Realism & Idealism

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This is the second in a series of articles in the International Relations 101 section about "understanding international relations and foreign policy decision making." These articles seek to make this complex, multi-dimensional arena accessible to people outside the halls of power. The series also pulls duty as a necessary backdrop for understanding the wisdom-based alternative approaches to the field that are being developed by The Wisdom Project.

Realism and Idealism in International Relations

by Charles Strohmer

I I made passing reference in the first article in this series to comparing international relations (IR) theory to a complicated 5,000 word jigsaw puzzle. I'll play around with that image a bit in this second article in the series, which outlines and differentiates between two prominently influential Western political ideologies of our time, realism and idealism. (Other articles in this series can be found here, and here. More will be forthcoming.)

The big conceptual picture

The place to begin is with the big conceptual picture itself, of international relations and world politics. Pieces that are salient to this complex and multi-dimensional puzzle include concepts about: the state; national interests; power and balance of power; culture and society; anarchy; identity; norms; actors; agency; democracy; diplomacy; globalization; human rights; international institutions; international law; non-government organizations (NGOs); economic progress; multinational corporations; international society. These big ideas are basic to any understanding of international relations and foreign policy decision making.

Now all of these big ideas have to be interpreted, and that is the point of the background theories that appear on the scene. For many decades, the most prominent in the West have been versions of political ideologies such as realism, idealism, and neoconservatism, as well as schools of thought such as IR constructivism and the English School. There are also other lenses such as neorealism and neoliberalism vying for greater pride of place. Any one of which can be chosen by a national leader, or by foreign policy advisers and committees, or by other decision makers, to give meaning to each of the conceptual pieces.

The choice of an interpretive grid, therefore, determines how situations and events are analyzed and how policy prescriptions will be made and implemented ? different interpretive grids place different emphases on different conceptual pieces, so that the importance of some pieces stand out over against others to get priority of place when it comes time to decision-making time, and that in turn enormously gives shape and direction to a particular policy. A neoconservative administration, for instance, would look at and respond to a major event of the Middle East quite unlike an administration following liberal internationalism.

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Further, we have the variety of religious-political ideologies of the Middle East states performing the same function, as meaning-grids, for their leaders and advisers for understanding and prioritizing concerns about the state, national interest, identity, agency, human rights, democracy, globalization, etc., and the kind of policies that will be enacted. So it's quite a mix, especially when we include Russia, China, India... Well, you get the picture. Now assemble it!

The thing to keep in mind is that all national leaders, their foreign policy teams, and other policymakers emphasize the relative importance of some pieces over others and their interrelationships depending on their interpretive grid, their ideological allegiances. Some analysts may object to some of the puzzle pieces I have called salient, while and others may say that some have been left out. Fair enough. But I think most everyone would agree that these pieces represent a basic minimum for each conceptual model's picture

of contemporary international relations and world politics.

It is the within the purview of scholars and academics to present these aspects (pieces) in detail, with the lengthy attention they deserve (readers can peruse the Bibliography to find all sorts of comprehensive approaches to these aspects). My goal in this article will be to paint with broad brush strokes to outline how political realism and idealism shed light on which of the pieces should be stressed as most important for understanding international relations and making foreign policy decisions. The following outlines of these two -isms will show the conceptual environment of the near-past and the present period in order to recognize how Western international relations work, how they are changing, and what the practical consequences of the changes have been and may be.

A caveat, however. This is not to assume that foreign policy decision comes down to whatever political ideology has been elected to the White House, Downing Street, or Élysée Palace. IR constructivism in particular has shown that there is much more going on than ideology. IR constructivist research project s, for instance, show the high level of significance that agency, identity, and norms have in foreign policy decision making. This results in heightening the importance of different pieces of the international picture, pieces that the traditional theories have tended to marginalize. (IR constructivists and the English school will be the subject of an article in this series.)

Realism and Idealism: Rival Theories

During the twentieth century, political realism and political idealism vied as conceptual rivals for understanding international relations, for analyzing the decision-making of inter-state actors, for qualifying what policies should or should not see the light of day, and for justifying or criticizing the kinds of policies that went forward from each other's camp. In fact, it was to deal formally with such issues that the academic discipline of ?international politics? itself was formed in 1919 at the University of Wales.

