



# What Is in the National Interest? Hans Morgenthau's Realist Vision and American Foreign Policy

---

*J. Peter Pham*

## Abstract

*To answer that question this analysis examines the work of the political realist thinker Hans J. Morgenthau who transformed the study of international relations with his analysis of this question. As this analysis turns to Morgenthau, a founder of the National Committee and the chief theorist of the national interest, to define the complexities of the term, Morgenthau read the writings of the founders of America—the Federalists—for an explication of what has become the most important term in the lexicon of international relations. As relayed in this analysis, Morgenthau distilled three precepts underlying the founders' conception of America's interest in foreign affairs and nine rules that govern the art of diplomacy. They are identified and explained here in an analysis that shows, among other things, the durability of Morgenthau's thought.*

## Introduction

---

In his characteristically succinct style, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once summarized the bipolarity of the foreign policy tradition of the United States.

The singularities that America has ascribed to itself throughout its history have produced two contradictory

attitudes toward foreign policy. The first is that America serves its values best by perfecting democracy at home, thereby acting as a beacon for the rest of mankind; the second, that America's values impose on it obligations to crusade for them around the world. Torn between nostalgia for a pristine past and yearning for a perfect future, American thought has oscillated between isolation and commitment.<sup>1</sup>

That two theories—each one founded on fundamentally differing visions of the nature of humanity, society, and politics—would be faced off in a “great debate” over the conduct of the foreign policy of the United States would have come as no surprise to the National Committee on American Foreign Policy's founder, Professor Hans J. Morgenthau. Reflecting more than half a century ago on the controversy in academic and policy circles that had been occasioned by the publication of his *In Defense of the National Interest*<sup>2</sup> and *American Diplomacy*<sup>3</sup> by Ambassador George F. Kennan, who later became honorary chairman of the National Committee, Morgenthau described the two competing schools of thought in this way:

One believes that a rational and moral political order, derived from universally valid abstract principles, can be achieved here and now. It

assumes the essential goodness and infinite malleability of human nature and attributes the failure of the social order to measure up to the rational standards to lack of knowledge and understanding, obsolescent social institutions, or the depravity of certain isolated individuals or groups. It trusts in education, reform, and the sporadic use of force to remedy these deficiencies.

The other school believes that the world, imperfect as it is from the rational point of view, is the result of forces which are inherent in human nature. To improve the world, one must work with those forces, not against them. This being inherently a world of opposing interests and of conflict among them, moral principles can never be fully realized, but at best approximated through the ever temporary balancing of interests and the ever precarious settlement of conflicts. This school, then, sees a system of checks and balances a universalist principle for all pluralist societies. It appeals to historic precedent rather than to abstract principles, and aims at achievement of the lesser evil rather than the absolute good.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that these lines so well describe the fault lines revealed in the debates concerning United States foreign policy during the 2008 presidential election campaign and will undoubtedly continue to manifest themselves through the coming years as the new administration manages America's international relations underscores the perennial wisdom of Morgenthau's realist vision and its ongoing relevance to the conduct of foreign policy, particularly the articulation and pursuit of the country's national interests. This article will briefly review two of the major pillars of Morgenthau's political realism—the permanence

of self-interest and the struggle for power and the inevitable nexus between moral principles and statecraft—and proceed to examine how they have shaped the contours and continue to influence the ongoing understanding of the major objectives of U.S. foreign policy.

## Interest and Power

A jurist by training and a philosopher by inclination, Morgenthau only reluctantly dedicated himself to the study of international relations because in the wake of World War II, when he began to focus his attention on the subject, it was increasingly evident that if the rising power of the Soviet Union was not balanced, freedom itself would be lost. As Robert J. Myers, who was a student of his at the time, has noted, for Morgenthau “rallying the West against this threat through rapid rearmament was the immediate goal,” while idealism “was blind to this menace, and its reliance on such ideas as collective security through the United Nations and goodwill toward the Soviet Union, which was gobbling up Eastern Europe, seemed a reckless stewardship of the national interest.”<sup>5</sup> To counter the idealists who expected international tensions to be resolved through open negotiations marked by goodwill and self-denial, Morgenthau articulated in the first edition of his *Politics Among Nations*—a classic work that “altered the way international relations was taught in the United States” by putting “the pursuit of specific American national interests at the center of foreign policy analysis while qualifying that objective with a strong commitment to ethical imperatives and restraints”<sup>6</sup>—what would become his realist theory of international politics, an approach that, he argued, had the advantage of being concerned “with human nature as it actually is, and with historic processes as they actually take place.”<sup>7</sup>

In the framework that Morgenthau elaborated, every political action is seen as directed

toward keeping, increasing, or demonstrating power. In short, the *animus dominandi*, the desire to dominate, is *the* social force that determines political activity.<sup>8</sup> On the international plane, those behavioral patterns translate into policies of the status quo, imperialism, and prestige. The first has as its objective the maintenance of the existing balance of power, whereas the second seeks to acquire more power and the third seeks to show off strength in order to keep or expand power. Consequently, Morgenthau argued that interest was at the heart of all politics and thus on the international stage it behooved each state to pursue its national interest, generally defined as power.

