

Redefining the National Interest

Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

CONFUSION AFTER KOSOVO

NATO's MILITARY intervention in Kosovo dramatically raises a larger problem: how should the United States define its interests in today's world? After the collapse of the Soviet Union, what are the limits of America's concerns abroad? Can one define interests conventionally in the information age? The "national interest" is a slippery concept, used to describe as well as prescribe foreign policy. Hence the considerable debate about it. Some scholars have even regretted the waning of the very idea of a "national" interest today. Writing in these pages, Samuel P. Huntington argued recently that "without a sure sense of national identity, Americans have become unable to define their national interests, and as a result subnational commercial interests and transnational and nonnational ethnic interests have come to dominate foreign policy."

For almost five decades, the containment of Soviet power provided a North Star to guide American foreign policy. From a longer historical perspective, however, the Cold War was the anomalous period, and even it involved some bitter disputes over where our interests lay—during the Vietnam War, for example. Before World War II, confusion was more often the rule. For example, ethnic differences colored appraisals of whether the United States should enter World War I. Peter Trubowitz's recent study of American definitions of national interests

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in the 1890s, 1930s, and 1980s concludes that "there is no single national interest. Analysts who assume that America has a discernible national interest whose defense should determine its relations with other nations are unable to explain the persistent failure to achieve domestic consensus on international objectives."

With all that said, it would be a mistake to discard the term. As the Commission on America's National Interests declared in 1996, "national interests are the fundamental building blocks in any discussion of foreign policy. . . . In fact, the concept is used regularly and widely by administration officials, members of Congress, and citizens at large." The commission goes on to identify five vital interests that most agree would justify the unilateral use of force. Not everyone would agree with this particular list. Economic and humanitarian interests are also widely thought important. Many experts argue that vital strategic concerns are more widely shared than other interests, and deserve priority because were we to fail to protect them, more Americans would be affected and in more profound ways. Leaders and experts are right to point out dangers to the public and to try to persuade it. Yet even "objective" threats are not always obvious. The connection between a particular event (Iraq's invasion of Kuwait or Serbia's rejection of the Rambouillet agreement) and an American interest may involve a long causal chain. Different people see different risks and dangers. And priorities vary: reasonable people can disagree, for example, about how much insurance to buy against remote threats and whether to do so before pursuing other values (such as human rights). In a democracy, such political struggles over the exact definition of national interests—and how to pursue them—are both inevitable and healthy. Foreign-policy experts can help clarify causation and tradeoffs in particular cases, but experts alone cannot decide. Nor should they. The national interest is too important to leave solely to the geopoliticians. Elected officials must play the key role.

In a democracy, the national interest is simply the set of shared priorities regarding relations with the rest of the world. It is broader than strategic interests, though they are part of it. It can include values such as human rights and democracy, if the public feels that those values are so important to its identity that it is willing to pay a price to promote them. The American people clearly think that their

interests include certain values and their promotion abroad—such as opposition to ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. A democratic definition of the national interest does not accept the distinction between a morality-based and an interest-based foreign policy. Moral values are simply intangible interests. Leaders and experts may point out the costs of indulging these values. But if an informed public disagrees, experts cannot deny the legitimacy of public opinion. Polls show that the American people are neither isolationist nor eager to serve as the world's police. But finding a middle course is proving difficult and complex.

THE IMPACT OF THE INFORMATION AGE

STRATEGISTS ADVISE that interests should be defined in relation to power—but how would one describe the distribution of power in the information age? Some think the end of the bipolar world left multipolarity in its stead. But that is not a very good description of a world in which one country, the United States, is so much more powerful than all the others. On the other hand, unipolarity is not a very good description either, because it exaggerates the degree to and ease with which the United States is able to get what it wants—witness Kosovo.

Instead, power today is distributed like a three-dimensional chess game. The top, military board is unipolar, with the United States far outstripping all other states. The middle, economic board is multipolar, with the United States, Europe, and Japan accounting for two-thirds of world production. But the bottom—representing transnational relations that cross borders and lie outside the control of governments—has a more dispersed structure of power. This complexity makes policymaking today more difficult. It means playing on several boards at the same time. Moreover, although it is important not to ignore the continuing importance of military force for some purposes, it is equally important not to be misled into thinking that American power can always get its way in nonmilitary matters. The United States is a preponderant, but not a dominant, power.