In the literature, the terms ?power politics? and ?realpolitik? (practical, actual politics) may be used synonymously for ?political realism,? and the word ?liberalism? may be favored for ?idealism.? Here, I'm using the term ?idealism? instead of ?liberalism? simply to give what I want to talk about some distance from being identified with word ?liberal,? which in all likelihood would occur in the minds of many Americans who are reading this article, for whom ?liberal? has become a four letter word. Also, both isms have their theoretical cousins; for example, neorealism and neoliberalism (neoliberal institutionalism). The cousins, too, are influential in their own ways, each stressing which pieces of the conceptual it deems the most important.

Here we will look only at the puzzle pieces most emphasized by realists and idealists. Some of these pieces are the same ones, but the two ideologies treat them differently, which affects how the purpose of international relations is understood, which affects policy choices.

Political Realism

State of nature, anarchy, war. Realism as a political philosophy has a history traced as far back as the classical political theorist Thucydides. Since the sixteenth century, the Europeans Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau have been its leading lights. At the core of this European realism is an assumption that relations between nations exist fundamentally in a ?state of nature? described as ?anarchy,? a condition in which war between nations is assumed to be permanent and expected, not unlike how violence would arise domestically between different groups within a nation were it not for the power of civil government to restrain people.

Human life in this anarchical state of nature was famously shorthanded by Thomas Hobbes as ?solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.? Politically, because states have no higher authority over them, such as a world government to restrain them, anarchy means that states as collective entities were on their own in the international arena to work out how to live with one another. For the more hard-core realists, relations between states must be ordered around the bare minimum conditions necessary for mere co-existence, and the world can forget about any notion of building cooperative agreements and arrangements toward human flourishing. In other words, the conceptual frame limits the options for what realists assume is possible (as it does for the idealist, neoconservatives, IR constructivists, and others).

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As an aside, the ?anarchical system of states,? as international relations theorist Joseph Nye puts it, is one of three basic forms of international politics. The other two being a ?world imperial system? and a ?feudal system.? In the former, ?one government

controls most of the world with which it has contact,? e.g., the Roman Empire; the British Empire. In the latter, ?human loyalties and political obligations are not fixed primarily by territorial boundaries. A local lord, for instance, might owe duties to some distant noble or bishop such as the pope in Rome.? (Nye, Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History, 2007, p. 3.)

If war is permanent in the world, then nothing, certainly not a bare minimum of international cooperation, can ever change that fundamentally. Wars will continue, despite even the wisest attempts to prevent them. That is a core position held by political realists, and behind it lies the moral assumption that human nature is inherently not benevolent or kind but self-centered and competitive. If so, then nation-states must always be prepared for war, and, indeed, history reveals that increasing military strength, if not superiority, is basic to political realists. For military might alone wins wars. As Jervis points out, however, this is not to say that realists like war, for ?many realists study the causes of war in the hope of reducing the chances of future conflict.? (Robert Jervis, ?Realism in the Study of World Politics,? in Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner, eds., Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics, 1999, p. 334.)

Realism's bottom line, then, structural anarchy, combined with the absence of a central authority to settle disputes, gives rise to what has been called the state security dilemma. Ole Holsti, a professor of international affairs, points out why this is be a lose-lose situation for international life, for ?one nation's search for security often leaves its current and potential adversaries insecure.? Further, ?any nation that strives for absolute security leaves all others in the system absolutely insecure,? providing ?powerful incentives for arms races and other types of hostile interactions.? (Ole R. Holsti, ?Theories of International Relations,? in Hogan and Paterson, eds., Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations, 2004, p. 54.)

The state and sovereignty. Another conceptual piece of the picture that has a very heightened emphasis for political realists in the modern era is the state. States are considered both sovereign and the main actors on the world stage. We today are so accustomed to the idea and functions of the state that it is assumed that the state as we know it has been around for millennia. The state as we know it, however, as based on the concept of sovereignty, loosely defined as ?supreme authority within a territory,? had its beginnings in fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe.

?Sovereignty,? writes William Cavanaugh in an insightful piece about the modern state, ?is a departure from earlier forms of governance in which people's political loyalties were based not necessarily on territoriality, but on feudal ties, kinship, religious, or tribal affiliation. If a stranger committed a crime on someone else's land, it would be necessary to find out whom he or she owed loyalty in order to know what law applied.? What Cavanaugh wants us to recognize is that although political governance of some sort has been natural and ancient, it would be misleading to assume that ?the sovereign state? (the state as we know it) is natural and ancient. Only in the sixteenth century, he writes, ?does there arise the concept of the abstract ?state' that is independent of both ruler and ruled.? (Cavanaugh, ?Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation-State Is Not the Keeper of the Common Good,? in In Search of the Common Good, Miller and MaCann, eds., 2005, pp. 303, 304.)