Forget the sentimental notion that foreign policy is a struggle between virtue and vice, with virtue bound to win.

Forget the utopian notion that a brave new world without power politics will follow the unconditional surrender of wicked nations.

Forget the crusading notion that any nation, however virtuous and powerful, can have the mission to make the world over in its own image.

Remember that the golden age of isolated normalcy is gone forever and that no effort, however great, and no action, however radical, will bring it back.

Remember that diplomacy without power is feeble, and power without diplomacy is destructive and blind.

Remember that no nation's power is without limits, and hence that its policies must respect the power and interests of others.

Remember that the American people have shown throughout their history that they are able to face the truth and act upon it with courage and resourcefulness in war, with common sense and moral determination in peace.

And, above all, remember always that it is not only a political necessity, but also a moral duty for a nation to always follow in its dealings with other nations but one guiding star, one standard for thought, one rule for action: The National Interest.<sup>9</sup>

Although Morgenthau conceived of interest and power as forces "inherent in human power," he did not claim for them a meaning "fixed once and for all."<sup>10</sup> Rather, he held that change occurs constantly and thus environment plays a major role in shaping the interests that determine political action. He subsequently clarified that the emphasis on power must be adapted to the changing circumstances of international politics.

When the times tend to depreciate the element of power, [the discipline of international relations] must stress its importance. When the times incline toward a monistic conception of power in the general scheme of things, it must show its limitations. When the times conceive of power primarily in military terms, it must call attention to the variety of factors which go into the power equation.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, even when the importance of a specific interest for a nation's relative power position is undeniable, that fact does not give it license to neglect other interests that are likewise essential to its security, even if their significance is perhaps less obvious.

## **Moral Principle and Statecraft**

It must be noted that Morgenthau's realism was never divorced from a profound moral foundation. In his early work *Scientific Man*

vs. *Power Politics*, Morgenthau sketched out an ethical vision that acknowledged the dilemmas inherent in free will and power in an imperfect world, arguing that the best course is to choose “among several possible actions the one that is the least evil.”<sup>12</sup> Subsequently this norm was expanded in the context of a theory of international relations to the principle that as long as there is no international community capable of guaranteeing security amid fierce competition, a nation fulfilled the duty to choose the lesser evil by following its national interest.

In the absence of an integrated international society, the attainment of a modicum of order and the realization of a minimum of values are predicated upon the existence of national communities capable of preserving order and realizing moral values within the limits of their power.<sup>13</sup>

Thus Morgenthau argued emphatically that

Despite the profound changes which have occurred in the world, it still remains true, as it has always been true, that a nation confronted with the hostile aspirations of other nations has one prime obligation—to take care of its own interests. The moral justification for this prime duty of all nations—for it is not only a moral right but also a moral obligation—arises from the fact that if this particular nation does not take care of its interests, nobody else will. Hence the counsel that we ought to subordinate our national interest to some other standard is unworthy of a nation great in human civilization. A nation which would take that counsel and act consistently on it would commit suicide and become the prey and victim of other nations which know how to take care of their interests.<sup>14</sup>

However, in such a seemingly bleak Hobbesian landscape of constant tension and struggle with states pursuing their own interests, what are the prospects for peace and security? Morgenthau held that traditionally there were two devices through which order can be maintained. The first was the balance of power, which is eventually arrived at through the struggle for power, the clash of those pursuing imperialist policies and those trying to maintain the status quo. However, in the changed circumstances that he surveyed after World War II, the balance of power was no longer an adequate instrument, especially given the disappearance amid the ideological contest between the superpowers of the restraints of times past when “foreign policy always operated within a generally accepted framework of moral values and ways of life common to all participants in the struggle for power.”<sup>15</sup> The second was the normative limitations imposed by international law, morality, and public opinion. Alas the loss of moral consensus and the lack of a central legal authority on the international stage comparable to the state on the domestic level render norms weak instruments for keeping the peace at best, although Morgenthau always held out hope that the United Nations might mature into a structure that might “contribute to the cause of peace by preventing the superpowers from going to the extremes which virtually nothing else prevents them from going to except their self-restraint born of mutual fear.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus having systematically rejected other instruments as either impractical or inadequate, by the third edition of *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau touted the virtues of diplomacy that could “make peace more secure than it is today”<sup>17</sup> by minimizing conflicts and contributing to the growth of a sense of world community upon whose foundations might someday in the far distant future be erected a world state that would ensure universal peace.<sup>18</sup> Diplomacy, however, cannot carry out its function unless it abides by nine rules that