Another distinction to keep in mind is that between “hard power” (a country's economic and military ability to buy and coerce) and “soft power” (the ability to attract through cultural and ideological appeal).

It is important that half a million foreign students want to study in the United States each year, that Europeans and Asians want to watch American films and TV, and that American liberties are attractive in many parts of the world. Our values are significant sources of soft power. Both hard and soft power remain vital, but in the information age soft power is becoming more compelling than ever before.

Massive flows of cheap information have expanded the number of contacts across national borders. In a deregulated world, global markets and nongovernmental actors play a larger role. States are more easily penetrated today and less like the classic realist model of solid billiard balls bouncing off each other. As a result, political leaders are finding it more difficult to maintain a coherent set of priorities in foreign policy, and more difficult to articulate a single national interest.

Yet the United States, with its democratic society, is well placed to benefit from the rapidly developing information age. Although greater pluralism may diminish the coherence of government policies, our institutions are attractive and the openness of our society enhances credibility—a crucial resource in an information age. Thus the United States is well placed to make use of soft power. At the same time, the soft power that comes from being a “city on the hill” does not provide the coercive capability that hard power does. Alone, it does not support a very venturesome foreign policy.

Hence different aspects of the information age mean different things for America's national interests. On the one hand, a good case can be made that the information revolution will have long-term benefits for democracies. Democratic societies can create credible information because they are not threatened by it. Authoritarian states will have more trouble. Governments can limit their citizens' access to the Internet and global markets, but they pay a high price if they do so. Singapore and China, for example, are currently wrestling with these problems. Moreover, transparency is becoming a key asset for countries seeking investments. Governments that want rapid development will have to give up some of the barriers to information flows.

On the other hand, some aspects of the information age are less benign. The free flow of broadcast information in open societies has always had an impact on public opinion and the formulation of foreign

policy. But now the flow has increased in volume and shortened news cycles have reduced the time for deliberation. By focusing on certain conflicts and human rights problems, the media pressure politicians to respond to some foreign problems and not others—for example, Somalia rather than southern Sudan in 1992. The so-called CNN effect makes it hard to keep items that might otherwise warrant a lower priority off the top of the public agenda. Now, with the added interactivity of groups on the Internet, it will be harder than ever to maintain a consistent agenda.

Also problematic is the effect of transnational information flows on the stability of national communities. The Canadian media guru Marshall McLuhan once prophesied that communications technologies would turn the world into a global village. Instead of a single cosmopolitan community, however, they may have produced a congeries of global villages, each with all the parochial prejudices that the word implies, but with a greater awareness of global inequality. Transnational economic forces are disrupting traditional lifestyles, and this increases economic integration and communal disintegration at the same time. This is particularly true in the post-Soviet states and the old European-built empires of Africa. Political entrepreneurs use inexpensive information channels to mobilize the discontented on sub-national tribal levels: some to the cause of repressive nationalism, and some to transnational ethnic and religious communities. This in turn leads to increased demands for self-determination, increased violence, and other violations of human rights—all in the presence of television cameras and the Internet.

AMERICAN POWER AND PRIORITIES

WILLIAM PERRY and Ashton Carter have recently argued that we should rethink the way we understand risks to U.S. security. At the top of their new hierarchy they put “A list” threats like that the Soviet Union once presented to our survival. The “B list” features imminent threats to U.S. interests—but not to our survival—such as North Korea or Iraq. The “C list” includes important “contingencies that indirectly affect U.S. security but do not directly threaten U.S. interests”: “the Kosovos, Bosnias, Somalias, Rwandas, and Haitis.”

What is striking is how the "C list" has come to dominate today's foreign policy agenda. Carter and Perry speculate that this is because of the disappearance of "A list" threats since the end of the Cold War. But another reason is that "C list" issues dominate media attention in the information age. Dramatic visual portrayals of immediate human conflict and suffering are far easier to convey to the public than "A list" abstractions like the possibility of a "Weimar Russia," the rise of a hegemonic China and the importance of our alliance with Japan, or the potential collapse of the international system of trade and investment. Yet if these larger, more abstract strategic issues were to turn out badly, they would have a far greater impact on the lives of most Americans.

