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THE "NATIONAL INTEREST" IN THE
CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY WORLD
POLITICS: SHIFTING CONCEPTIONS
AND PERCEPTIONS

J. Martin Rochester

ABSTRACT

Perhaps no concept in the international relations field has received more thorough criticism and nonetheless managed to persist than "national interest." Despite its being discarded in many scholarly circles as a meaningless and useless analytical construct, even its most fervent detractors will recognize that the term still has great currency not only among practitioners of international politics but also among the public at large both in the U.S. and elsewhere. Hence, the author would maintain that the concept is not passe but deserves continuing examination. This paper is not meant to be still another attempt at critiquing and discrediting the concept. Rather than a wrecking operation, the paper is intended to provide a fresh look at and reformulation of the concept, particularly in light of changing conditions in the international system which have tended to produce more muddled "world-views" (and "nation-views") than ever before and which have further complicated the definition of "national interests." In particular, the paper focuses on three recurrent themes that can be found in discussions of contemporary international relations -- diffusion of power, shrinking and linking of the globe, and interdependence -- and examines the implications of each for "national interest" considerations, concluding that traditional notions about "national interest" held by policymakers and the public are inadequate to deal with current phenomena.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no concept in the international relations field has received more thorough criticism and nonetheless managed to persist than "national interest." Despite its being discarded in many scholarly circles as a meaningless and useless analytical construct, even its most fervent detractors will recognize that the term still has great currency not only among practitioners of international politics but also among the public at large both in the U.S. and elsewhere. One need only perform a cursory content analysis of speeches made by members of the foreign policy establishment and commentaries in the mass media to substantiate this observation. While it might be argued that the term "national interest" is utilized by decision-makers merely as a handy catch-phrase to facilitate their post-hoc legitimization and rationalization of foreign policy decisions taken, and by the public merely as an equally handy catch-phrase to avoid their having to come to grips with the confusing world of foreign affairs, such an argument would seem to grossly understate the extent to which the term and everything it represents actually informs both the former's calculations in the decision-making process and the latter's reactions to the decisions that are produced. Hence, the author would maintain that the concept is not passé but deserves continuing examination. This paper, then, is not meant to be still another attempt at critiquing and discrediting the concept. Rather than a wrecking operation, the paper is intended to provide a fresh look at and reformulation of the concept, particularly in light of changing conditions in the international system.

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THE CONCEPT REVISITED

As long as there have been nation-states, men have thought in terms of "national interests." It remained for Carr (1939) and Morgenthau (1946) and their fellow realists to enshrine this observation into a dictum and to turn the loose notion of "national interest" into a full-blown, well developed, and clearly labeled concept occupying a special place in scholarly discourse among more than a generation of international relationists. The widespread criticism of the utility of this concept that has followed the realists has been based primarily upon the argument that, notwithstanding the painstaking attempts by realists to elaborate the concept, it has remained highly amorphous and ambiguous both as a guide to action for policy makers seeking to make sound decisions and as an explanatory factor for scholars seeking to understand international events. Arnold Wolfers (1952:147) summed up the "subjectivity" problem in his thoughtful essay several years ago:

When political formulas such as "national interest" or "national security" gain popularity they need to be scrutinized with particular care. They may not mean the same thing to different people. They may not have any precise meaning at all. Thus, while appearing to offer guidance and a basis for broad consensus, they may be permitting everyone to label whatever policy he favors with an attractive and possibly deceptive name.

The twofold assumption which appears to be embedded in the concept of "national interest" is that (1) there exist an objectively determinable collective interest which all individual members within a given national society share equally and (2) this collective interest transcends any interests that a particular subset of those individuals may share with individuals in other national societies. The traditional critique of the concept has focused on the first assumption, with the caveat being that certain definitions of the "national interest" tend to coincide with the interests of some subnational groups more than others (e.g., the argument that an \$80 billion annual U.S. Defense Department budget benefits an individual on the welfare rolls less than it benefits, say, a McDonnell-Douglas Aircraft Company employee). Various subnational groups, so the caveat goes, whether they are located within the governmental machinery (bureaucratic or elected officials) or outside it (specialized interest groups) recognize the potentially disparate impacts of different definitions of the "national interest" and attempt to have official definitions (i.e., policies) adopted which are consistent with their particular interests. Thus, according to this line of reasoning, the concept of "national interest" and the associated treatment of nation-states as unitary, purposeful, rational actors ("blackboxes" or "billiard balls") responding exclusively to stimuli from the international environment is a distortion of reality which vastly deprecates the degree of domestic dissensus that operates in national societies--both democratic and non-democratic systems--and that drives foreign policy at least as much as external forces (Allison, 1969 and 1971; Hilsman, 1971; Halperin and Kanter, 1973; Halperin, 1974).