Morgenthau elaborated in considerable detail.<sup>19</sup>

1. Diplomacy must be divested of the crusading spirit. . . .
2. The objectives of foreign policy must be defined in terms of the national interest and must be supported with adequate power. . . .
3. Diplomacy must look at the political scene from the point of view of other nations.
4. Nations must be willing to compromise on all issues that are not vital to them.
5. Give up the shadow of worthless rights for the substance of real advantage. . . .
6. Never put yourself in a position from which you cannot retreat without losing face and from which you cannot advance without grave risks. . . .
7. Never allow a weak ally to make decisions for you. . . .
8. The armed forces are the instrument of foreign policy, not its master.
9. The government is the leader of public opinion, not its slave.

The first four rules are fundamental, whereas the latter five are prerequisites for the possibility of compromise. All nine require statesmen familiar with “the eternal laws by which man moves in the social world”<sup>20</sup> who refuse to “identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe.”<sup>21</sup> There is, Morgenthau furthermore asserted, “a world of difference between the belief that all nations stand under the judgment of God, inscrutable to the human mind, and the blasphemous conviction that God is

always on one’s side and that what one wills cannot fail to be willed by God also.”<sup>22</sup>

## **Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy**

---

Given the analytical framework that he had almost singlehandedly constructed for the new discipline of international relations, what did Morgenthau deem to have been the national interests of the United States? In answering that question, Morgenthau reached back to the Federalist period and what he viewed as the three premises underlying the founders’ conception of America’s interest in foreign affairs.

The first was that the interest of the United States in international affairs was fundamentally different from those interests that European nations traditionally pursued. . . . This purpose leads to the second presupposition of the Federalist conception of foreign policy . . . [that] there exists something like a natural isolation of the United States . . . [that was] the result of an intelligent and deliberate foreign policy to be achieved by hard thinking and hard work . . . . The third presupposition of the Federalists was that, in order to make the United States immune from foreign interference and, more particularly, from being drawn into the squabbles of Europe, its foreign policy had to be the policy of the balance of power.<sup>23</sup>

According to Morgenthau, that meant that historically the prime objective of United States foreign policy was the country’s security and status as “predominant power without rival”<sup>24</sup> in the Americas. “This first concern,” he wrote, “leads with logical necessity to the second one,

which is the maintenance of the balance of power in Europe. . . . [since] the security of the United States in the Western Hemisphere was clearly recognized to depend upon conditions prevailing outside the hemisphere.”<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, Morgenthau noted, the United States added to its shortlist of key national interests the balance of power in Asia, a principle that originated in the idea of the “open door” in China—at first a commercial concern, later a political and military preoccupation that assumed that the domination of the Asian mainland by another nation would create so great an accumulation of power as to threaten the security of the United States.<sup>26</sup>

How Morgenthau reconciled his analysis that the existence of hegemony over the old world threatened the core national interests of the United States and his opposition to what he disparaged as “utopian” schemes to roll back what was, at least in the early 1950s, the Moscow–Beijing axis controlling the heartland of Central Eurasia is illustrative of the realist vision he championed. Although he acknowledged that “the captivity of any nation, large or small, close or far away, is a moral outrage which cannot be tolerated” and that “the presence of the Russian armies in the heart of Europe and their cooperation with the Chinese armies constitute the two main sources of the imbalance of power” that threatened American security,<sup>27</sup> Morgenthau insisted that certain questions needed to be answered in order to consider the situation rationally.