How should Americans set priorities in such a world? We should start by understanding our power. On one hand, for reasons given above, American power is now less fungible and effective than it might first appear. On the other, the United States is likely to remain preponderant well into the next century. For a variety of reasons, the information revolution is likely to enhance rather than diminish American power.

As a wealthy status quo power, the United States has an interest in maintaining international order. Behind the abstractions about rising interdependence are changes that make it more difficult to isolate the United States from the effects of events in the rest of the world. More concretely, there are two simple reasons why Americans have a national interest in preventing disorder beyond our borders. First, events and actors out there can hurt us; and second, Americans want to influence distant governments and organizations on a variety of issues such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, drugs, shared resources, and the environment.

To do so, the United States cannot merely set a good example—it needs hard-power resources. Maintaining these will require an investment that Americans have recently been unwilling to make—witness the decline in the foreign affairs budget and the reluctance to take casualties. It is difficult to be a superpower on the cheap. Second, the United States has to recognize a basic proposition of public-goods theory: if

How should America
set priorities in the
information age?



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

What should be our foreign policy priority? Russian soldiers . . .

the largest beneficiary of a public good (such as international order) does not provide disproportionate resources toward its maintenance, the smaller beneficiaries are unlikely to do so. This puts a different twist on Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright's phrase that the United States is "the indispensable nation," and one less palatable to the public and to Congress.

Third, we should make sure that top priority is given to those aspects of the international system that, if not attended to properly, would have profound effects on the basic international order and therefore on the lives and welfare of Americans. Some analysts have suggested that we can learn something from the lesson of the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century, when it was also a preponderant but not dominating power. Three public goods that Britain attended to were maintaining the balance of power among the major states, promoting an open international economic system, and maintaining open international commons such as the freedom of the seas. All three translate relatively well to the current American case. In terms of



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

... or Kosovar refugees?

the distribution of power, we need to continue to “shape the environment” (in the words of the Pentagon’s *Quadrennial Defense Review*), and that is why we keep 100,000 troops based in Europe, another 100,000 in Asia, and some 20,000 near the Persian Gulf. Our role as a stabilizer and a reassurance against the rise of hostile hegemonies in important regions has to remain a top priority, an “A list” issue.

Meanwhile, promoting an open international economic system is good not just for America’s economic growth but for other countries’ as well. In the long term, economic growth is likely to foster stable democratic middle-class societies around the world. To keep the global system open, the United States must resist protectionism at home and strengthen international monitoring institutions such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the Bank for International Settlements. In regard to international commons, the United States, like nineteenth-century Britain, has an interest in freedom of the seas, but also in the environment, in the preservation of endangered species, and in the uses of outer space and of the new cyberspace.

Beyond the nineteenth-century analogy, in today's world the United States has a general interest in developing and maintaining the international laws and institutions that deal not just with trade and the environment, but with arms proliferation, peacekeeping, human rights, and other concerns. Those who denigrate the importance of law and institutions forget that the United States is a status quo power. They also ignore the extent to which legitimacy is a power reality. True realists would not make such a mistake.

Finally, as a preponderant power, the United States can provide an important public good by acting as a mediator and convener. By helping to organize coalitions of the willing and by using its good offices to mediate conflicts in places like Northern Ireland, the Middle East, or the Aegean Sea, the United States can help to shape the world in ways that are beneficial to us as well as to other nations.

THE C LIST

IF WE did not live in the information age, the foregoing strategy for prioritizing America's national interests might suffice. But the reality is that nonvital crises like Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, and Kosovo continue to force their way to the foreground because of their ability to command massive media attention. Such crises raise moral concerns that the American people consistently include in their list of foreign policy interests. Policy experts may deplore such sympathies, but they are a democratic reality.