The state and state sovereignty are seen today in an almost absolute sense by realists

The Italian philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) is usually cited as the transitional figure responsible for ushering in ?an abstract apparatus {the state} above both prince an people.? (Ibid., p. 304.) Having understood the radical nature of the shift in political governance that was taking place in Europe, with its increasing accumulation of power and authority over the peoples of a territory, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) wrote Leviathan, which was his metaphor for the absolute control that the state was gaining through its institutionalization by state-building elites.

And ?the invention of sovereignty? as a concept in tandem with the state, Cavanaugh writes, made this possible. ?The doctrine of sovereignty asserts the incontestable right of the central power to make and enforce laws for people who will fall within recognized territorial borders.? (Ibid., p. 310.)The state and state sovereignty are seen today in an almost absolute sense by realists, who in turn see the security of the state as the primary and non-negotiable objective of heads of state.

National interest. Since a state must look first and last to itself for its security when arranging its relations with other states, this

gives primacy of importance to a state's national interests; the interests of other nations, or of international institutions, such as the UN, or of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with transnational interests, become secondary or tertiary. National interests are central to realist theory and usually rooted in whatever a state considers necessary for maintaining its survival. A state is thought to act according to the logic of its national interests, and especially in defense of them when its survival is at stake.

Hans Morgenthau, the European philosophical father of twentieth-century political realism, saw ?interests defined in terms of power.? Morgenthau, whose Politics Among Nations is considered the definitive text of political realism in the twentieth century, went so far as to say that ?[w]ithout such a concept a theory of politics ... would be altogether impossible.? (Morganthau, Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace, 1993, p. 5.) For realists, then, a state's ?goals have to be trimmed to fit within the possibilities created by the configuration of power.? (Jervis, ?Realism," in Exploration, p. 346.)

When it comes to actually listing such goals, however, Pentagon analyst Tom Barnett isn't very charitable. National interest, he writes, ?is one of those great phrases constantly used in the Pentagon, even though nobody really knows what it means. The Pentagon just knows that it needs to protect American interests, promote them when possible, and never step beyond their logical boundaries ? whatever those are. There is no list of ?national interests' to be found anywhere throughout the U.S. government, much less the Pentagon. You either know them or you don't. Raising your hand during a Pentagon brief to ask exactly what these interests are is considered impolitic in the extreme.? (Barnett, The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-First Century, 2004) pp. 81-82.)

Further complications arise because nations have differing interests, and interests change over time due to changing domestic or international circumstances. And because a realist sees the state as the primary actor in international relations, are often accused of using international institutions as yet another arena for acting out state power. From a constructivist point of view, however, for instance, although the state remains a key actor, international institutions can act as important restraining agencies on a state's power, particularly on its foreign policy, perhaps, in order to seek joint gains for the common international good, rather than just for the good of the one state. (One significant practical consequence of such a difference might be that a realist might feel less guilty about breaking an international treaty than would an IR constructivist.)

Balance of power. Another non-negotiable principle of political realism is balance of power, which has been the most relied on arrangement for ordering relations between states to put the brakes on forms of anarchy. Typically, two or more states or groups of states will act in concert (politically, economically, or militarily) to try to hold in check a powerful state or a group of states from gaining predominance and dictating to the others. The idea is to create a form of international stability through balance of power arrangements, which arise and change through shifting alliances, partnerships, friendships, or even secret diplomacy and adversarial relations. Morgenthau insists that balance of power politics must not be thought of as merely one kind of foreign policy among many, but the only kind possible. The ?balance of power and policies aiming at its preservation,? he wrote, ?are not only inevitable but are an essential stabilizing factor in a society of sovereign nations; and the instability of the international balance of power is not due to the faultiness of the principle but to the particular conditions under which the principle must operate in a society of sovereign nations.? (Morganthau, Politics, see chapters 11-13.)

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War is the agency through which balance of power arrangements often change dramatically in the aftermath. Political analysts have argued, for instance, that the ousting of Saddam Hussein's army from Kuwait in 1991 was needed to restore the balance of power in the Middle East. Conversely, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 disrupted and changed the balance of power in the Middle East ? though it did not have the desired outcome expected by the George W. Bush administration. Also, benefits accrue to nations in alliance, such as through the sharing of assets and resources. The classic modern example was during the long Cold War era, when Western bloc nations benefitted amongst themselves from their concert of power against the Soviet communist block nations.