The latter critique is somewhat unfair insofar as Morgenthau and other realists are not so unastute students of politics as to fail to recognize the role of domestic politics and conflicts of interests in the formulation of foreign policy. There is a very clear concern with domestic politics that can be found in realist writings (Kissinger, 1966; Fisher, 1969; Morgenthau, 1972). However, the realists do tend to argue that once internal conflict over defining the "national interest" in a particular instance is played out and some official definition (policy) ultimately emerges, the various contending subnational actors can generally be counted upon to coalesce and enable the nation to act in the aggregate, at least to the extent that they will not push their separate interests beyond national boundaries and will not form coalitions with subnational actors in other nations to oppose the established policy.

The reasoning here relates precisely to the second assumption articulated above, i.e., whatever the differences between various subnational groups in a national society, those groups have more interests in common with each other than they do with groups in other national societies. While the concept of "national interest" has been traditionally criticized mainly in terms of the weakness of the first assumption, it is the second assumption that would seem to bear further examination than it has thus far received since it runs squarely up against what a number of observers believe to be major new forces in world politics. The author is not referring here simply to the confrontation between, or convergence of, the interests of nation-states and the interests of the world community as a whole--which has, of course,

always been a subject of discussion in debates over the "national interest"--but rather to a much more complex set of relationships. It is these forces and their impact on conceptions and perceptions of the "national interest" that we will now turn to as the central concern addressed in this paper.

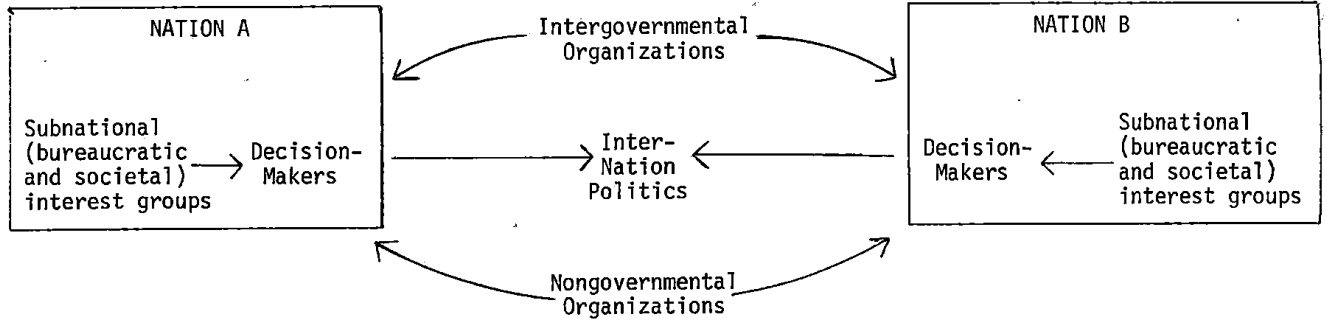
FROM INTERNATIONAL POLITICS ("BILLIARD BALLS") TO WORLD POLITICS ("COBWEBS")?: ALTERNATIVE PARADIGMS

A growing number of observers of world affairs have called attention to two seemingly paradoxical but mutually related and reinforcing sets of trends which together, it is suggested, represent the "erosion" of the nation-state and inter-state relations as we have known it over the past three hundred years. These trends are, first, disintegrative tendencies within existing national units (i.e., increasing domestic violence, crises of authority, and paralysis of problem-solving institutions) and, secondly, integrative tendencies beyond the nation-state level (i.e., increasing interdependencies, transaction flows across national boundaries, and proliferation of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations). While similar observations about the demise of the nation-state have been made in the past only to be retracted (Herz, 1957 and 1968)--indeed, forecasting the doom of the nation-state has long been a favorite pastime of international relationists--nevertheless the current observations cannot be so easily dismissed as shortsighted or pollyanish.

The latter trends have appeared so striking to some as to cause a major rethinking and overhauling of the traditional paradigm or theoretical framework (variously labeled "international politics," "state-centric," or "billiard ball") within which phenomena in the field have been conceptualized in the past. Keohane and Nye (1971), Coplin et al (1973), and Burton et al (1974) are among those who have attacked the traditional paradigm, not on normative grounds but on empirical grounds, arguing that it never has adequately corresponded with reality and that it is especially inadequate to comprehend contemporary events. In place of the traditional paradigm, another paradigm is suggested (variously labeled "world politics," "transnational relations," or "cobweb") which takes into account relatively new, more complex phenomena.

It would seem appropriate here to elaborate briefly these two paradigms since they have widely different implications for considerations of "national interest." The "international politics" paradigm is schematically represented by Figure 1.

