



The Philosophy of International Relations

Yury Sayamov

Professor, Head of UNESCO Chair on Global Problems, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia; Fellow, World Academy of Art & Science

Abstract

The author attempts to examine philosophical components in the way of thinking and decision-making in the sphere of international relations by drawing links from the past and the present.

The present uncertain and insecure state of world affairs has led diplomats and scientists to significantly reconsider approaches and formats for global cooperation, thus extending the discussion to the philosophy of international relations.

The attempts to consider international relations in terms of a philosophical approach can be traced back to ancient times. Athenian historian and General Thucydides (460–411 B.C.E.), whose monuments one can see today at the entrance to the Bavarian State Library in Munich and in front of the Austrian Parliament Building in Vienna, has been called the Father of the international relations theory, which was dubbed later as “political realism”. It views the relations between states as ultimately mediated by and constructed upon the emotions of fear and self-interest. In the famous *History of the Peloponnesian War*, which is described as the only acknowledged classical text in international relations still inspiring theorists and scholars, a philosophical approach is clearly felt.

“Plato, Aristotle and Socrates in classical Greek philosophy and later Cicero in Rome felt dissatisfied with the world as they found it, trying to answer the eternal question of what ought to be in international politics and insisting that there should be some universal moral values on which political life could be based.”

International politics is seen as a competitive and conflictual field in which power and security become the main issues leaving quite a little place for morality and ethics. Constraints imposed on international relations are responsible for human beings’ conflict-based paradigm. Power therefore plays an overriding role in shaping interstate relations. According to Thucydides, “the independent states survive only when they are powerful” and not so much has changed since that time as far as the content of this statement is concerned, both practically and theoretically.

Generally, international relations contend various theories presenting their expectations and perspectives. There is a view of international relations that regards the field as states in their capacity of principal actors in the international arena amended today by many other participants: cities, local powers, transnational corporations, non-governmental organizations, political movements, unions of civil society. Political realism in international relations is often contrasted with idealism or liberalism which ostensibly tends to emphasize cooperation. When national interests are stressed these days, they are not as blunt any more, as per the Machiavellian doctrine “that anything is justified by reason of state”. The negative consequence of the emphasis on power is that a kind of skepticism is generated regarding the relevance of ethical and moral norms to the relations among states. However, the role of ethics in international relations could be hardly denied. It is an inseparable part of the contemporary philosophy of international relations, which reaffirms the importance of the possibility of moral judgment in international politics. It does not imply, of course, any abstract moral discourse that does not take into account political realities. A supreme value could be assigned to successful political action based on prudence, which means the ability to judge the rightness of a given action from among possible alternatives on the basis of its likely political consequences.

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The ancient construct that “the decisions about justice are made in human discussions only when both sides are under equal compulsion, but when one side is stronger, it gets as much as it can, and the weak must accept that” has been ameliorated by means of international law and limited world governance by the UN and its system. At the same time enough space is still left to states pursuing elusive dreams of their superiority to claim the right of the stronger to dominate the weaker. A state bent on domination tends to explicitly equate right with might and to exclude considerations of justice from foreign affairs. In this respect, security of states acquires a central place. To attain security, states try to increase their power and engage in balancing power for the purpose of deterring potential aggressors.

A variety of approaches within the scope of what is called political realism in international relations is claimed to be replaced today by neorealism, which is presented as an attempt to establish more science-based attitudes to politics on the world arena. Judgments proceeding from realist and neorealist views and conceptions are being criticized by theorists representing ideal, liberal, critical and post-modern perspectives and vice versa.

A system of views that is called idealism can claim to have a long tradition in international relations too. The representatives of it such as Plato, Aristotle and Socrates in classical Greek philosophy and later Cicero in Rome felt dissatisfied with the world as they found it, trying to answer the eternal question of what ought to be in international politics and insisting that there should be some universal moral values on which political life could be based. Building

on the work of his predecessors, Cicero developed the concept of a natural moral law that was applicable to both domestic and international politics. The idea that politics, including the relations among states, should be virtuous, and that the methods of warfare, which for ages used to be the most applied form of international relations, should remain subordinated to ethical standards, was gaining ground.

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Contrary to that, a Florentine Renaissance diplomat, historian and philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) introduced in the 15th century the concept of admissibility of immoral actions in politics. It is a doctrine which denies the relevance of morality in politics and claims that all moral and immoral means are justified to achieve certain political ends. Although Machiavelli never uses the expression “ragion di stato” in his native Italian, or its more widely known French equivalent “raison d’état”, what ultimately counts for him is precisely whatever is good for the state, not any ethical scruples or norms. This type of political thinking is called “Machiavellianism” and is associated with unscrupulous behavior, dishonesty and betrayal considered to be normal and acceptable in the pursuit of what is understood as goals of the actor. Though no one uses the term “Machiavellianism” now in a positive sense which has a clear negative connotation, it has become part of the present philosophy in international relations striving often for one-sided preferences at the cost of other participants, which has thus resulted in the loss of global balance after the end of the bipolar era. If there was an end to the “Cold War” and an ensuing victory, it should be considered definitely a Pyrrhic victory, since the world has not become more safe or predictable than before. On the contrary, today multiplying conflicts are witnessed everywhere around the globe and refugees are invading and making states suffer.

