

Theory and Practice in American Foreign Policy: Barack Obama's Presidency and Classical Realism

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Abstract

Recent remarks about Barack Obama's foreign policy conduct restarted a debate whether his practice can be characterized as realist. This debate shows that such classifications are not evident, which raises the question how the relation between realist theory and practice can be described, and what makes it difficult to decide whether certain conduct of foreign policy is realist or not. In this thesis, I investigate these issues based on the thoughts of main classical realist theorists in the context of American foreign policy. While there are reasons why it is difficult to identify *any* theory in actual behavior, I also argue that certain peculiarities of *realist* theories hinder the revelation of such connections. Although many similarities to realist ideas can be found in Obama's conduct, the thesis will not conclude that his policies can undoubtedly be seen as realist. However, this investigation will provide an opportunity to make some observations about the rather ambiguous relation between realist theory and practice.

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Introduction

When it was announced in October 2009 that the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Barack Obama, the most frequent reaction was incomprehension: ‘why?’, ‘what has he done?’. Being the President of the United States for less than a year, Obama was faced with high expectations and equally high challenges: fighting two wars, tackling the economic crisis and executing domestic reforms. Under these circumstances, his acceptance speech in Oslo received special attention all around the world and its tone surprised many observers. While he reiterated that “war itself is never glorious”, he also acknowledged that violent conflicts would not be eradicated in our lifetime. The speech – contrary to what we would expect from someone who receives the Peace Prize – emphasized contradictions and dilemmas, “the imperfections of man” and the “limits of reason”. Although Obama rejected both the ‘realist’ and ‘idealist’ label, in certain aspects, his language recalled the classical realist traditions of political thinking.¹

The speech – and the foreign policy decisions around the time – restarted a discussion on the assessment of Obama’s foreign policy principles and actions. Only a few days after the Oslo speech, David Brooks of *The New York Times* identified these principles as part of a ‘Christian realist’ tradition hallmarked by the philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr. He also cited a previous interview in which Obama “spoke about the way Niebuhr formed his thinking”.² Fred Kaplan wrote similarly in *Slate magazine* as he argued that “[Obama’s] speech, like Niebuhr’s writing, reflects an active awareness of humanity’s ideals but also its imperfections – of our reach and our limits.”³ However, others claim that these arguments are based only on

¹ Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize*. December 10, 2009. Oslo, Norway. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>

² David Brooks, ‘Obama’s Christian Realism’, *The New York Times*, December 15, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/15/opinion/15brooks.html>

³ Fred Kaplan, ‘Obama’s War and Peace’, *Slate Magazine*, December 10, 2009. <http://www.slate.com/id/2238081/>

superficial generalities about ‘irony’, ‘paradox’ and ‘tragedy’ – ideas appearing in Niebuhr’s and many other authors’ works.⁴ Liam Julian examined Niebuhr’s influence on Obama earlier, and he concluded that it is more plausible to think that Obama “merely adopt[s] Niebuhr’s philosophy] when and where it supports his prior and indiscernible convictions”.⁵

The debate resurfaced in April 2010, when *The New York Times* assessed Obama’s foreign policy principles after the signing of a new nuclear arms reduction treaty with Russia and the conclusion of a nuclear-security summit. Peter Baker argued that the emerging Obama doctrine “is ... much more realpolitik than his predecessor’s, focused on relations with traditional great powers” and he quoted Rahm Emanuel, the White House chief of staff who said that “[Obama is] probably more realpolitik, like Bush 41,” referring to the first President Bush.⁶ In reaction, *Foreign Policy* asked a panel of foreign-policy experts whether Obama is as “cold-blooded about the self-interests of [his] nation” as his chief of staff indicated. The comments were rather mixed. Robert Kagan, for example, called Obama an idealist who has “a 21st-century Wilsonian vision,” while Charles Kupchan stated that he “clearly tilts in the realist direction,” but his pragmatism and the “absence of ideological clutter” is the most important characteristic of his foreign policy. Others rejected the realist/idealist framing: Joseph Nye claimed that instead “a new synthesis that might call liberal realism” should be examined, which understands “the strength and limits of American power,” and Philip Zelickow argued that these labels are often pointless since “no one wants to be in the ‘unrealistic’ camp.”⁷

This debate shows that it is not obvious to classify somebody’s foreign policy along these lines, and neither is it evident if these distinctions are meaningful for policy-makers.