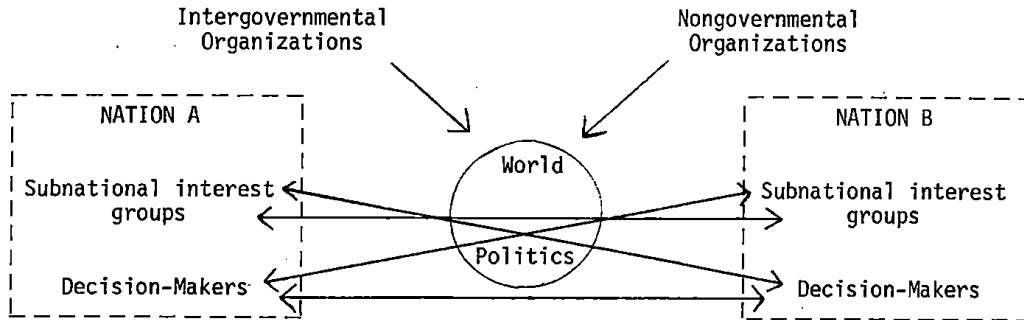
FIGURE 1: International Politics (Billiard Ball) Paradigm



The "international politics" paradigm assumes that nation-states, acting through official representatives (decision-makers, diplomats, soldiers, etc.), are the only significant actors in world affairs. Neither subnational actors (bureaucratic and societal interest groups) nor transnational actors (intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations, including multinational corporations) are treated as distinct and autonomous actors; with the former subsumed by the nation-state and the latter considered as extensions of the nation-state or, at best, marginal factors influencing nation-state interactions. The paradigm assumes a hierarchially ordered set of relationships along Eastonian lines, with demands flowing from bureaucratic and societal groups to national leaders located in the authoritative decision-making apparatus who resolve whatever internal conflict exists and whose actions then become the nation's actions and the source of interactions between the national unit and other national units. In other words, this paradigm contains the assumptions surrounding the concept of "national interest" that were discussed earlier in the paper.

The "world politics" paradigm is schematically represented in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2: World Politics (Cobweb) Paradigm



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The key assumption of the "world politics" paradigm, in contrast to the "international politics" paradigm, is that subnational and transnational actors can and should be treated as distinct and autonomous actors apart from national actors and that there are no neat hierarchially organized patterns of influence and authority among these three categories of actors. The world is conceived of as a set of systems interacting rather than a set of geographically and legally defined entities interacting. In other words, not all stimuli which provide the inputs for world politics travel through and are emitted from Washington or Paris or Warsaw or Cairo; instead, some bypass national capitals and travel by way of places like Poughkeepsie and Peoria. The paradigm suggests that subnational actors can affect world politics directly--and not just indirectly through domestic political processes--by initiating or serving as targets of interactions with either foreign governments or subnational groups located in other countries. It tends to accentuate conflict within national units and cooperation across national units--allowing for the possibility that transnational coalitions of interests (either among bureaucrats or private interest groups in different countries) may be found that are stronger than intranational coalitions--although there is nothing in the paradigm which precludes the kinds of cooperation and conflict patterns assumed by the "international politics" paradigm. Insofar as this paradigm suggests that there is no national "self" that is identifiable, it challenges the assumptions surrounding the concept of "national interest."

What are we to make of these two paradigms? Which one more accurately reflects the current state of world affairs and is a more useful framework for scholars and, more importantly, policy makers to employ in their attempts to understand international phenomena? As stated above, proponents of the "world politics" paradigm cite trends which seem to suggest that the nation-state will never quite be the same again, that it is being dismantled from within and from without, and that a new and more complex web of relationships is forming inside and across national boundaries. It must be noted that, at the same time, counter-trends have been cited by others which reinforce the traditional paradigm. Let us examine some of these apparent trends and counter-trends in an effort to assess which of the two paradigms is a better portrait of contemporary reality. The author does not propose here to "test" the paradigms through systematic analysis of empirical data--which would be a task well beyond the scope of this paper--but rather to make some "face validity" judgments about their relative merits based on a survey of present conditions in the international system.

TRENDS AND COUNTER-TRENDS

We can examine present trends and counter-trends in terms of several recurrent themes that can be found in discussions of contemporary international relations. These persistent themes, all interrelated, are (1) the diffusion of power, (2) the shrinking and linking of the globe, and (3) interdependence and loss of control.

(1) Diffusion of power

Perhaps no trend has been more commented upon recently than the diffusion of power within the international system. However, depending upon which conceptual lenses one is using to make observations about the diffusion of power, one can be describing two different and somewhat inconsistent phenomena. On the one hand, there are those who view the diffusion of power in the international system as consisting primarily in the proliferation of non-state (subnational and transnational) actors as autonomous or at least semi-autonomous agents capable of shaping events and competing with national actors for influence in world politics. On the other hand, more conventional-minded observers see the diffusion of power in terms of a shift from bipolarity to multipolarity in which more and more nation-states have become relevant actors in the international system.