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) saw the relations among states as based on the quest and struggle for power. The same would be true later for the model of international relations developed by Hans Morgenthau who was deeply influenced by Hobbes and adopted the same view of human nature driven by “a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceases only in death.”

German philosopher Georg Hegel asserted in the 19th century that “the state has no higher duty than maintaining itself”, and gave a kind of an ethical sanction to the promotion by a state for its own interest and advantage against other states, thus defying traditional morality. The good of the state was interpreted as the highest moral value with the extension of power of nations regarded as its right and duty. During the same period, German historian Heinrich von Treitschke declared that the state was power and that the supreme moral duty of the state was to foster this power. He considered international agreements to be binding only insofar as they were expedient for the state. The idea of an autonomous ethics of state behavior and the concept of what was called “Realpolitik” were thus introduced. Traditional ethics was denied

and power politics was associated with a “higher” type of morality. These notions, along with the belief in the superiority of German culture and nationhood, remained till the end of the Second World War as instruments to justify policies of conquest and extermination. The concept of a double ethics, private and public, that created further damage to traditional, customary ethics, was invented. The doctrine of “raison d’état” has led as its final consequence to the politics of “Lebensraum”, two world wars, and the Holocaust.

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After the horror of the First World War, the philosophy of international relations was dominated by the desire for peacekeeping to prevent another global catastrophe. This was accomplished by establishing a system of international law to be promoted by a universal organization. The League of Nations created in 1920 and the Briand-Kellogg Pact of 1928 which outlawed war contributed to cherished hopes for a peaceful solution to aggravating problems in the relations among states. In the illusory philosophy of international relations of that period the origin of war was seen in rather bad social conditions and wrong political arrangements which could be improved. The League of Nations did not become a truly universal organization due to its obvious dependence on France and Great Britain which stopped the United States from fully endorsing it. At a certain stage, the outbreak of the Second World War became inevitable.

The United Nations founded in 1945 as a real universal organization, the first of its kind in the history of the world, basically changed the philosophy of international relations by introducing a new format for states’ interaction and interdependence, thus paving the way for global governance with elements like the Security Council which gave veto right to its permanent members and made resolutions obligatory for member-states.

Among the recent philosophers in international relations, it should be mentioned that Edward Carr contributed in the 20th century largely to the concept of conflict of interests which is fundamental to emerging challenges and wars. He showed that the language of justice could be used just to achieve the particular interests of a state, or to create negative images of other countries to justify acts of aggression. Morally discrediting a potential enemy or morally justifying one’s own position shows, in his opinion, that moral values are derived from actual policies. Policies are not created on some universal norms independent of the interests of the parties involved.

The philosophy of International relations propounded by a prominent post-War scientist Hans Morgenthau placed human qualities such as selfishness and lust for power at the center of the vision of the contemporary world. This insatiable lust for power, timeless and universal, which Morgenthau identifies as “animus dominandi”, the desire to dominate, is for him the main cause of conflicts. His concept of power implies the assumption that political leaders “think and act in terms of interest defined as power.” It appears as a universally valid category

and an essential element of politics, since various things can be associated with interest or power at different times and in different circumstances. Its content and the manner of its use are determined by the political and cultural environment.

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However, the philosophy of international relations is not just an intellectual enterprise. It has practical consequences and largely influences the way of thinking and decision-making in world politics. As Raymond Aron and other scholars have emphasized, power, the fundamental concept of Morgenthau’s theory, is ambiguous. It can be either a means or an end in politics. But if power is only a means for gaining something else, it does not define the nature of international politics in the way Morgenthau claims. It does not allow us to understand the actions of states independent of the motives and ideological preferences of their political identity. Accordingly, it is useless to define the actions of states by the exclusive reference to power, security or national interest. International politics cannot be studied independently of the wider historical and cultural context.

At the same time, a new vision of international relations and their philosophy has been developed, reflecting changes in the world. Following the détente of the 1970s, the growing importance of international and non-governmental organizations, as well as of transnational corporations and new formats of multilateral cooperation, was witnessed. This development led to the consolidation of thinking which became known as neo-liberalist or pluralist thinking. The leading pluralists Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye have proposed the concept of “complex interdependence” to describe their more sophisticated picture of global politics. They argued that there can be progress in international relations and that the future does not need to look like the past.

Kenneth Waltz, another scientist, made an effort to amend the philosophical discussion about human nature with his theory of international politics, which is analogous to microeconomics. He argued that states in the international system are like firms in a domestic economy and have the same fundamental interest to survive.

As a practical expression of international society, international organizations could be seen as upholding the rule of law in international relations, especially the UN. Their philosophy, as well as the philosophy of existing G7 and new formats of international cooperation of states like G20 and BRICS at the global level, and Shanghai Organization for Cooperation and others on the regional level, is subject to future studies and assessments which challenge scientists with an important and responsible task to be accomplished.

Author contact information

Email: y.sayamov@yandex.ru

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