



The U.S. Army War College Guide to National Security Issues - Volume II: National Security Policy and Strategy (4th Edition)

Jr., J. Boone Bartholomees

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Both Henry Kissinger and Robert Art make it clear that the identification of national interests is crucial for the development of policy and strategy. Interests are essential to establishing the objectives or ends that serve as the goals for policy and strategy. “Interests are the foundation and starting point for policy prescriptions.” They help answer questions concerning why a policy is important.⁴ National interests also help to determine the types and amounts of the national power employed as the means to implement a designated policy or strategy. The concept of interest is not new to the 21st century international system. It has always been a fundamental consideration of every actor in the system. Despite what many academics have maintained, national interests are not only a factor for nation-states. All actors in the international system possess interests. Using Barry Buzan, Ole Weaver, and Jaap de Wilde’s units of analysis, the need to have interests is equally applicable to international subsystems (groups or units that can be distinguished from the overall system by the nature or intensity of their interactions with or independence on each other) like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, individual units (actors consisting of various subgroups, organizations, and communities) such as nations of people that transcend state boundaries and multi-national corporations, subunits (organized groups of individuals within units that are able or try to affect the behavior of the unit as a whole) like bureaucracies and lobbies, and finally, individuals that all possess separate personal interests as they participate in the overall system.⁵ Some academics choose to distinguish between national interests (interests involved in the external relations of the actor) and public interests (interests related within the boundaries of the actor).⁶ For purposes of this essay, given the closing gap between the influence of external and internal issues in the 21st century international system brought about by the associated components of a rapidly globalized world, there will be no distinction made between external and internal interests. In effect, they all fall under the concept of the national interest. There is a generally accepted consensus among academics that interests are designed to be of value to the entity or actor responsible for determining the interest for itself. This could include those interests that are intended to be “a standard of conduct or a state of affairs worthy of achievement by virtue of its universal moral value.”⁷ However, there is less agreement over the question of whether all nation-state interests are enduring, politically bi-partisan, permanent conditions that represent core interests that transcend changes in government,⁸ in contrast to those interests that may be altered over time and or respond to change in the international system.

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