Some might object that a strategy based on "A list" issues does not take account of the ongoing erosion of Westphalian national sovereignty that is occurring today. It is true that old-fashioned state sovereignty is eroding—both *de facto*, through the penetration of national borders by transnational forces, and *de jure*, as seen in the imposition of sanctions against South Africa for apartheid, the development of an International Criminal Court, and the bombing of Yugoslavia over its policies in Kosovo. But the erosion of sovereignty is a long-term trend of decades and centuries, and it is a mixed blessing rather a clear good. Although the erosion may help advance human rights in repressive regimes by exposing them to international attention, it also portends considerable disorder. Recall that the seventeenth-century

Peace of Westphalia created a system of sovereign states to curtail vicious civil wars over religion. Although it is true that sovereignty stands in the way of national self-determination, such self-determination is not the unequivocal moral good it first appears. In a world where there are some two hundred states but many thousands of often overlapping entities that might eventually make a claim to nationhood, blind promotion of self-determination would have highly problematic consequences.

So what do we do about the humanitarian concerns and strong moral preferences that Americans want to see expressed in their foreign policy? Americans have rarely accepted pure realpolitik as a guiding principle, and human rights and the alleviation of humanitarian disasters have long been important aspects of our foreign policy. But foreign policy involves trying to accomplish varied objectives in a complex and recalcitrant world. This entails tradeoffs. A human rights policy is not itself a foreign policy; it is an important *part* of a foreign policy. During the Cold War, this balancing act often meant tolerating human rights abuses by regimes that were crucial to balancing Soviet power—for example, in South Korea before its transition to democracy. Similar problems persist in the current period—witness our policy toward Saudi Arabia, or our efforts to balance human rights in China with our long-term strategic objectives.

In the information age, humanitarian concerns dominate attention to a greater degree than before, often at the cost of diverting attention from “A list” strategic issues. Since pictures are more powerful than words, arguments about tradeoffs become emotional and difficult. Of course, acting on humanitarian values is often appropriate. Few Americans can look at television pictures of starving people or miserable refugees and not say that their country should do something about them. And the United States often does respond to such catastrophes. Sometimes this is quite easily done, such as hurricane relief to Central America or the early stages of famine relief in Somalia. But apparently simple cases like Somalia can turn out to be extremely difficult to resolve, and others, like Kosovo, are difficult from the start.

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The problem with such hard cases is that the humanitarian interest that instigates the action often turns out to be a mile wide and an inch deep. The American public's impulse to help starving Somalis (whose food supply was being interrupted by various warlords) vanished in the face of televised pictures of dead U.S. soldiers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. Such transience is sometimes attributed to popular reluctance to accept casualties. But that is too simple. Americans went into the Gulf War expecting and willing to accept some ten thousand casualties. As this suggests, Americans are reluctant to accept casualties only in cases where their *only* foreign policy goals are unreciprocated humanitarian interests. Ironically, when opinion turns against such cases, this may not only divert attention and limit willingness to support "A list" interests but may also undermine support for action in other, more serious humanitarian crises. One of the direct effects of the Somalia disaster was America's failure (along with other countries) to support and reinforce the United Nations peacekeeping force in Rwanda that could have limited a true genocide in 1994.

There are no easy answers for such cases. We could not simply turn off the television or unplug our computers even if we wanted to. The "C list" cannot simply be ignored. But there are certain rules of prudence that may help the integration of such issues into the larger strategy for advancing the national interest. First, there are many degrees of humanitarian concern and many degrees of intervention to reflect them, such as condemnation, sanctions targeted on individuals, broad sanctions, and various uses of force. We should save violent options for the most egregious cases. When we do use force, it is worth remembering some principles of the "just war" doctrine: having a just cause in the eyes of others; discrimination in means so as to not unduly punish the innocent; proportionality of means to ends; and a high probability of good consequences (rather than wishful thinking).

We should generally avoid the use of force except in cases where our humanitarian interests are reinforced by the existence of other strong national interests. This was the case in the Gulf War, where

the United States was concerned not only with the aggression against Kuwait, but also with energy supplies and regional allies. This was not the case in Somalia. In the former Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Kosovo), our interests combine both humanitarian values and the strategic concerns of European allies and NATO. We should try to involve other regional actors, preferably in the lead role when possible. In Africa after 1995, the United States offered to help with training, intelligence, logistics, and transportation if African countries provided the troops for a peacekeeping force. There were few takers. If African states are unwilling to do their part, we should be wary of going it alone. In Europe, we should welcome the idea of combined joint task forces that would be separable but not separate from NATO and encourage the Europeans to take the lead on such issues.