Diplomacy. Within political realism, as with all other conceptual models of international relations, diplomacy is crucial. For the realist, diplomacy is controlled by the aforementioned concepts (the anarchical state of nature; the sovereign state; balance of power; national interests). In practice, this usually means that a realist-oriented president or prime minister (Ronald Reagan and Margaret

Thatcher, for example) would rely on their ambassadors and diplomats to advance only the nation's interests when they are engaging with their counterparts in other nations. Diplomacy so directed generally work satisfactorily enough among states functioning as a concert of power. Realist leaders, however, are not prevented from seeking relations with ideological adversaries when it is in the interest of the state to do so, although relations of this sort will be stressed, as they were between the United States and Russia during the Cold War.

Morganthau called diplomacy ?The brains of national power,? meaning that realist diplomacy ?is the art of bringing the different elements of the national power to bear with maximum effect upon those points in the international situation which concern national interest most directly.? (Ibid., p.155.) But the art can be rude and crude even among friends and allies and undercut a nation's standing or hurt its interests. Seasoned Middle East envoy and adviser Dennis Ross argues in Statecraft that the George W. Bush administration's failure to use diplomacy wisely during its first term cost the U.S. dearly internationally. When speaking of the Bush administration's first term, Ross writes that ?if one wants to know both what has been missing in our foreign policy in the last years and what is necessary to fix it, the answer is statecraft.? (Ross, Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World, 2007), p. xi.)

A classic realist foreign policy

The foregoing short descriptions of several prominent conceptual pieces of international relations and foreign policy as they are understood by realists do not even begin to address the complexity of their political ideology, but hopefully it should be enough for non-specialists to get a feel for it. For in-depth treatments, interested readers will want to peruse the bibliography, where they will find many of the best titles on the subject from various points of view. What follows, here, is a short note about a well-know modern realist approach to international relations that was implemented in the doctrine of containment, a U.S.-led post-World War 2 effort of Western nations to limit the spread of Soviet Communism. First endorsed by President Harry Truman, containment was adopted in varying ways by succeeded presidents of both parties.

Historians and political theorists consider statesman and premier realist thinker George Kennan, who was a Truman Democrat, as the father of containment doctrine. Kennan spoke Russian and several European languages and was an expert on Soviet ideology. In the 1930s and 1940s he held various positions in the U.S. embassy in Moscow. Known for his intellect and clear-headed analysis, Kennan by 1946 had become despondent in Moscow over what he considered Washington's rudderless position concerning the emerging Soviet threat. Threatening to resign and return to private life, he instead fired off an unprecedented 5,500 word analysis meant to enlighten the State Department about changing U.S.-Soviet relations and the direction that U.S. policy should go. It answered pressing questions about the Kremlin's domestic and foreign policy psychology and its expansionist ambitions. It became known as The Long Telegram, shook up official Washington, and became the basis for the containment doctrine.

In a follow-up article to The Long Telegram, Kennan made the prescient observation that ?Soviet society may well contain the deficiencies which will eventually weaken its own total potential. This would of itself warrant the United States entering with reasonable confidence upon a policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counter-force at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceable and stable world.? But U.S. policy toward the Soviets, he also wrote, ?should be put forward in such a manner as to leave the way open for a compliance not too detrimental to Russian prestige.? In this, Kennan seems wisely to have been suggesting that U.S. relations with the Soviets should be ordered around a bare minimum of conditions necessary for co-existence without resorting to war between the two superpowers. Showing U.S. military strength, if not superiority, nevertheless remained essential. (Kennan, American Diplomacy, 1984, p. 126.], p. 119)

It is instructive that this realist foreign policy was bipartisan. Truman drew in liberal visionaries and hard-nosed anti-communists alike, as well as others on the political spectrum, who, while seeking to check the spread of Soviet control, sought to avoid war with Russia. Authors Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas provide a fascinating personal look into how this bipartisan approach arose and became fundamental to U.S. relations with the Soviet Union in their book that explores the biographies of the leading ?wise men? (Kennan among them) within the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. The authors write that these high-level foreign policy advisors ?were tacitly willing to cede to the Soviets some sphere of interest, but in return they saw no reason for Moscow to crush all freedoms in that realm. This outlook involved, of course, an implicit assumption that the rest of the world naturally desired the system of democratic capitalism, liberal values, and economic trade enjoyed by the West.? These wise men, the authors write, ?viewed the Soviets in the way a businessman might regard a competitor: concessions and appeasement would not serve to buy

good-will, but it was possible to achieve a realistic modus vivendi that included cooperation on mutual interests.? (Isaacson and Thomas, The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made, 1986, p. 33. The book is also instructive in showing, if you read between the lines, how national interests were never far from the economic and political interests of the advisers.)

