International relations are concerned with national interests and how they evolve. Some researchers insist that there are obligatory and unchangeable interests expressed in terms of power or prosperity. Others suggest reconstructing national interests depending on how a country acts in a particular situation. Still others hold that national interests are relatively stable, but can vary considerably due to external factors, such as emerging or disappearing norms, institutions, or circumstances.

Assuming that evolution actually takes place, one could legitimately wonder how national interests are stated and for what purpose. We are interested in “non-trivial” interests; that is, interests that go beyond the obvious security needs of a state and its economic survival in the face of external threats.

A country’s current interests are stated explicitly in both official doctrines and unofficial publications. The opinion of leading experts is normally taken into account when such decisions are made. In the majority of leading countries, the government adopts official documents such as foreign policy or national security doctrines, concepts, or strategies. Unofficial, yet integral and influential, doctrinal texts are more difficult to find, but they exist in many countries. Experts who watch Russian foreign policy pay special attention to Academician Yevgeny Primakov’s annual speeches at the

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Why Are National Interests Necessary?

Mercury Club. Another example is a report by the non-governmental Commission on America’s National Interests released by a group of experts from George W. Bush’s election support group in 2000. Many of them, including Condoleezza Rice and Robert Blackwill, were later appointed to key foreign policy positions in the Bush administration. Although the administration diverged from some, but not all, of the commission’s recommendations, the report can be considered a canonical model for identifying and evaluating the national interests of a major power.

The authors of the report sorted through U.S. national interests to exclude everything that would not result in immediate economic gains to the country or directly affect its security. The restrictive interpretation of “national” interests was offered in contrast to “global” or simply “alien” interests. For example, Rice, Blackwill, and their colleagues criticized the outgoing Clinton administration for what they called indiscriminate interference in crises and conflicts outside the U.S.

Does Russia have to state its national interests in the same way? And who should define those interests and how?

THE FUNCTIONS OF INTERESTS

National interests are a public declaration of a country’s needs and intentions based on an assessment of the current situation. Such a declaration performs several key functions.

Firstly, it establishes a hierarchy of foreign policy priorities to avoid the ineffective use of resources and overextension. This was the main purpose of the report prepared by the Commission on America’s National Interests, which did not invent anything new, but simply put well-known interests in order of priority, substantiating their choice.

Secondly, an official or semi-official statement of national interests puts reasonable constraints on the government, which often uses foreign policy to gain political advantage over the opposition. In addition, clearly stated national interests provide society with strict criteria for evaluating the policy conducted by those who make foreign policy decisions.
Thirdly, national interests ensure both continuity and timely adjustment of key aspects of the policy. It is particularly important that proper definitions contained in official documents prevent the state from turning foreign policy into a continuation of domestic policy. Regardless of how well democratic institutions are developed, in the majority of countries numerous actors with private interests seek to push them to the national level and garner government support. In this respect, national interests are a system of interconnected and logically coherent statements on what can be beneficial for a particular state in a given period of time.

In a harmonious system of national interests, one cannot easily manipulate its parts. In fact, in most cases one or several interests cannot be restated without affecting the others, as those “retouched” for the sake of some immediate goals or influential groups will undoubtedly collide with other national interests. Kommersant international affairs observer Yelena Chernenko has rightfully noted that Russia cannot give up on its commitment to the inviolability of borders and state sovereignty without correcting the underlying doctrinal principles of its foreign policy.

Finally, a country pronounces national interests publicly in order to be more predictable to the outside world. The state largely restricts itself by declaring its interests and readiness to pursue them by all means, whilepledging to refrain from actions that would clearly be at odds with such declarations. Such firmness in pursuing these interests is usually accompanied by attempts to explain why they do not threaten other countries and can on the whole be acceptable to them. The declaration of national interests as a foreign policy instrument can be effective if there is a balance between a state’s ambitions and its guarantees to refrain from zero-sum games. For instance, if national interests are stated in a manner that multiplies influential opponents and increases international resistance to a country’s foreign policy, then this can hardly be the best way to do it.

Any violation of declared national interests can result in serious external consequences. In fact, how can anyone trust existing or future declarations if the authors themselves ignore them so easily? What would be the price of mistrust? An exorbitantly costly arms race is just
Why Are National Interests Necessary?

one of the most common consequences a major power that has lost
the trust of the rest of the world (or its part) in its declared interests or
intentions can face.