While the United States has a general interest in the liberation of all captive nations, what is the hierarchy of interests it has in the liberation, say, of China, Estonia, and Hungary? . . . What resources does the United States have at its disposal for the liberation of all captive nations or some of them? . . . Are we more likely to avoid national bankruptcy by embarking upon a policy of

indiscriminate liberation with the concomitant certainty of war or by continuing the present policy of containment?<sup>28</sup>

Although it would be anachronistic to try to conjecture which sides in the various contemporary American foreign policy debates Morgenthau might have come down upon, it would not be too farfetched to imagine that the mild-mannered academic who nonetheless passionately inveighed against “great powers which dream of remaking the world in their own image and embark upon world-wide crusades, thus straining their resources to exhaustion,”<sup>29</sup> would not be terribly enthusiastic about a “forward strategy of freedom”<sup>30</sup> aimed at “replacing hatred and resentment with democracy and hope across the broader Middle East.”<sup>31</sup> Always monitory against the temptation of nations to project their interests and image onto others, Morgenthau was downright skeptical of the transformative efficacy of interventions into the affairs of other states, writing in the midst of the Vietnam War, a military commitment he came to oppose, that

We have come to overrate enormously what a nation can do for another nation by intervening in its affairs—even with the latter’s consent. This overestimation of our power to intervene is a corollary of our ideological commitment, which by its very nature has no limit. . . . Both the need for intervention and the chances for successful intervention are much more limited than we have been led to believe. Intervene we must where our national interest requires it and where our power gives us a chance to succeed. The choice of these occasions will be determined not by sweeping ideological commitments nor by blind reliance upon American power but by a careful calculation of

the interests involved and the power available. If the United States applies this standard, it will intervene less and succeed more.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, assertions that “the mission of the United States is to provide global leadership grounded in the understanding that the world shares a common security and a common humanity”<sup>33</sup> fly directly in the face of Morgenthau’s maxim that this world is “a world of opposing interests and of conflict among them.”<sup>34</sup> Nor would calls for belief in “change,” especially in the international arena, likely have found much sympathy from Morgenthau who greeted the inauguration of President Jimmy Carter by publishing an essay entitled “The Pathology of American Power,” which he concluded with the laconic sentence: “To establish and maintain stability in an existentially unstable world requires of necessity an anti-reformist and anti-revolutionary foreign policy.”<sup>35</sup>

In short, Morgenthau’s political realism is less prescriptive than dispositive. Rather than provide an answer certain for every possible circumstance, it proposes an intellectual framework conducive to the prudent evaluation of the political consequences of the concrete actions required of the statesman. Rejecting the attempts by his idealist critics to frame their differences as a contest between principle and expediency, morality and amorality (if not immorality), Morgenthau posited that the conduct of foreign policy necessarily meant choices among different moral values and offered a key to those vested with the responsibility of decision.

If an American statesman must choose between the promotion of universal liberty, which is a moral good, at the risk of American security and, hence, of liberty in the United States, and the promotion of American security and of liberty in the United States,

which is another moral good, to the detriment of the promotion of universal liberty, which choice ought he to make? The utopian will not face the issue squarely and will deceive himself into believing that he can achieve both goods at the same time. The realist will choose the national interest on both moral and pragmatic grounds; for if he does not take care of the national interest nobody else will, and if he puts American security and liberty in jeopardy the cause of liberty everywhere will be impaired.<sup>36</sup>

Nonetheless, he cautioned, holding up the national interest as the standard for judgment and action requires recourse to diplomacy to minimize conflict with the interests of others.

The national interest of a nation which is conscious not only of its own interests but also that of other nations must be defined in terms compatible with the latter. In a multinational world this is a requirement of political morality; in an age of total war it is also one of the conditions of survival.<sup>37</sup>

In this respect Morgenthau might have approved of the assertion by the presidential candidate who, describing himself as a “realistic idealist,” argued that

In such a world, where power of all kinds is more widely and evenly distributed, the United States cannot lead by virtue of its power alone. . . . Our great power does not mean we can do whatever we want whenever we want, nor should we assume we have all the wisdom and knowledge necessary to succeed. We need to listen to the views and respect the collective will of our democratic allies. When we believe international action

is necessary, whether military, economic, or diplomatic, we will try to persuade our friends that we are right. But we, in return, must be willing to be persuaded by them.<sup>38</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In his tireless advocacy of a realist foreign policy for his adopted homeland based on the rational pursuit of America's national interest, the National Committee's founder never failed to add a note of caution that "while the interests which a nation may pursue in its relation[s] with other nations are of infinite variety and magnitude," the resources which are available to the United States—or any country—for the pursuit of such interests would necessarily be "limited in quantity and kind."<sup>39</sup> He went on to explain not only how to go about that but also to warn of the particular danger that democracies face in this exercise, one that will resonate with many in the wake of the foreign policy debates of the 2008 general election campaign.