In the view of the former, national power everywhere is being undermined and diluted by both ever narrower interpretations of the "national interest" on the part of some subnational groups and ever broader interpretations on the part of other societal elements which have developed cross-national affiliations and identities through membership in multinational corporations and other organizations transcending national borders. A corollary here is that an increasing number of problems in the contemporary world are seen as either generated by non-state forces or dealt with through non-state means and that world politics is becoming a series of fragmented, discretely defined issue-areas (e.g., air safety) in which outcomes are determined by a congeries of forces including both

nation-states and other actors (e.g., intergovernmental organizations such as the International Civil Aviation Organization, nongovernmental organizations such as the International Air Transport Association and the International Air Line Pilots Association, and subnational interest groups such as the airline lobbies within particular countries).

As recent case studies of various issue-areas have suggested, there are few issues in world politics that one can think of in which non-state actors are not relevant (Kihl, 1971; Keohane and Nye, 1971; and Handelman et al, 1974). Even in the war-peace issue-area, traditionally considered to be the exclusive domain of nation-states, one cannot ignore the substantial capacity of subnational actors like the Irish Republican Army and transnational actors like the Palestine Liberation Organization to generate violence in the international system.

If one focuses on the "law of the sea" issue-area, for example, one can hardly reduce the intricacies of the debate to simply a conflict between those states which seek exclusive claims to the oceans and those which seek inclusive claims. Although the debate is commonly couched in terms of a confrontation between the interests of developed states and the interests of developing states (Friedheim, 1965), this loses sight of significant conflicts which exist within those states and between transnational groups. One can point to conflicts between those subnational groups in a given country which for different reasons favor inclusive claims that would permit maximum freedom of the seas (bureaucratic groups such as the Department of Defense and societal interest groups such as scientific research organizations) and those subnational groups in the same country which, also for different reasons, favor

exclusive claims expanding national jurisdiction over and protection of coastal resources (bureaucratic groups such as the Department of Interior and societal groups such as fishing and oil interests more concerned with exploiting resources off their own coast than off of the coast of other states). This constellation of interests tends to encourage transnational coalitions, such as scientists in different countries articulating shared issue positions through nongovernmental organizations. It follows that there are disagreements between various transnational actors as well-- nongovernmental organizations such as the multinational oil corporations and intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations--over the extent of inclusive and exclusive claims. (One cannot help noting that ocean politics, viewed in this fashion, uncovers strange seabed fellows, indeed.)

At the same time, one might argue that, in the end, it is states which make claims on the oceans and not subnational or transnational actors, and that national power can be expected to prevail in this issue-area and all other issue-areas where it is pitted directly against either subnational forces (as in the case of the several states along the Eastern Seaboard of the United States which futilely claimed ownership of offshore oil resources adjacent to their coasts) or transnational forces (as in the case of a multinational company that was heavily fined for causing the Santa Barbara oilspill in 1967). This returns us to the earlier observation that, to the extent that there has been a diffusion of power in the international system, it has consisted in the emergence of an increased number of states as relevant actors in world politics.

While some conceive of the shift from bipolarity to multipolarity as being the result of a diffusion of military power--and, in particular, nuclear destructive capability--among several states, it seems more reasonable to attribute it to a deprecation of military power and the concomitant substitution of other modes of exercising influence. As a number of scholars have noted, the prohibitive costs of occupying foreign territory and the fear of conflicts escalating into nuclear holocausts have conspired to alter both the traditional means of pursuing foreign policy goals as well as the goals themselves (Knorr, 1966; Morse, 1970). As the possible instruments for exercising (and resisting) influence have become more varied, more and more states have found themselves in possession of resources which enable them to play key roles in different situations. And as territorial aggrandizement has declined in importance as an objective of foreign policy, the central concern of national security has taken on new, added dimensions and has become in effect several issue-areas. This changing distribution of power and array of issues in international politics has been accompanied by increased flexibility of alignments.

In this latter context, different issue-areas such as "law of the sea" are characterized by different coalitions of states (as opposed to subnational and transnational actors), with the power of a given state varying from issue to issue and considerable cross-issue bargaining occurring. This is essentially a "polyarchical" system (Dahl, 1961; Rosenau, 1966) in which no pecking order can be identified insofar as power is issue-specific and no actor has a capacity to dominate over

more than a narrow range of issues. According to this view of things, if world politics no longer simply revolves around a single issue-area, it nonetheless remains basically a contest between nation-states. It could even be argued that the diffusion of power among states has had the effect of increasing cohesion within national societies to which power has gravitated insofar as it has produced a sense of national pride and purpose where there perhaps was none previously.

(2) Shrinking and linking of the globe

Another trend which has attracted great attention is what can be called the "shrinking and linking" phenomenon. According to one popular line of analysis, modern transportation and communication technology has facilitated increased flows of people, goods, and ideas across national boundaries, with the result that the world has become "smaller" in terms of both physical distances and social distances. Persons residing in nation-states located in one corner of the globe are becoming increasingly sensitive to and affected by what goes on inside and outside of nations situated in other corners of the globe. "Cultural diffusion" is seen as occurring at an even faster rate than "power diffusion" as an homogenization process is producing a world society of universally shared values and tastes.