Political idealism

Like political realism, idealism, since at least the time of English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), has also profoundly shaped the way many politicians and theorists in the West think about international relations and world politics. Perhaps the chief difference between the two ideologies is ontological. Whereas realism emphasizes the tragic side of human nature, political idealism is more optimistic. There are many versions of idealism and some tend toward utopianism (see Edward Carr, The Twenty Years' Crisis, chapters 2-6), but they are united around the assumption that human nature is basically good. This in turn determines what idealists posit as possible for collective expressions of human nature, such as in international relations.

Put crudely, realists tend toward the cynical; idealists tend to idealize. From that starting point, national leaders and their policy advisors aspire to some ideal of what relations between nations should and can look like, and they are usually concerned that as wide range as possible of basic human needs increasingly should be met. In this way, progress toward an increasingly peaceable world can be evolved. This goal, of course, is quite different than the realist goal of ordering international relations around a bare minimum of conditions necessary for mere co-existence.Whereas realism emphasizes the tragic side of human nature, political idealism is more optimistic.

Driving idealists visionaries is the huge bet that most have placed on the potential of liberal democracy to become the organizing principle of all international relations. Idealists see cardinal features of liberal democracy, such as limited government, equal rights, a constitution, the rule of law, consent of the governed, individual rights, and religious pluralism, as being essential around the world. Of this, acclaimed political theorist Jonathan Schell, in a chapter somewhat critical of this kind of liberal internationalism, makes the following wry comment. The ?plan of the liberal democratic state,? he writes, ?is based on a formula that seems to beg for application in the international sphere. Might not nations enter into a social contract just as individuals supposedly once did? Why should domestic governments alone be founded on nonviolent principles? Why stop at national borders? Shouldn't a system of cooperative power, the key to resolving disputes without violence, be extended to the limits of the earth? Thought glides smoothly and easily to this conclusion.? (Schell, The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People, 2003, pp 265-266.)

State of nature, anarchy, war. Many political idealists assume forms of an anarchical state of nature, and thus war remains an accepted means of settling international disputes for many idealists, such as with the so-called liberal hawks. But as Nye points out, realists hold a harsher view of the anarchical system; ?anarchy [is] less threatening? to idealist views of international politics, giving idealists a more optimistic view than realists. (Nye, Understanding International Conflicts, p. 4.)

Anarchy between nations may be seen as a flaw that can be ameliorated or, for the more utopian, cured. ?Where realists,? writes national security expert Paul Seabury, ?observed the perpetual primacy of selfish and irrational motives in the practice of statecraft, idealists saw instead possibilities of disinterested and selfless actions that might be elevated into principles of conduct, once the flawed structure of politics had been replaced by more rational institutions. To the idealist, war and conflict were products of outmoded forms of human organization.? (Seabury, ?Realism and Idealism,? in Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy: Studies of the Principal Movements and Ideas, DeConde, et al., eds., 1978, p. 856.)

Holsti writes that whereas realists see war as a natural state of affairs, idealists tend to view conflict ?as a consequence that can be attributed to historical circumstances, evil leaders, flawed sociopolitical systems, or inadequate international understanding and education.? (Holsti, "Theories," in Explaining the History, p. 54.) Or, as a leading constructivist thinker, Alexander Wendt summed it up in the title of his often cited 1992 article: ?Anarchy is what states make of it.?

The state and balance of power. In other words, whereas realism tends to see balance-of-power arrangements as the broadest extent to which inter-state relations are possible, idealism imagines much wider possibilities for cooperative arrangements among states. Although many idealists would not sacrifice the concept of state sovereignty, they tend to see the state in more relative terms; the state is thus able to work more selflessly, such as with other states and international institutions like the UN.