⁴ Joseph Loconte, ‘Obama Contra Niebuhr’, *The American*. January 14, 2010.

<http://www.american.com/archive/2010/january/obama-contra-niebuhr>

⁵ Liam Julian, ‘Niebuhr and Obama’, *Policy Review*, Apr/May 2009, Issue 154, pp. 19-33.

⁶ Peter Baker, ‘Obama Puts His Own Mark on Foreign Policy Issues’, *The New York Times*, April 13, 2010.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/14/world/14prexy.html>

⁷ ‘George H. W. Obama?’, *Foreign Policy*, April 14, 2010.

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/04/14/george_hw_obama

However, realism, as a school in the field of IR, clearly has its own traditions and distinct intellectual foundations. This raises the questions how the relation between realist theory and realist practice can be described, and what makes it difficult to decide whether certain conduct of foreign policy can be seen as realist or not. In my thesis, I will investigate these questions based on the thoughts of the main classical realist theorists in the context of American foreign policy. Starting from the puzzle about Obama's policies, I focus on the peculiarities of the implementation of classical realist theories. In the end, I will examine the relevance of my findings in Obama's principles and political practice, and how this alters the view of the theoretical issue. Despite many similarities to realist thoughts in Obama's rhetoric, I will not conclude that we can undoubtedly declare that he carries out realist practice. Instead, I will make observations about the ambiguous relation between theory and practice. On the one hand, I argue that some general characteristics of the conduct of foreign policy make it difficult to identify *any* theory in actual behavior. On the other hand, I also find some peculiarities of *realist* theories – such as the different viewpoints within the school of realism; the inherent distrust in realism to abstractions and generalizations; realists' preference for practice over theory in many cases, – which hinder the revelation of such connections.

Of course, this thesis cannot give a comprehensive overview of classical realism, and cannot present the views of all the relevant authors of the school. Instead, I will focus on issues that are related to my main question: to understand the relation between realist theory and realist practice, and to decide whether someone's policy acts can be regarded as realist or not. I will mostly explore realism in the works of Hans Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, George Kennan and Henry Kissinger. Although there are other important works of realist theory, these authors can be regarded as the most influential members of the school, who laid the theoretical foundations and also intended to influence the conduct of American foreign policy. Morgenthau and Niebuhr hallmarked the American turn to realism after the Second

World War, and while they both remained in the academic sphere, their works contained references to desired policy actions. Kennan and Kissinger both combined a diplomatic career with their academic work: while Kennan began his involvement in academic life after his retirement from his duties as a diplomat, Kissinger pursued the opposite path, and reached high government positions as a well-known theorist. Their distinct routes might also be reflected in their different approaches to diplomacy. Classical realism was a response to the failed idealist proposals of the inter-war period, and this is the reason why the most important works on realist foreign policy were written by Kennan, Morgenthau and Niebuhr over a rather short period in the late 1940s and early 1950s. However, Kissinger's works are also important in the context of my analysis, because in his case a self-declared realist had the opportunity to formulate American foreign policy from influential positions.

There are many different ways to explore realism. Michael Smith's *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* provides a detailed discussion on the works of the major realist theorists along three main questions: their general theories of international politics; their prescriptions for the conduct of foreign policy; and their possible solutions to the moral dilemmas of international affairs.⁸ He analyzes their contributions in the context of a broader tradition of thought, however, as Alastair Murray remarks, "Smith accepts conventional views of this heritage unquestioningly," and centers this tradition around the thoughts of Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes.⁹ Instead, in *Reconstructing Realism*, Murray undertakes an examination of the moral theory of realism on the basis of the contextualist approach developed by Quentin Skinner. This approach focuses on the "understanding of the *intellectual* context underlying texts, rather than on the *historical* context in which they were written,"¹⁰ and Murray's reconstruction identifies the Augustinian roots of realist ethics. His

⁸ Michael Joseph Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986)

⁹ Alastair Murray, *Reconstructing Realism* (Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1997), p. 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 14.

works reinterprets realism, and intends to explain how ethical concerns can be reconciled with the power political face of realist doctrine.