Translated into political terms, this "shrinking and linking" phenomenon is associated with notions of "permeability" and "penetration" or, to use James Rosenau's phrase, "linkage politics" (Rosenau, 1969). That is, nation-states are being stripped of their hard outer shells and are becoming increasingly vulnerable to external influences which

do not follow the normal paths of inter-nation interaction. What is referred to here is not merely outside governmental intervention in the political affairs of a state--a common enough occurrence in the past--but rather a more subtle and pervasive enmeshment of external elements in the entire national life of a society. As the boundaries between national political systems and their international environments continue to deteriorate, distinctions between foreign and domestic policy become further blurred.

When it is even difficult to tell foreign actors from domestic actors, the "national interest" becomes especially problematical to define. For example, do persons employed by a French subsidiary of a U.S.-based multinational corporation represent a foreign element or a domestic element? This becomes something more than an academic question when the MNC's home government attempts to extend laws directed at its own national commercial establishment to subsidiary companies located abroad, as in the case of the U.S. government a few years ago expecting subsidiaries of American corporations in Western European countries to observe the same export restrictions that Congress had imposed on domestic firms through the Trading with the Enemy Act. Such concerns are particularly relevant to a country like Canada, where the fact that over 50% of all manufacturing and extractive industries are foreign-controlled makes one wonder what the domestic-foreign distinction means in the Canadian setting.

To the extent that the distinction between domestic policy and foreign policy can be maintained, the Canadian experience puts into sharp focus the tensions that can develop between the two and the frequent

difficulties in sorting out and reconciling the various elements of the "national interest" that are to be served. In particular, national decision-makers seem to be faced increasingly with agonizing choices involving trade-offs between national economic welfare and the maintenance of a free and unencumbered hand in pursuing foreign policy. The recent issue of whether to permit the Iranian government to bail out Pan American Airways from its financial problems by purchasing a major interest in the company is only one among several similar issues confronting decision-makers. Failure to allow foreign investment in U.S. companies threatens both to deprive the national economy of a vital new infusion of capital and to produce harmful repercussions for American commercial ventures abroad that will have to operate under the shadow of a "double standard." While decision-makers have always had these kinds of trade-offs to consider, and while "internal" needs have often had to be sacrificed for "external" requirements (such as the production of guns in place of butter or constraints on free speech in time of war), these situations of choice seem to occur more regularly of late and seem to be more complicated than previously.

Counter-balancing these trends is what would appear to be a "backlash" effect produced by the "shrinking and linking" process, i.e., a tendency toward national introspection and a renewed preoccupation with the national self on the part of many societies. Although in the case of the U.S. the current isolationist impulse may be considered simply a "return to normalcy" following the Vietnam debacle, it seems to be a much larger phenomenon having deeper roots. One can see states everywhere

responding to the "permeability" problem by attempting to resurrect at least partially their hard outer shells through higher tariff walls, immigration quotas, and other barriers. In this regard, one might note the observation made by Karl Deutsch and others that national introversion (roughly defined as the ratio of intranational to transnational flows of communications, goods and people) tends to increase as societies industrialize (Deutsch and Eckstein, 1961; Deutsch et al, 1967).

The fact is that "shrinking and linking" is not a uniform phenomenon characterized by tidy symmetry. Some societies are more penetrated than others. Some transaction flows are at unprecedented levels while others (notably population migration and foreign trade as a percentage of GNP) still do not approach their pre-World War I volume (Kuznets, 1966). Where growth in transnational flows has occurred, it has not been felt evenly throughout the system; there are gaping gaps, for example, in the global network of nongovernmental organizations, as developed, pluralistic states are far more represented than less developed states and communist states (Feld, 1972). There is further evidence which suggests that "shrinking and linking" is more of a regional phenomenon than a global phenomenon (Nye, 1972).

Indeed, in some respects the world was more shrunken and linked in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than it is today. For all the "Coca-Colaization" of the world that has taken place, there has never been greater cultural and ideological diversity than at present (Bozeman, 1971). The homogeneity of the contemporary international system pales by comparison with an earlier system which consisted essentially of a

handful of major actors having shared autocratic values, European cultural traditions, and family ties. Moreover, if modern communications and transportation technology has promoted some degree of cultural diffusion and assimilation, it has also heightened awareness of certain differences between various national populations in terms of rising consciousness of the "rich-poor gap" and other disparities (Bhagwati, 1972).

(3) Interdependence and loss of control

The "diffusion of power" and "shrinking and linking" themes are closely related to a third theme, namely "interdependence and loss of control." One version of the latter theme is the Spaceship Earthish notion of a tiny planet of people with interlocking and inseparable destinies moving aimlessly through time and space. A more muted expression of the same theme is the view that governments have become increasingly incapable of managing their national destinies, of controlling events within their own boundaries much less outside them, since the problems they are called upon to solve--economic inflation, pollution, skyjacking, etc.--spill over national boundaries and are caused by factors beyond the control of any single national actor. The paralysis of the central institutions of states in the face of their inability to cope with these problems has contributed to what many observers see as widespread crises of authority within nation-states and surrender of de facto, if not de jure, national sovereignty in the international system (Falk, 1971; Brown, 1972).