National interests. Idealism's more optimistic view of human nature also gives it a broader frame of reference for national interests. The saying that ?states act in their national interests? is a truism even for idealists. Realists, as Nye points out, believe they ?must define their interest in terms of balance of power or they will not survive, just as a company in a perfect market that wants to be altruistic rather than maximize profits will not survive. So for the realists, a state's position in the international system determines its national interests and predicts its foreign policies.? Idealists, in contrast, ?have a richer account of how state preferences and national interests are formed. The definition of the national interests depends in large part on the type of domestic society and culture a state has. For example, a domestic society that values economic welfare and places heavy emphasis on trade, or that views wars against other democracies as illegitimate, defines its national interests very differently from a despotic state that is similarly placed in the international system. Liberals argue that this is particularly true if the international system is moderate, that is, not purely anarchic.? (Nye, Understanding, pp. 49-50.)

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Idealist policymakers thus tend to circumscribe the state and think outside of balance-of-power arrangements. This rattles realists. For instance, idealists emphasize international institutions, multinational corporations, and international law much more than many realists would be happy with. International norms, as well as cultural, economic, and ecological considerations between nations, also play emphasized roles in idealist world politics ? at the expense of, realists might argue, military clout.

Diplomacy. For the political idealist, then, diplomacy is not as rigidly controlled by the concepts of anarchy, the sovereign state, balance of power, and national interests as it is for realists. Perhaps a better way to say this is that the diplomatic initiatives of an idealist administration are controlled differently than realist initiatives because idealists understand the concepts somewhat differently and place different emphases on them. We see this today in the approach to international relations of the Barack Obama White House, as we did in recent history with the Clinton and Carter administrations. Certainly ambassadors and diplomats serving idealist administrations would seek to advance their nations' interests, but they would in many periods of history have the blessing of their presidents or prime ministers to work with their counterparts overseas in other areas as well.

Although Seabury is making the following contrasts between idealism and realism as ideologies, we may imagine ourselves commissioned as a diplomat within each of the following frames, and the difference that would make to the kind of diplomatic initiatives we could conduct. Seabury writes: ?Idealists foresaw benign possibilities as nations became increasingly interdependent; realists saw in such a tendency the source of further friction, since rival [national] interests could collide more frequently. The security and interest of the nation were primary components of realist doctrine; the welfare of the individual and of humanity in general were the focuses of idealist concern. Idealists took for granted the objective validity, authority, and supremacy of universal norms, laws, and principles. In their view, statecraft that acted contrary to such precepts was illegal, immoral, or both. Realists, asserting the primacy of national interest, saw such universal norms as only conditionally binding.? (Seabury, ?Realism and Idealism,? in Encyclopedia, pp. 856-857.)

Under the rubric ?liberal foreign policy,? also in a contrast to realism, Dennis Ross notes other central idealist principles and these, too, help us to image the different cast of mind between idealist and realist diplomacy: promote dialogue; restrain aggression through collective security mechanisms rather than through balance-of-power maneuvering; strengthen international institutions to manage international relations and mediate conflicts; foster human rights and support humanitarian interventions militarily; and enlarge nation-building and the export of democratic values. (Ross, Statecraft, p.12.)

In conclusion, idealists assume that most everyone values and wants such things as individual freedom, the right to self-governance, at least a modicum of prosperity, homeland security, and so on. If most individuals wants these things, then in theory no basic conflict should exist between nations, for there is at heart harmony of interests. From whence, then, cometh violence and war? Not from fundamentally selfish human nature, but from states organized by a harsh anarchical view exercising power politics. Quite unlike political realists, who hold little faith in the perfectibility of human nature, idealists show a profound faith in the capacity of human beings to create increasingly peaceable international relations.
A classic idealist foreign policy

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As an idealist visionary, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson strongly fought for as long as he could, against powerful arguments to the contrary from his own cabinet, to keep America out of the first world war. Working to seek peace between the Allies and the Central Powers in the early years of the war, Wilson argued that American neutrality was the right policy, and he succeeded in sustaining it until a tipping point had been reached, due largely to the increasingly high numbers of American commercial ships that were being sunk in the Atlantic German submarines. Even so, the eventual decision to take America into the war was, as historian Margaret MacMillin writes, an ?agony for Wilson,? who eventually justified the decision to go to war, to himself and to the America public, as ?a crusade, against human greed and folly, against Germany and for justice, peace and civilization.? (MacMillan, Paris 1919, 2001, pp. 6-7.)