In another approach, Jack Donnelly's *Realism and International Relations* provides a critical assessment of major realist thoughts.¹¹ His book deals with both classical and neorealist theories, and focuses on the different 'paradigms' of major figures. His aim was to evaluate standard realist arguments. Although he recognizes important contributions of realist thought, he argues that realism is "an exaggerated and dangerously one-sided set of insights" which lays too much emphasis on power politics and disregards other factors.¹² A further possible way to explore realism is to focus on one key concept, like Scott Burchill does in connection with the idea of 'national interest'.¹³ His work – though it does not focus solely on the realist understanding of 'national interest', but unveils other schools' approaches too – assesses the various interpretations of the concept that is especially important in realist thought. Finally, Gergely Romsics chooses a path to reconstruct a nuanced understanding of classical realist traditions, and uses this to reflect on contemporary debates around international order and the concept of sovereignty.¹⁴

Due to the limitations of this thesis, a full reconstruction of realist theories – even limited to the above-mentioned authors – is not possible here. Instead, the relation between realist theory and practice will be explored through the examination of certain relevant issues. Since my main argument emphasizes the ambiguities of this relation, highlighting a few selected topics can also lead to valuable observations. The investigation of some recurring issues, like concerns about nuclear weapons, can shed light on the different realist interpretations, and the main difficulties of establishing a clear connection between theories and actual conduct of foreign policy. At the same time, the analysis of some general issues is

¹¹ Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

¹² Ibid, p. 2.

¹³ Scott Burchill, *The National Interest in International Relations Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)

¹⁴ Romsics Gergely, *A lehetetlen művészete* (Budapest: Osiris, 2009)

also inevitable for this investigation. Realist foreign policy is often considered to be immoral, however, a closer examination of classical realist thinking reveals their moral concerns too. Therefore, it cannot be said that realists are immoral and idealists are moral, which also makes classification of foreign policy practice more complicated. Furthermore, realists also argue that it is necessary to prioritize preferences in foreign policy, since resources and potential achievements are limited, and they often propose that the ‘national interest’ should be the ultimate measure of policy action. However, it can be rather vague as to what is understood as ‘national interest’ which is also a reason why it is difficult to decide who is realist, thus I will also analyze the concept of ‘national interest’.

The thesis will proceed as follows. I will begin with an investigation of the foreign policy of the first year of Barack Obama’s presidency from where my theoretical questions come. I will refer to his major foreign policy speeches and decisions, and examine why the question arises whether he is a realist or not. In the second chapter, I will analyze the relevant theoretical foundations of classical realism: what are the basic assumptions, against what kind of worldview it emerged. An examination of the moral concerns of realism will follow, and I will also touch upon the concept of ‘national interest’, which is often regarded by realists as the ultimate measure of foreign policy action. In chapter 3, I focus on the practice prescribed by classical realists. I will analyze how actual proposals were derived from the theories, and whether the actual conduct of foreign policy based on these proposals can be seen as realist action. First, I will examine the early-Cold War period in which Kennan, Morgenthau and Niebuhr formulated their proposals, then Kissinger’s practice as a decision-maker will be investigated. In the final chapter, I return to the principles and practices of Obama, to examine how its consideration alters the previous findings about the realist conduct of foreign policy, and how meaningful it is to ask whether a certain political practice is realist or not.

1. Obama and Realism: the First Year of Obama's Foreign Policy

When Barack Obama entered office, expectations for him were very high, while the United States was in a rather unpromising situation. The country was absorbed in two complicated wars with no clear exit strategy, the financial crisis demanded urgent measures, and the global standing of the United States was undoubtedly at a low level after eight years of George W. Bush's presidency. Obama was welcomed with a lot of enthusiasm, both at home and abroad, but it was evident that he could not execute radical changes over a short period. In his first year, he did not bring about a radical change of American foreign policy, it was rather slowly reoriented by symbolic moves and gestures. The first year was much about "rebuilding the brand, rebuilding political capital" than articulating a clear foreign policy doctrine, as one official admitted in an article in *Newsweek*.¹⁵ The lack of a great vision could have led to a fast disillusionment, but this did not happen. America's global standing, according to a new BBC World Service poll conducted in 15 countries, significantly improved, and now more people consider US influence positive than that of China or Russia.¹⁶ The reason behind it might be the way how Obama conducted his policies and not the concrete actions he accomplished. This way of foreign policy might reflect a certain thinking of "skepticism that the world can be changed any way but very, very slowly"¹⁷ and this is where realism comes into the picture. Besides the general principles articulated by Obama, his emphasis on relations with other states, and two main issues of his first year – the war in Afghanistan and nuclear disarmament – may provide some examples where realist thinking might be identified.