Increased interdependence among nations has meant that their efforts to achieve desired goals for themselves--security, economic well-being, etc.--have tended to become "collective goods" problems, i.e., problems which require joint action among various actors who find they cannot singly produce desired "goods" (or avoid undesired "bads") insofar as their individual actions result in benefits and losses that cannot be withheld from others. There has been a spate of attempts recently to apply collective goods theory, as developed by Mancur Olson (1965), to various international concerns ranging from alliances (Olson and Zeckhauser, 1967 and 1968) to law of the sea questions (Wenk, 1972; Cowhey et al, 1973) to more general issues (Olson, 1971; Frolich, Oppenheimer, and Young, 1971; Russett and Sullivan, 1971; and Ruggie, 1972).

When problems are cast in "collective goods" terms, then international collaboration seems to become more imperative and to take on greater urgency than ever. While coordination of policies may occur informally through ad hoc actions or through formal agreements, the dynamics of problem-solving tend to elicit institutional responses in the form of intergovernmental organizations. The dramatic growth of intergovernmental organizations since World War II (Kegley and Rochester, 1971) clearly suggests that states have found such arrangements to be important vehicles for collective problem-solving. Where the "shrinking and linking" phenomenon is thought to be eroding the nation-state at the level of inter-societal interactions, "interdependence" is thought to be making a frontal assault at the level of inter-governmental interactions.

Carried to its logical conclusion, the "logic of collective action" suggests to some that all interests everywhere are indivisible and that the "national interest" is a contradiction in terms.

Juxtaposed against this view of contemporary international politics is the impression that governments are getting bigger if not stronger, that they are expanding their functions in society, and that their creation of intergovernmental organizations demonstrates the adaptability and resiliency of the nation-state rather than its erosion. There are a few who even argue that interdependence is a "myth" that has no basis whatsoever in reality (Waltz, 1970). Others, while not dismissing interdependence as a real phenomenon, have noted that there is at least contradictory evidence to be found and that the phenomenon is more complex than commonly conceived (Young, 1969; Morse, 1969).

Just as in the case of the "shrinking and linking" phenomenon, one can point to asymmetrical elements. Some states' relationships with other states are characterized more by dependence than by interdependence, while some states may be essentially independent vis-a-vis other states. Some states--either dyadically, triadically, or in some other combination--may be interdependent strategically but not economically. Even on a specific dimension, such as economic interdependence, it may be necessary to distinguish between aid dependence, trade dependence, currency dependence and other sub-dimensions.

If one looks carefully at collective goods theory, it appears to be only a slight variation of "mixed motive" game theory, i.e., a case of old wine in new bottles. The latter suggests that as international

politics has moved away from "zero-sum" game conditions to "non-zero sum" conditions, most situations encountered by national actors have come to involve elements of both cooperation (insofar as no single actor's decision determines the outcome and gains can be maximized by all "players" through proper coordination of strategy) and competition (insofar as, while there is something to be gained by everybody, not all players need share equally in the payoffs). In this sense, while the cooperative dynamic may be greater than ever before, we are still not so far from international politics as usual.

Returning to the question raised earlier--what are we to make of the two paradigms?--the previous discussion of trends and counter-trends would not appear to be especially helpful in resolving the issue in favor of one or the other. While one might argue that a hard empirical analysis of trend data might prove more decisive and revealing, there is reason to believe that the conclusions reached would be just as equivocal. For every analyst, for example, whose data confirm that the nation-state remains the most powerful actor in the international system and that multinational corporations and other transnational actors are mere extensions (Simmonds, 1970), there is another whose data indicate otherwise (Brown, 1972). With little good theory to go on, as is presently the case, we are left essentially with random facts. So what if Standard Oil of New Jersey has three times as many employees stationed overseas as the U.S. Department of State, and if its tanker fleet is almost half that of the Soviet Union? Does this really tell us anything about international relations?

In the final analysis, it would appear that neither paradigm by itself quite captures contemporary reality, that each is a caricature of sorts (granted most paradigms on models are), and that the world is in flux somewhere between a pure "state-centric" system and a full-blown "world politics" system. If the author's analysis has seemed somewhat "schizophrenic," that's the way the world seems to be. How else can one view many of the recent events that have taken place, such as the arrangement whereby the U.S. Department of Defense contracted with an American multinational corporation (in which Saudi Arabian interests were to purchase 25% ownership) to engage former U.S. servicemen in training Saudi troops to protect oil wells which at the time were considered potential targets of American military action?