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Wilson, Seabury writes, justified his eventual decision by seeing profound moral implications in the war. By entering, the United States ?could employ its power and moral influence to eliminate the hated balance of power, to establish the League of Nations as a mechanism for preserving peace, and to establish the conditions of security for democratic nations.? (Seabury, ?Realism and Idealism,? p. 862.) This was quite unlike how Theodore Roosevelt, a realist, defended America's entry into the war. Roosevelt, whose presidency ended four years before Wilson took office, argued that Germany was a threat to America's national interests. A German victory, in his mind, would threaten the European balance of power, from which America greatly benefitted.

Immediately after the war, Wilson's moral idealism shone for a season as he rallied much of Europe ? but in the end, not the U.S. Senate ? to an international reorganization that he called the League of Nations, his centerpiece of the peace settlements that ended the war. The League of Nations, Wilson believed, would put an end to balance of power arrangements, which he thought had been discredited by the war as a way to maintain peace. He argued that the League would keep the peace through collective security and international law. Of this idealist vision, MacMillan writes: ?There would be no more secret diplomacy of the sort that had led Europe into calculating deals, rash promises and entangling alliances, and so on down the slope to war. The peace settlements must not leave the way open to future wars.? Wilson's vision was, in short, ?collective security.? (MacMillan, Paris 1919, p. 13.)

The vision had gained wide public support by the end of the war. For idealists this was a good thing, Macmillan writes. They assumed that now people would bring a much needed common sense to international relations, eschewing war and expensive arms races. ?A growing middle class provided a natural constituency for a peace movement preaching the virtues of compulsory arbitration of disputes, international courts, disarmament, perhaps even pledges to abstain from violence as ways to prevent wars.? These visionaries ?took as models their own societies, especially in Western Europe, where governments had become more responsive to the will of their citizens, where public police forces had replaced private guards and where the rule of law was widely accepted. Surely it was possible to imagine a similar society of nations providing collective security for its members?? (Ibid., p. 85.)

However, when he was back home from Europe after the Paris peace talks, Wilson made costly political misjudgments about the popularity of the League. In the end, he refused to make compromises with U.S. Senate moderates on both the Treaty of Versailles and its League of Nations covenant. As a result the United States never ratified either, and the League ran its General Assembly out of Geneva without official U.S. participation.

When the League failed to curb events in Europe that contributed to a second world war, when that war broke out, what remained of Wilson's liberal internationalist vision lost the rest of its street cred. This had strong implications after the second world war for realist political ideology, which easily returned to the halls of power in the Eisenhower administration and has been prominent in many White Houses ever since.
Rethinking Idealism and Realism

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and especially due the surprise attack on America the morning of September 11, 2001 and U.S. responses to it, the inherent weaknesses and limits of both idealism and realism have become evident to all but the most ardent ideologues. As result, many of the more honest political advisors and analysts became unsure how they should identify themselves.Realist? Idealist? Neither?many of the more honest political advisors and analysts became unsure how they should identify themselves

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was among the leading figures who was quite open and frank about her own ambivalence. As she told Charlie Rose during a television interview: ?I've had increasing problems with the division of idealist and realist.... I don't know where to put myself. So I've often called myself an idealistic realist or a realistic idealist. And the reason for that is that if you don't have a vision and ideals, you don't know where you're going. But if you are not realistic, you won't get there. So you do need somebody that has a view of where the United States should be going, or what our relationship with a particular group of countries should be, but you have to be very practical, and you have to be very tough, and you have to have experience about how to handle a lot of these problems.?

The confusion and ambiguity seems to be the norm across the political spectrum during the George W. Bush years, starting with the man himself. During the first term of his presidency, Bush was labeled a neoconservative by many journalists, but others, more accurately in my view, tagged him as an ?idealistic realist? because of his vision to turn Iraq into a democracy through military power. On the other hand, maybe ?idealist? should have been the noun, and with a utopian modifier. For this was the president who, in his second inaugural address, plainly stated that the foreign policy of the United States has ?the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.?

It was a time when ideological allegiances were slipping and sliding in all directions. In 2008, during his run for the presidency, Republican Senator John McCain described himself as a realistic idealist in foreign policy. But Senator Joe Lieberman, a Democrat who did the unthinkable and crossed the aisle to endorse McCain for president, identified McCain as an idealistic realist! And to the dismay of those who see him as a liberal internationalist, President Barack Obama seems to be more an idealistic realist in many matters of U.S. foreign policy. You decide.

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