¹⁵ Michael Hirsh, 'Obama's Bad Cop', *Newsweek*, May 3. 2010, pp. 27-31.

¹⁶ 'World warming to US under Obama, BBC poll suggests', *BBC News*, April 19, 2010.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8626041.stm>

¹⁷ Larissa MacFarquhar, 'The Conciliator', *The New Yorker*. May 7, 2007.
http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/05/07/070507fa_fact_macfarquhar

First, it needs to be justified that in the understanding of the Obama Administration's foreign policy actions, Barack Obama's personal thinking has a crucial role. Nevertheless, several accounts on his foreign policy emphasize that he "runs the most centralised ... administration since Richard Nixon" and "President Obama is his own Henry Kissinger – no one else plays that role."¹⁸ However, it is rather difficult to discern his true beliefs on foreign policy – or about any political issue, – because of the dominance of pragmatism in his political behavior. In fact, as Bart Schultz argued, his political philosophy was most of all influenced by the American tradition of pragmatism.¹⁹ His true beliefs are often concealed, and the American press was speaking about an 'Obama Enigma' even after a whole year of campaigning under intense scrutiny.²⁰ Obama is known of his discomfort with any label or ideology, his distrust for abstractions and generalizations.²¹ His behavior at home and internationally clearly fits Morgenthau's description of Kissinger as a *polytropos*, a person who has the ability to have "many appearances."²² Obama used this successfully in the campaign, as he portrayed himself to be a "one-man melting pot" who had a biracial ethnic background, spent parts of his childhood in Indonesia, graduated from Harvard but worked for the poor in Chicago,²³ and there are indications that he can use this skill as a tool in foreign policy as well.²⁴

However, certain characteristics of Obama's foreign policy thinking can surely be ascertained from his utterances. In his 2006 book, *The Audacity of Hope*, he argued for a re-examination of the framework of American foreign policy, something in the scope of

¹⁸ Edward Luce and Daniel Dombey, 'US foreign policy: Waiting on a sun king', *Financial Times*, March 30, 2010. A similar quote can be found in Hirsh's article: a senior aide of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton conceded that "[i]f you ask, 'Who is Barack Obama's Henry Kissinger?' the answer, of course, is that it's Barack Obama." (Hirsh, p. 30.)

¹⁹ Bart Schultz, 'Obama's Political Philosophy: Pragmatism, Politics, and the University of Chicago', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 39, no. 2, June 2009, pp. 127-173.

²⁰ Julian, p. 20.

²¹ Julian, p. 21.; MacFarquhar.

²² Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State', *Encounter*, 1974, November, p. 58.

²³ Richard Wolffe, 'Inside Obama's Dream Machine', *Newsweek*, Jan. 14, 2008, p. 15.

²⁴ For example, in the way he delivered special messages to the Muslim world, either to the Iranian people, or to an audience at Cairo University.

Truman's reorientation of policies after the Second World War. He emphasized that isolation cannot be a working policy for America, that in our time conflicts between great powers are not the sources of danger, and because of dangers such as terrorism, peripheric regions cannot be ignored. He argued that in order to tackle these challenges, cooperation and diplomatic efforts between great powers are necessary, and the United States should not only invest in upgrading its military capabilities but also in winning over the trust of international public opinion.²⁵ In his speech in Berlin as a presidential candidate in 2008, he also proclaimed that "America cannot turn inward [and] the burdens of global citizenship continue to bind [Europeans and Americans] together."²⁶ These are not necessarily realist thoughts, but his constant consciousness of the limits of American power or any idealist achievement reflects more the thinking of that school. For example, he argued that the United States needs to "exercise restraint in the use of military force,"²⁷ and as he received the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, instead of calling for "a definitive solution to the problems of war," he rather proposed incremental steps based on international cooperation and diplomatic tools.²⁸ While he reiterated several times that he is "not somebody who believes [American] foreign policy has to be driven by moral relativism", he also emphasized that the U.S. has to "promote [its] ideals and [its] values with some sense of humility."²⁹ In Cairo, where he initiated a "new beginning" in the relations between America and the Muslim world, he declared that "no system of government can or should be imposed by one nation on any other,"³⁰ which is in contrast with the policies of the previous Administration. Although he claimed in Oslo that

²⁵ Barack Obama, *Vakmerő remények* (Budapest: Cor Leonis, 2008). Translated from the original: Barack Obama, *The audacity of hope: thoughts on reclaiming the American dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), pp. 305-310.