If one is willing to look beyond the most visible manifestations of "state-centrism" such as Vietnam, one can discern two different "cultures" superimposed on each other. In addition to the traditional culture of diplomacy, strategic bargaining, alliances and arms races, there is beneath the surface another culture with different trappings represented by the Vinnell Corporation episode referred to above. For every Vietnam, there is at least one Vinnell. This can be a tremendous source of confusion to policy makers and publics trying to get a handle on the world, and it is reflected in the current desultory national debate over the future direction of American foreign policy. It accounts for why it is sometimes hard to tell the isolationists from the internationalists in this debate. While the "national interest" remains the lone lodestone anchoring the debate, that is more difficult than ever to decipher in a world which is

rent in half not only by East-West and North-South conflicts but by more knotty tensions. This situation, which might only half-facetiously be labeled the "schizoid spheroid" syndrome, leads us to a consideration of the role of images in defining the "national interest" in the contemporary era.

PARADIGMS, IMAGES, AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Paradigms are nothing more than cognitive maps or belief systems which scholars operate with that help organize reality for them and help them make some sense out of the multitude of discrete events that occur in the world daily. Paradigms serve mainly to orient their research; they suggest what questions one ought to investigate and how one ought to interpret one's findings. They have the effect, likewise, of leaving certain questions unasked and unanswered.

However, paradigms are not just conceptual blinders that are confined to academia. Policy-makers and people in general have similar blinders that, if we want to avoid using the term paradigm, we can call "images." The images of the world possessed by policy-makers and laymen may not be as well developed as those held by scholars, and the former may not be nearly as conscious of them, but they exist nonetheless and perform similar functions. Where images help scholars collect and analyze data, they help policy makers seek out and interpret intelligence relating to their environment and help laymen evaluate the decisions that policy-makers take. In this regard, it would seem appropriate to note John Maynard Keynes' observation (1957:383) that "practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences,"

whether they realize it or not, often act on the basis of paradigms developed by "some academic scribbler of a few years back."

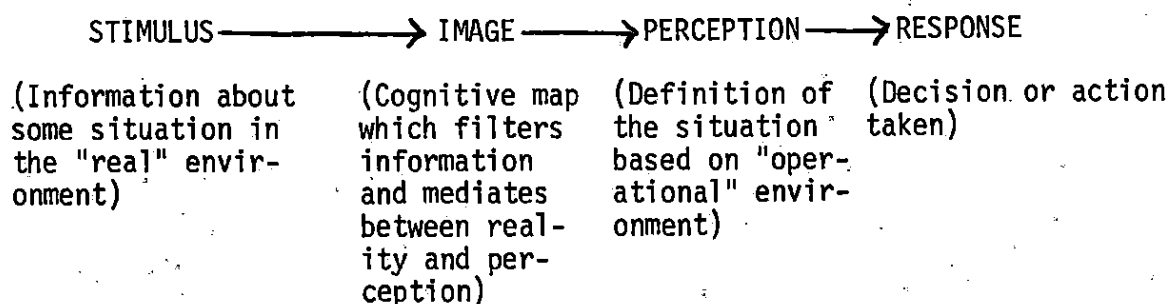
In one of the earliest writings on "images," Kenneth Boulding (1959:120) points out how images operate and how the extent to which they square with reality has far more important implications for policy-makers than for scholars:

. . . we must recognize that the people whose decisions determine the policies and actions of nations do not respond to the "objective" facts of the situation, whatever that may mean, but to their "image" of the situation. It is what we think the world is like, not what it is really like, that determines our behavior. If our image of the world is in some sense "wrong," of course, we may be disappointed in our expectations, and we may therefore revise our image; if this revision is in the direction of "truth" there is presumably a long-run tendency for the "image" and the "truth" to coincide. Whether this is so or not, it is always the image, not the truth, that immediately determines behavior. . . . The "image," then, must be thought of as the total cognitive, affective, and evaluative structure of the behavior unit [the nation], or its internal view of itself and its universe.

Since the pioneering work of Boulding (1956 and 1959) and Harold and Margaret Sprout (1956 and 1957), a voluminous literature has sprung up dealing with the role of images in foreign policy-making and international politics. One segment of this literature treats the images held by individuals and focuses attention on the decision-making process (Holsti, 1962 and 1970; Angell et al, 1964; Pruitt, 1965; de Rivera, 1968; Jervis, 1968 and 1970; Zimmerman, 1970; Zinnes, 1972; Brecher, 1973). Another segment of the literature takes a somewhat different approach, treating aggregate, national or societal images and focusing attention on the dynamics of inter-nation interaction (Osgood, 1959; Deutsch and Merritt, 1965; North and Brody, 1968; Terhune, 1970; Stoessinger, 1971; Smith, 1973;

Benjamin, 1975). Both strands of the literature basically adopt an S-O-R behavior model as diagrammed below, with the only difference being the nature of the "organism" (the individual in the former case, the reified nation-state in the latter case).