We should also be clearer about what are true cases of genocide. The American people have a real humanitarian interest in not letting another Holocaust occur. Yet we did just that in Rwanda in 1994. We therefore need to do more to organize prevention and response to real cases of genocide. Unfortunately, the Genocide Convention is written so loosely and the word is so abused for political purposes that there is danger of the term becoming trivialized. But a strict historical interpretation of the crime, based on the precedents of the Holocaust and Rwanda, can help to avoid such pitfalls.

Finally, Americans should be very wary about intervention in civil wars over self-determination. The principle is dangerously ambiguous; atrocities are often committed by activists on both sides and the precedents can have disastrous consequences.

How could these rules of prudence have helped in the case of Kosovo? At an earlier stage, they would have produced more caution. In December 1992, President Bush issued a vague threat that Serbia should not attack ethnic Albanians in its Kosovo province while he remained silent on Bosnia. A year later, the Clinton administration reiterated the warning. The United States was saved from having to back up these threats by the Kosovar Albanians' pacifist leader, Ibrahim Rugova, who espoused a Gandhian response to Serbian oppression. After 1996, the rise of the militantly pro-independence Kosovo Liberation Army undermined Rugova's leadership. According to journalist Chris Hedges, the radicals of the KLA, who combine

"hints of fascism on one side and whiffs of communism on the other," have been labeled a terrorist organization by U.S. government officials. A KLA victory might well have involved atrocities and ethnic cleansing of the Serb minority in Kosovo. The KLA's refusal to sign the Rambouillet agreement in the first round of talks in February let the NATO alliance off the moral hook and should have been used as an opportunity to step back. Instead, the United States "fixed the problem" by pretending to believe the KLA's promise to accept autonomy within Yugoslavia. The United States then threatened to bomb Serbia. Milošević called the American bluff and initiated his planned ethnic cleansing of Kosovo.

At that point, new facts on the ground raised Kosovo from the "C list" to the "B list" of U.S. foreign policy concerns. The scale and ferocity of Milošević's ethnic cleansing could not be ignored. European allies such as the United Kingdom, France, and even Germany joined the United States in calling for NATO action. If the United States had then pulled the rug out from under its pro-interventionist allies, it would have produced a NATO crisis on the scale of Suez in 1956. The humanitarian impact had grown immensely and was now reinforced by a strategic interest in the future of the American alliance with Europe. Skeptics argue that one should never pursue "sunk costs." By this argument, if Kosovo was not worth intervention before, it is not worth it now. But history is path-dependent, since choices, once made, eliminate certain options and create others. In calculating the costs and benefits of future actions, policymakers must realistically assess the current situation, not the past. It does no good to lament the more prudent paths not taken at an earlier stage.

Kosovo illustrates how a "C list" issue can migrate to the "B list" of national interests that merit the use of force. Kosovo itself is not a vital American interest, and it only touches tangentially on an "A list" issue (the credibility of the NATO alliance). The "A list" also includes the future of Russia and of international laws and institutions such as the United Nations. NATO, Russia, and the United Nations must all figure in how we resolve the Kosovo crisis. And the rules of prudence must still be applied as we insist on the return of the refugees and the withdrawal of Serbian forces. If moral outrage or unilateralist temptations blind Americans to their other "A list" priorities, the

United States may dangerously overreach itself and turn a just cause into a counterproductive crusade.

Prudence alone cannot determine the national interest in the information age. But better consequences will flow if American values and goals are related to American power, and interests are rationally pursued within prudent limits. Determining the national interest has always been contentious throughout U.S. history. That is to be expected in a healthy democracy. But the debate about the American national interest in the information age should pay more attention to the peculiar nature of American power today; it should establish strategic priorities accordingly; and it should develop prudential rules that allow the United States to meld its strategic, economic, and humanitarian interests into an effective foreign policy. ❷

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