²⁶ Barack Obama, *Speech in Berlin*, July 24, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/24/us/politics/24text-obama.html>

²⁷ Barack Obama, *Address on the War in Afghanistan*, December 1, 2009. West Point, N.Y. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/02/world/asia/02prexy.text.html>

²⁸ Obama, Oslo speech.

²⁹ MacFarquhar.

³⁰ Barack Obama, *Remarks by The President on a New Beginning*. June 4, 2009. Cairo, Egypt. http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/

“America will always be a voice for those aspirations that are universal,” he immediately added that often “painstaking diplomacy” leads to the achievements of these values, and he defended his policies of diplomatic engagements all over the world.³¹ In an article to *Foreign Affairs*, Zbigniew Brzezinski praised Obama for his intention to improve key geopolitical relations, and he urged him to execute this “in a manner that accepts, rather than seeks to undo, post-Cold War geopolitical realities.”³²

The inherited wars in Iraq and Afghanistan constrained Obama’s possibilities in his foreign policy agenda. Nevertheless, the way he dealt with these issues reflects his own approach. While he did not announce an immediate withdrawal from Iraq, he continued the gradual pull-out of troops and transferring responsibility to local authorities, – and according to the promises of the campaign – he laid more emphasis on the situation in Afghanistan. He announced an increase of the troop levels there, but at the same time he limited American goals. In his West Point speech, he insisted on the need to define the “nature of [America’s] commitment there, the scope of [its] interests, and the strategy”³³ his administration would pursue there. Instead of broader objectives, he called for a “goal that was narrowly defined as disrupting, dismantling and defeating Al Qaeda,” and spoke about vital American interests.³⁴ He “moved toward abandoning some of the more ambitious, even ideological, objectives that defined the United States’ initial engagement”³⁵ – like the creation of democracy, – and instead he argued that the United States was there because its security was at stake, and ultimately the Afghan government would be responsible for their country. The announcement on Afghanistan clearly reflected Kissinger’s advice,³⁶ articulated after the lessons learned in

³¹ Obama, Oslo speech.

³² Zbigniew Brzezinski, ‘From Hope to Audacity: Appraising Obama’s Foreign Policy’, *Foreign Affairs*, Jan/Feb 2010, pp. 16-30.

³³ Obama, West Point speech.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Brzezinski.

³⁶ See for example, Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 700.

Vietnam, on how an American administration should commit itself to the use of military force.

Another important pillar of Obama's foreign policy is the issue of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. The vision of a world free of nuclear weapons was already mentioned during the campaign,³⁷ and during the first months of his presidency he centered a major address in Prague around this idea. He argued that dismantling nuclear weapons was necessary "for our global safety, our security, our society, our economy, to our ultimate survival."³⁸ A year later, again in Prague, Obama signed a new treaty on strategic arms reduction with Russian President, Dmitriy Medvedev. While the new treaty is far from the ultimate goal of the nuclear-free world, it perfectly fits in the tradition of arms reduction agreements, initiated by Nixon and Kissinger, and it also reflects Obama's understanding of implementing gradual changes. The negotiating of the new treaty coincided with the announcement of the Obama Administration's revision of its nuclear doctrine, in which it limited the use of nuclear weapons, and committed itself not to use them against non-nuclear countries being in compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty.³⁹ Although Robert Kagan claimed Obama's nuclear policies as a proof of not being realist, because "[realism] is not a plan to rid the world of nuclear weapons through common agreement by all the world's powers,"⁴⁰ in fact, realists from Kennan to Kissinger were highly concerned about the dangers of nuclear weapons. Kissinger himself raised the issue several times over the last years as well, and he published with former senators and secretaries of defense representing both

³⁷ See for example, Obama, Berlin speech.

