Communitas Christiana*[3]. In the humanism of the Renaissance, the old Aristotelian concept of "*sociabilitas*", the philosophical category indicating the capacity of each man naturally to stay with other human beings, corresponding necessarily to his rationality and perfectibility, permeated a lively philosophical and political debate[4].

Over the XVI and XVII centuries some drastic changes took place in the paradigm of universality. New seeds of individualism, rationalism and liberalism, products of the French Revolution and of Enlightenment theories, started to take root in political and social life. God was no longer the centre of this universe; Reason was rather the new source and test of knowledge. The "politics of Reason" was developed within utilitarianism, secularism and anticlericalism. This break from metaphysical universalism was reflected in a new ideological paradigm and framework which legitimized individual empowerment.

Economic transformations generated by industrialization caused a definitive fragmentation of the classic holistic vision. The individual became the centre of the universe. No more was he seen as part of an organic and homogenous totality. His individuality and independence acquired a priority over the unity of the community. Detached from natural predetermined political structures, castes or social hierarchies, man discovered freedom, equality and the ability to organize a new

rational order. New social theories appeared in support of this triumphant individualism. Particularism emerged as a category to some extent in opposition to universalism.

This was indeed a Copernican revolution. While in the past the individual was at the service of the community, in this new paradigm the community was meant to serve and advance the individual[5]. The concept of power and its legitimacy were to be redefined in an attempt to give them a new structure. Whereas the classic foundation of power had been metaphysical, power was now disengaged from metaphysics and Reason became its new reference. However, universalism was not completely obliterated. Both concepts endured, though not integrated, in a dualistic coexistence.

The dissolution of the classic order also brought the rapid consolidation of territorial states, whose Westphalian criteria dated back to 1648. States, with no superior reference, acted like monads, in total contrast with the classic sense of unity and universality. Rationalist theories and the positive law created an ethos encouraging the expansion of individuality. In time, states were forced to provide a constitutional and legal framework capable of guaranteeing a public order wherein this ethos was internally reflected. However, the individualism of states did not support a similar concept of public order at the international level. As Hobbes would say, the world of international relations was still dominated by nature, by fear and by aggressive behaviour. The transition to an order where individual interests and needs became the priority had set the conditions for a future global order of private interests but no sense of unity could be predicted, or predicated for states.

In the gradual transition to this individualistic model, a relevant element was still playing a role. It was the idea that economic interactions among individuals respond to a sort of idea of universal harmony of which the individual action is just an aspect. At the beginning of the XVIII century for the first time Adam Smith wrote of the individual interest as the engine to improve not only the personal conditions of life but also those of the nation as well. Smith gave precedence to the egoistical interest of each individual as the driving force for progress, but his level of analysis was the state, the wealth of the nation. It was not the individual that counted, but the effect that his action produced for the whole. Furthermore, this was not meant to respond to a universal order but to the goal of national wealth, supported with the tenacious work of millions of individuals acting out of their own desire. Any restriction or control on economic interactions was likely to damage national wealth.

Smith was a firm believer in economic freedom as the foundation of national prosperity. He showed the importance of individual economic action as the foundation of prosperity, but in the end what mattered for him was national wealth. In a competitive world, he thought the "invisible hand" was sufficient for creating the conditions for peace, harmony and prosperity without the necessary corrections of governments. With time, individualism continued to expand, creating an international stream of emerging human rights, but the international order had no "invisible hand" or morally superior principle to hold up for all to follow. The importance of the public sphere could not find a similar relevance at the international level and in our modern times the system has generated contradictions and mistakes.

The globalization of private interests is built around the idea of unlimited growth. However this growth-based, and consequently competitive, culture has profound effects on individuals and states. Large powers, states and non-state actors, require the support of military strength and culture to be the winner who takes all. Thucydides, an Athenian historian, philosopher and army general, expressed this as the "security dilemma": each state or entity can only increase his security at the expenses of others. As US Defense

Secretary William Cohen in his speech at Microsoft Corporation in Seattle admitted, "*The prosperity that companies like Microsoft now enjoy could not occur without having the strong military that we have*"[6]. This link to military power is not new in history, as all ancient city-states, empires and colonies were built using force. However, in our times, multinationals or transnational corporations directly demand this political and military support and act above and beyond the processes of state decision making when defining their marketing and investment strategies. What is perceived as free trade and the free movement of capital and products, is, in reality, sustained by governments. Wars are primarily fought for resources[7]. Failed or rogue states or non-state groups are also escalating factors in hegemonic wars.

International law has increased the potential for a global governance of common interests, if states were willing to act less egoistically. In the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document[8] the vital importance of *effective* multilateral systems is reaffirmed, in accordance with international law, because "*no state can stand wholly alone*" or can afford a system that discourages cooperation. The key to an effective multilateral system in foreign policy lies in the fact that the genes encouraging cooperation have provided an evolutionary advantage. Moving towards the idea of common interest is a win-win situation. "*States are strongly urged to refrain from promulgating and applying any unilateral economic, financial or trade measures not in accordance with international law and the Charter of the United Nations that impede the full achievement of economic and social development, particularly in developing countries*"[9].

Military power spent on globally imposed national interests are the main sources of the dramatic increases in pollution, poverty, financial instability, endemic unemployment, increased conflict, health epidemics, depression and species extinction. As the political scientist Joseph Nye put it, power is not obvious; there are three sets of power. To explain them, he uses the analogy of a three dimensional chess game on a stack of three boards: on the top board there is military power, where the US is obviously the superpower; on the middle board there are economic interests, where power is multipolar, and on the bottom there is terrorism, international crime, climate change and the spread of infectious disease, and this power is unipolar. "*Yet many political leaders still focus almost entirely on military assets and classic military solutions - the top board. They mistake the necessary for the sufficient. They are one-dimensional players in a three dimensional game. In the long term, that is the way to lose*"[10]. Empires come and go. However, the demand for a paradigm shift for humankind is no longer an option. A systemic change is the key to survival.

NOTE:

[1] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1989.

[2] Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy*, University Press of America, 1951.

[3] Sergio Della Valle, *Dalla Comunità Particolare all'Ordine Universale – I Paradigmi Storici*, Volume I, Quaderno del Dipartimento di Scienze Giuridiche dell'Università di Torino, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane 2011 Napoli.

[4] Fausto Arici, *Autorità e desiderio. Ipotesi di riflessione intorno la secolarizzazione fra XVI e XVII secolo*. Dispense aa. 2010-2012.

[5] Sergio Della Valle, *cit.*

[6] Karen Talbot, *Backing up Globalization with Military Might,* Covert Action Quarterly, Issue 68, Fall 1999.

[7] J.W. Smith, *Economic Democracy: The Political Struggle for the Twenty-First Century*, (M.E. Sharpe, 2000), p.58.

[8] UN General Assembly Resolution 60/1 dated 16 September 2005 at http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/487/60/PDF/N0548760.pdf?OpenElement > p. 2.

[9] UN General Assembly Resolution 67/1dated 30 November 2012 at http://www.unrol.org/files/Declaration%20HLM_A%20RES%2067%201.pdf > p.2.

[10] Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Oxford University Press 2008.