Some may object: does not the uncertainty created by a “flexible
interpretation” of our own doctrines give us additional advantages
and does it not give us more room for diplomatic maneuver? True,
there must be uncertainty in a publicly presented military doctrine
or security strategy. A potential adversary must not know how we
are planning to respond to its aggression or threats, and our reaction
is meant to come as a surprise. But foreign policy is not defense; it
is, above all, a sequence of actions to create favorable conditions
for a country so that it can reap benefits through cooperation. But
no cooperation can develop if the main intentions of its participants
are unclear. Countries whose wellbeing and security depend on
cooperation with other countries prefer not to scare their potential
partners by the uncertainty of their intentions and openly state their
interests. Moreover, similarity of values underlying national interests
(commitment to liberal democracy or unlimited state sovereignty)
sends an additional signal to countries that share these values. This
provides a strong foundation for mutual trust without the need to
commit large amounts of money to building a safety net against a
surge of animosity from a partner.

NATIONAL INTERESTS AND SOCIETY
The role played by national interests in building a civic nation deserves
special mention. A popularly supported declaration of national
interests consolidates people, helping them overcome divisions
between different ethnic groups, social and economic status, and level
of education. A “common cause” usually brings people together. The
legitimacy of a government that pursues a national interest policy
increases along with popular support for foreign policy expenditures.
If necessary, people can even agree to pay a certain price for the sake
of important common goals.

The uniting power of declaring national interests should not be
overestimated, though, because different socially active groups and
political forces can assess them very differently. Clear public gains (preferably financial) from the consistent implementation of the declared foreign policy principles are a sufficient condition for such consolidation.

At the same time, officials who convey national interests should not rely entirely on public opinion. Professional skills are required that go beyond a layman’s concept of “common sense” and a deeper understanding of the international situation than one can get from the press or television news to determine threats to a country and its future possibilities. As Larissa Pautova has noted in this journal before, “geopolitics lies beyond the average Russian’s everyday life.” Those who chart the country’s foreign policy course are forced to take into account public sentiment. But populist opinion surveys are not enough to define national interests.

Nor can this task be entrusted to a narrow circle of top state functionaries whose contacts with small influential groups are hard to trace. Any “elite” that ventures “to take upon itself” the task of working out a concept of national interests will most likely be unable to consolidate plentiful private interests into several common ones. At best, this “elite” will become hostage to several groups of interests such as the military-industrial complex, natural resources sector, or any other big business. Subsequently, foreign policy will be distorted, resulting in overspending and missed opportunities to improve a nation’s prosperity and strengthen security in general. In the worst-case scenario, the “elite” will manipulate public opinion in order to raise its electoral chances, thus taking a position in opposition to any national interests.

In foreign policy private interests rarely come together into one resultant vector that society will support. On the contrary, by competing for a say in foreign policy, private interests get in each other’s way. Therefore, doctrinal foreign policy documents listing “priority” partner countries and areas of international cooperation cannot reflect national interests in principle and are a result of a chaotic lobbying and bureaucratic process. It is important to say that we do not question a priori the legitimacy of any of these private interests (development of
Why Are National Interests Necessary?

relations with country A, resolution of the conflict with country B, creation of favorable conditions for arms exports to region C, etc.). We only say that none of them can claim the role of national interests for failure to perform their basic functions described above.

It is not so easy to determine sufficient criteria for classifying certain interests as “national.” These can probably include interests generated by the institutional system that provides for communication between people and the policy-making community, and takes into account the results of independent evaluation obtained through broad public debate. In order for the national interests stated during such discussions to be accepted by the majority of people as fair, there must be a significant degree of public trust in governmental and political institutions (but not necessarily in concrete leaders who hold specific positions in those institutions).

A high degree of trust in institutions that have proved their efficiency is a sign of a mature civic nation, a community of people with consensus-based identity, clearly defined borders, an active political role of citizens, and well protected individual rights, a limited number of which are delegated to the authorities and can be revoked at any moment. Therefore, the term “national interest” can be applied only to a mature civic nation. The absence of such a nation will most likely mean that there will be no relevant national interests, only a bunch of legitimate, but private and transient ones.