³⁸ Barack Obama, *Remarks by President Obama*. Prague, Czech Republic. April 5, 2009.

http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/

³⁹ Reuters, *Obama Limits U.S. Use of Nuclear Arms*. April 6, 2010.

<http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2010/04/06/world/international-uk-nuclear-usa-review.html>

⁴⁰ "George H. W. Obama?", *Foreign Policy*

major parties “recommendations for systematically reducing and eventually eliminating the danger from nuclear weapons.”⁴¹

As another important acknowledgement of the limits of foreign policy, Barack Obama often reminds Americans that in order to be successful in the international environment, the United States should, first of all, lead by example. In West Point, he argued that America “must promote [its] values by living them at home,”⁴² which was the reason why he prohibited torture and ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed. At his Nobel Remarks, he reaffirmed his commitment to respect international rules on the conduct of war, otherwise Americans would lose themselves when they “compromise the very ideals that [they] fight to defend”.⁴³ This idea is similar to that of George Kennan who viewed Soviet-American relations as a “test of national character”⁴⁴ for Americans sixty years ago, and who argued that “the most important influence that the United States can bear upon internal developments in Russia” is the influence by example.⁴⁵ As was seen, several issues in Obama’s foreign policy principles can remind us of the thoughts of classical realists, but that does not mean that these policies can be unambiguously characterized as realist ones. Therefore, it raises the question why it is difficult to decide whether someone is conducting a realist foreign policy, and in order to examine this question, it is necessary to take a closer look at the theories and suggested practices of classical realists.

⁴¹ Henry Kissinger, ‘Our Nuclear Nightmare’, *Newsweek*, February 7, 2009.

⁴² <http://www.newsweek.com/id/183673/page/>

⁴³ Obama, West Point Speech.

⁴⁴ Obama, Oslo speech.

⁴⁵ George Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 128.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 153.

2. Realism as a Theory

This chapter aims to examine some aspects of classical realist theories in order to investigate the relation between theory and practice in American foreign policy. Instead of a complete theoretical overview, I will focus on issues that reveal important characteristics of this relation. This is suitable for our investigation exactly because realists emphasize that foreign policy cannot follow directly general theories, but it should reflect a pragmatic behavior. First, some peculiarities of realist theory will be discussed, which will be followed by a closer examination of the ethical considerations of realist thought. To conclude, the key concept of ‘national interest’ will be analyzed.

2.1 What Kind of Theory?

Classical realism was unraveled as a response to the idealist worldview that dominated thinking about international relations before the Second World War. The approach, which was called ‘utopianist’ by E. H. Carr in his ‘realist critique’, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, was later described often as ‘liberal’, ‘idealist’, or in the works of Kennan, Morgenthau and Niebuhr as the ‘moralistic-legalistic approach’. These thoughts are based on the assumptions that interests can be harmonized, and by creating certain structures and organizations, nations can submit themselves to rules made in the name of some higher common goal. However, realists argued that in an imperfect world, where opposing interests and conflicts are inherent, “moral principles can never be fully realized, but at best approximated through the ever temporary balancing of interests and the ever precarious settlement of conflicts”.⁴⁶ In Kennan’s words, utopian “enthusiasms distracted our gaze from the real things that were happening, [and] the

⁴⁶ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Dilemmas of politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 55.

cultivation of these utopian schemes ... took place at the expense of our feeling for reality”.⁴⁷

Therefore, realists doubt the validity of overarching universal goals, and instead aim to achieve more by setting lesser targets, or as Morgenthau explained, achieve “the lesser evil rather than the absolute good”.⁴⁸

Realists criticized the idealist approach in a wider context of scientific methodology too, namely the rationalist foundations of idealism. Idealist beliefs, after all, stem from the nineteenth-century rationalist assumptions about the infallibility of human reason, and they suggested that by extending education and intellectual power, conflicts can be resolved, and war – which is in the words of Norman Angell simply “a failure of understanding”⁴⁹ – would ultimately disappear.⁵⁰ However, Carr and later Morgenthau and the others discerned the limits of rationalist approaches to social issues. In his main philosophical work, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, Morgenthau sharply criticized the scientist solutions, which disregard the human and organic characteristics of social behavior, and intend to simplify them to “engineering” problems. In Morgenthau’s strong statement, “politics is an art and not a science,” and instead of the rationality of an engineer, “the wisdom and the moral strength of the statesman” is needed for its success.⁵¹ Niebuhr, from a Christian point of view, expressed his doubts about the optimism of rationalist thoughts. He pointed out that “individual limitations have a cumulative effect in human societies,”⁵² and reason cannot be the only basis of man’s moral virtue, since “[h]is social impulses are more deeply rooted than his

⁴⁷ George F. Kennan, *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 22.