No nation has the resources to promote all desirable objectives with equal vigor; all nations must therefore allocate their scarce resources as rationally as possible. The indispensable precondition of such rational allocation is a clear understanding of the distinction between the necessary and variable elements of the national interest. Given the contentious manner in which in democracies the variable elements of the national interest are generally determined, the advocates of an extensive conception of the national interest will inevitably present certain variable elements of the national interest as though their attainment were necessary for the nation's survival. In other words, the necessary elements of the national

interest have a tendency to swallow up the variable elements so that in the end all kinds of objectives, actual or potential, are justified in terms of national survival. . . . The same problem presents itself in its extreme form when a nation pursues, or is asked to pursue, objectives which are not only unnecessary for its survival but tend to jeopardize it.<sup>40</sup>

Consequently, the essence of Morgenthau's wisdom is the acknowledgment that if the United States pays heed to the principles of its founders, is candid about its real capabilities, restrains its unreasonable expectation that every problem has a ready solution achievable in all-too-short time frames, and prioritizes action in favor of the most critical objectives of its foreign policy, most challenges that it will encounter on the global stage can be managed to the benefit of America's true national interests—solid counsel for any administration in Washington that wishes not only to maintain its international relations but to see them prosper.

### **About the Author**

A member of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy's Board of Advisers, J. Peter Pham is director of the Nelson Institute for International and Public Affairs at James Madison University and a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies. Dr. Pham's most recent book, a volume on U.S. foreign policy toward Africa entitled *Africa Matters*, is forthcoming from Yale University Press.

### **Notes**

1. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York, 1994), 18.
2. Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1951).

3. George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago, 1951).
4. Hans J. Morgenthau, “Another ‘Great Debate’: The National Interest of the United States,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 46, no. 4 (1952): 961–962.
5. Robert J. Myers, “Hans Morgenthau’s Realism and American Foreign Policy,” *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1997): 256–257.
6. Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman, “Ethical Realism and Contemporary Challenges,” *American Foreign Policy Interests*, vol. 28, no. 6 (November/December 2006): 414.
7. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 1st ed. (New York, 1948), 4.
8. See Sean Molloy, “Truth, Power, Theory: Hans Morgenthau’s Formulation of Realism,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2004): 1–34.
9. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, 241–242.
10. *Ibid.*, 8.
11. Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Decline of Democratic Politics* (Chicago, 1962), 47.
12. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago, 1946), 202. Also see Christian Hacke, “Power and Morality: On the Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau,” *American Foreign Policy Interests*, vol. 27, no. 3 (May/June 2005): 171–175.
13. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, 38.
14. Hans J. Morgenthau, “What Is the National Interest of the United States?” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 282, no. 1 (1952): 4.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Hans J. Morgenthau, “The Yardstick of National Interest,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 296, no. 1 (1954): 84.
17. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York, 1960), 569.
18. See James P. Speer II, “Hans Morgenthau and the World State,” *World Politics*, vol. 20, no. 2 (1968): 207–227.
19. See Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 3rd rev. ed., 561–567. Also see Greg Russell, “Hans J. Morgenthau and the Normative Foundations of Diplomacy and Statesmanship,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1991): 130–160.
20. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, 220.
21. Morgenthau, *The Decline of Democratic Politics*, 11.
22. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 3rd rev. ed., 11.
23. Morgenthau, “What Is the National Interest of the United States?” 1–2.
24. Hans J. Morgenthau, “The Mainsprings of American Foreign Policy: The National Interest vs. Moral Abstractions,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 44, no. 4 (1950): 834.
25. Morgenthau, “What Is the National Interest of the United States?” 5.
26. See Morgenthau, “The Mainsprings of American Foreign Policy,” 835–836.
27. Morgenthau, “Another ‘Great Debate,’” 981.
28. *Ibid.*, 981–982.
29. *Ibid.*, 977.
30. George W. Bush, Remarks on Winston Churchill and the War on Terror at the Library of Congress (February 4, 2004), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/02/20040204-4.html>
31. George W. Bush, Remarks on the War on Terror at the National Endowment for Democracy (October 6, 2005), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051006-3.html>
32. Hans J. Morgenthau, “To Intervene or Not to Intervene,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 45, no. 3 (April 1967): 436.
33. Barack Obama, “Renewing American Leadership,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 4 (July/August 2007): 3.

34. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 3rd rev. ed., 4.

35. Hans J. Morgenthau, "The Pathology of American Power," *International Security*, vol. 1, no. 3 (winter 1977): 20.

36. Morgenthau, "Another 'Great Debate,'" 987.

37. *Ibid.*, 977.

38. John McCain, Remarks to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council (March 26, 2008), <http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/News/Speeches/872473dd-9ccb-4ab4-9d0d-ec54f0e7a497.htm>

39. *Ibid.*, 976–977.

40. *Ibid.*, 977.