Such interests can hardly ensure the continuity of foreign policy even if the international environment remains stable. As Andrei Skriba has observed, each regime change in countries lacking efficient institutions that would establish broad dialogue between all actors involved in the political process, “only redistributed private interests within national interests, and irresponsibility among the elites sooner or later manifested itself again.” Authorities in any country try to reduce their accountability to society and avoid responsibility for achieving declared aims. Only a system of independent civic watchdogs can ensure such accountability and therefore put some sense into national interests, such as a declaration of a country’s long-term goals.
Mikhail Troitsky

Does this mean a country that fails to meet mature civic nation requirements cannot come up with a productive definition of its national interests? It probably can, but such a definition should contain some restraints in order to avoid a situation where private interests are elevated to the status of national ones. Only society as a whole can be the subject of the national interest and that interest should have the form of the public good.

For example, support for domestic carmakers or weapons manufacturers can be part of a program proposed by a politician or party, but such private interests must not claim the status of national ones. By stating national interests publicly, we take precautions against attempts by small interest groups to “privatize” government institutions. Interestingly, the above-mentioned report from the Commission on America’s National Interests puts export support for certain economic sectors at the bottom of the least important national interests of the country.

At the same time, such interests as supporting education reforms using the best foreign practices, attracting foreign investments into hi-tech industries, or developing good-neighborly relations with bordering countries are beneficial for all levels of society. Although not all of its members will benefit equally (uncompetitive teachers and backward “national” industries will presumably be the losers), these gains will be distributed fairly enough as regards the fundamental and indisputable goal of enhancing the security and economic prosperity of the country, and promoting the intellectual development of society.

The development of a national interests concept (at least in foreign policy) seems to have unquestionable benefits: unjustified budget expenditures are reduced, people acquire a sense of common cause, national bureaucracy becomes more disciplined, and foreign policy ambitions and limitations are communicated to other countries. However, states often fail to offer a convincing concept of national interests to its citizens, bureaucracy, and the rest of the world. The Soviet Union and present-day Russia can serve as an example.

Soviet and Russian foreign policy experts have said that attempts to clearly define national interests in the Soviet Union and Russia
Why Are National Interests Necessary?

always proved abortive. This can be seen if one attempts to find an unambiguous declaration of interests (other than overused security and economic development) that could pass for national ones and perform their functions. Why did the Soviet Union, and then Russia, refuse to define national interests? A detailed answer to this question is beyond the scope of this essay. But we can propose several hypotheses for further investigation and discussion.

Firstly, as subjects of international relations, the Soviet Union and modern Russia never completely determined their borders, not formally or legally on the world map, but ideologically and ethnopolitically. It took several decades and a great deal of effort to form the new civic community of Soviet people. Today, a large number of Russians support “compatriots abroad” as a foreign policy goal, and many foreign affairs experts use the term “the Russian world.” But as Igor Zevelev has pointed out, the boundaries of the “Russian world” can be interpreted in a number of ways. Yet a civic nation capable of productively specifying its national interest must have clearly defined borders beyond which the state should hardly “owe” anything to anyone.

Secondly, the Soviet Union’s foreign policy was a hostage to ideology, but national interests by definition cannot be stated in terms of ideas if the impact of those ideas on the material world cannot be measured precisely. The Soviet experience proved that attempts to realize ideological interests with material means quickly (by historical standards) overburden the system and undermine the legitimacy of the polity, eventually leading to the collapse of the state itself. The need to commit considerable resources to promoting liberal democracy worldwide (as opposed to leadership by example) has been questioned by many U.S. foreign policy specialists, including members of the Commission on America’s National Interests.

Finally, individuals who make foreign policy decisions never want to commit themselves to clearly defined interests in an unstable political situation that often requires foreign policy to be adjusted for internal political imperatives. This phenomenon exists in different forms practically in all countries, including the United States, where members of Congress have been trying lately (and on many previous
Mikhail Troitsky

occasions) to influence the country’s foreign policy in the most radical way, acting beyond their mandates and hoping to shift responsibility for a possible failure to the executive branch.

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As a manifestation of higher-order wisdom than just the election needs of concrete leaders or political parties, national interests should discipline politicians and significantly restrict the freedom of their action. The notion of national interests as a central element of the foreign policy doctrine becomes senseless if this doctrine is messed with or altered too often for the sake of some transitory purposes (especially retroactively). The self-restricting function of an official or even semi-official, yet influential, declaration of national interests is particularly important for Russia, whose policy often raises concerns (legitimate or not) among its neighbors and other countries, with which cooperation is vital for its own economic progress.