⁴⁸ Morgenthau, *Dilemmas...*, p. 55.

⁴⁹ E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1946), p. 25.

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 40-41.

⁵¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946, Midway Reprint, 1974), p. 10.

⁵² Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932, reprint, 1960), p. 25.

rational life.”⁵³ In his opinion, scientific approaches and technocratic solutions deny the “dignity of man” by neglecting “his essential freedom and capacity for self-determination”.⁵⁴

This skepticism toward the rationalist and scientist assumptions has two important consequences on realist thinking that are also important in the context of our main question. First, a methodological one: the opposition to rationalism is often accompanied by the opposition to the positivist framework of scientific conduct. The emphasis on uncertainty and contingency in the development of international relations⁵⁵ creates skepticism about any kind of overarching theory or generalization. As Kennan argued about institutions, they “are forged mainly in the fire of practice, and not in the vacuum of theory,”⁵⁶ though this means realist thinking is more inclined to deal with unique situations than generalizable ideas, which makes it more difficult to decide about a new practice whether it belongs to the realist school. The second is partly a consequence of the previous one. There are limitations to human understanding, thus general theories cannot be applied to all parts of the world. The worldwide propagation of universalist ideas are senseless and unfeasible, because the world is characterized by diversity and not universality, therefore Kennan, for example, propagated particularist approaches.⁵⁷ In a 1951 article, he quoted Tocqueville who observed that precisely the American example shows “that there is nothing absolute in the theoretical value of political institutions, and that their efficiency depends almost always on the original circumstances and the social conditions of the people to whom they are applied”.⁵⁸ Furthermore, according to realists, the pursuit of universal ideals can have detrimental effects. They can be used as tools for self-deception, self-righteousness and hypocrisy,⁵⁹ while

⁵³ Ibid, p. 26.

⁵⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), p. 8.

⁵⁵ See for example: “The principles of scientific reason are always simple, consistent and abstract; the social world is always complicated, incongruous, and concrete.” (Morgenthau, *Scientific Man...*, p. 10.), or “The greatest law of human history is its unpredictability.” (Kennan, *Realities...*, p. 92.)

⁵⁶ Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, p. 136.

⁵⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 28.

⁵⁸ Tocqueville is quoted by Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, p. 136.

⁵⁹ Niebuhr, *Moral Man...*, pp. 97-98.

conflicts in the name of such values can lead to even more disastrous wars because they make compromise impossible. Therefore “the goal of war is no longer limited,”⁶⁰ the only accepted outcome is total victory, “which is another way of saying that the war became an end in itself.”⁶¹

In contrast, for realists, limits constitute an important part of their theory. Due to their skepticism toward the perfectability of man, they focus on self-limitation and restraint, “the recognition of finiteness within infinity,”⁶² which in the practice of Kissinger materialized as a “doctrine of limits”.⁶³ For social planning, Morgenthau criticized the rationalist “method of the single cause” which cannot be applied to complicated social processes, instead plans to be successful should be made in preparation for a number of alternative and hypothetical situations.⁶⁴ Niebuhr argued for “historical rather than abstract modes of social engineering,”⁶⁵ which leads to another important aspect of classical realism: the recognition of historical forces. Contrary to the ahistoric concepts of international relations – like that of the neorealists later, – the consciousness about the historical process has a central role in classical realist theory, which receives special emphasis in Kissinger’s works. For him, history is not about “a quest for final destination, [but] an unending process”.⁶⁶ In his undergraduate thesis he claimed that “we can find only within ourselves” the ultimate meaning of history.⁶⁷ His personal experiences – most of all that of losing many relatives, he was personally affected by the Holocaust – led to the consciousness of the irrevocability of this historic process. He viewed man as a “spiritual being endowed with freedom but ... lost

⁶⁰ Hannah Arendt, ‘Introduction into politics’ in: Jerome Kohn ed. *The promise of politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), p. 112.