FIGURE 3: S-O-R Model



How images relating to the nation and the outside world are formed and are changed are relevant to "national interest" considerations since definitions of the national interest, according to image theorists, are matters of perception. One's images of the nation and the international environment have essentially the same roots as one's images of other things. That is, one's images derive from two sources--either one's past personal experiences and background (religious upbringing, parent-child relationships, etc.) or one's current situation which/dictates his interests (where one sits in a governmental bureaucracy, etc.). Clearly, there is a potential for widely different images to prevail among policy-makers and other persons within any national society, as has been emphasized by those studies in the literature that have focused on individual images.

At the same time, counterbalancing this tendency toward diversity within societies has been the presence in most societies of (1) a common set of historical experiences and political socialization experiences capable of overcoming or muting personal background variations and (2) the ability of the nation-state to perform certain basic functions (attainment of physical security, economic well-being, etc.) capable of overriding more narrow parochial concerns and interests. Hence, as those studies that have focused on aggregate images suggest, it has been possible to talk of shared images of the nation and the external environment that are widely held throughout a society's population and that ultimately tend to produce shared perceptions of the "national interest."

However, as problems continue to mount and to go unsolved by national leaders, the utilitarian basis for the nation-state is likely to become increasingly weaker. If it is true that, as Charles Kindleberger (1969: 207) has argued in raw utilitarian terms, "the nation-state is just about through as an economic unit," then one has to wonder what is keeping it together. In these circumstances, what can be called the identitive basis for nation-states--those common historical and socialization experiences--is taking on added importance as the underpinning of shared national images. It is curious that the concept of "national interest," as articulated by Morgenthau and others, stresses the rational, utilitarian motive force behind the actions of individuals and groups, yet an almost irrational attachment to the nation-state (i.e., viewing its preservation as an end in itself) has been perhaps an even stronger force. As one writer (Viner, 1970:105) has put it, "the power of nationalist sentiment can override all other considerations; it can dominate the minds of a

people, and dictate the policies of government, even when in every possible way and to every conceivable degree it is in sharp conflict with what seem to be and are in fact the basic economic interests of the people in question."

The latter statement is a commentary on the staying power of images, particularly those that have an identitive basis. Images once formed are very slow to change. As Festinger (1957) and others have pointed out, people do not shed their images easily since they provide a sense of psychic security and are built up through considerable investment of intellectual and emotional energy. Images tend to remain intact as "cognitive dissonance" is either avoided (by individuals seeking out only those information sources that can be counted upon to reinforce the established image, and ignoring any incongruous signals that might be forthcoming from the environment) or resolved (by forcing contrary stimuli into the established framework). Images can be shaken and perhaps revised only when, recalling Boulding's remarks, one's images come up against more and more stimuli that they are drastically at odds with and one's expectations based on those images regularly fail to materialize. Even then, one's images may be so "closed" as to resist change, although the possibility for change increases as it becomes increasingly difficult to fit existing stimuli into the established framework.

This resistance to changing one's basic assumptions about the world accounts for why the traditional "international politics" paradigm (image) has persisted as the dominant orientation among scholars as well as among policy-makers and the public in general, even in the face of concrete

events which have called it into question and made it seem anachronistic at times. Despite doing some violence to reality, the traditional paradigm was close enough to reality in the past that it could accommodate most data which scholars and policy-makers and laymen were confronted with. A policy-maker does not abandon his worldview any sooner than a scholar rejects his theory just because it does not fit every case. However, as suggested in the discussion of trends and counter-trends, the traditional paradigm is becoming increasingly inadequate to accommodate a large number of phenomena that can be found in the contemporary world.

As existing images come into conflict more and more with reality, they are likely to undergo some refinement--probably in the direction of the more sophisticated "world politics" paradigm. Just as many scholars are now feeling the need to make adjustments of their operating assumptions about the world, so also will policy-makers and the public likely feel such a need in the future. What we may have is a dualistic image based on a mix of both "billiard ball" and "cobweb" views of the world, in which case the aforementioned identitive underpinning of shared national images and shared perceptions of the "national interest" may be subject to substantial strain. That may be a price that will have to be paid for coming to grips with the world.

It is admittedly easier for scholars to leap from one paradigm to another than for policy-makers to do so, although there are costs involved for both. For scholars, it might mean complete mental "retooling." But for policy-makers, particularly if they were to accept even partly the

"world politics" paradigm, it might mean self-deprecation, might entail considerable redefinition of their role, and might at least in the short term heighten their insecurity about their environment. There is reason to believe, then, that policy-makers may well hold onto the traditional paradigm long after others have resigned themselves to its irrelevance. While one might argue that policy-makers more than anybody else shape events and, hence, the paradigm that best fits with reality at any point in time is the one that they alone can actuate and perpetuate, this is not borne out by current happenings. In the end, they would be advised to make the necessary adjustments in their thinking if they are truly to serve the "national interest" since failure to do so will mean increased misunderstanding and misperception of the environment, with resulting chaos in domestic and world affairs.

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