⁶¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest* (New York: Knopf, 1951), p. 32.

⁶² Niebuhr, *Moral Man...*, p. 42.

⁶³ Peter W. Dickson, *Kissinger and the meaning of history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 119.

⁶⁴ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man...*, p. 152.

⁶⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), p. 72.

⁶⁶ Henry Kissinger, *American foreign policy* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 79.

⁶⁷ Dickson, p. 39.

in an historical process that has no ultimate end or transcendent meaning,”⁶⁸ which turned his attention to the importance of controlling one’s fate, but at the same time being conscious of the limitations of the self, in accordance with the Bismarckian tradition. Consequently, since history matters, classical realism does not articulate timeless concepts of international relations that are valid without the context of the historic situation and that can be the ultimate judge of any realist behavior. On the other hand, the dismissal of any ultimate end or transcendent meaning of the historical process also means that from a realist point of view, the future realist behavior is also incalculable because of the unpredictability of history. Therefore, realism does not offer universal measures for the delimitation of the true realist practice.

However, some general ideas of realist thoughts are still given. The distrust of any ideology leaves power as the ultimate factor in political relations, and in Morgenthau’s theory, “interest defined in the terms of power” is the underlying assumption behind international politics.⁶⁹ Although Morgenthau claims that “power is an objective category which is universally valid,” he also recognizes that its meaning is not necessarily fixed.⁷⁰ In another work, he also suggests for policymakers that the “one guiding star, one standard for thought, one rule for action: [should be] the national interest.”⁷¹ But this concept can be rather vague, which Morgenthau partially admits when he writes about the “elusiveness of the concept and its susceptibility to interpretations.”⁷² In order to investigate what kind of practices can be considered as realist on the basis of his principle, one should take a closer examination of this concept. This will be done later, but first, the role of morality and ethics in

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 50.

⁶⁹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), p. 5.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 10.

⁷¹ Morgenthau, *In defense...*, p. 242.

⁷² Morgenthau, *Dilemmas...*, p. 65.

realism needs to be clarified, since the superficial understanding of it often assumes that realism completely disregards this factor.

2.2 Morality in Realism

Due to their skepticism toward the realization of ideas based on universal moral principles, realists are often portrayed by opponents as being ignorant about normative concerns and “as being incapable of saying anything”⁷³ about contemporary normative debates. However, as Alastair Murray argues, since realism arose in opposition to idealism which focused on morality in international relations, realism is concerned with normative questions by its genesis. The fundamental difference is how they deal with normative issues. Realists aim “to interrelate morality and power in a viable synthesis, to generate a practical ethic which might prove more realistic, and more productive, than those which ignored the ‘rules’ of international politics.”⁷⁴ In fact, for Murray, a potential definition of realism involves moral questions: he defines it “in terms of a particular practical problematic: that of avoiding both the alienation of others by the arbitrary imposition of one’s own particular values and the sacrifice of these values by the surrender to alternative value systems”, and in a simpler form, realism is “concerned with the morality of practice, and the practice of morality.”⁷⁵ In a similar way, Morgenthau defines political action as “an attempt to realize moral values through the medium of politics, that is, power.”⁷⁶ In Niebuhr’s words, politics is “an area where the ethical and coercive factors of human life ... interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises.”⁷⁷

⁷³ Murray, p. 2.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 8.

⁷⁶ Morgenthau, *Dilemmas...*, p. 85.

⁷⁷ Niebuhr, *Moral Man...*, p. 4.

These definitions point to the fact that the problem of reconciling moral and power aspects underlies realist theories. Realists differ from idealists in their approach that they do not consider this reconciliation as self-evident, actually they consider it as the main problematic of politics. Of course, these differences stem from the different worldview mentioned in the previous section. The recognition of the limits of human understanding leads to the acceptance of uncertainty, and the judgment in moral questions can also be unclear, because, as Kennan stated, “in most international differences elements of right and wrong ... are simply not discernible to the outsider.”⁷⁸ Moreover, the idealist concept about the perfectability of man is doubted by realists,⁷⁹ therefore the preferred solutions bear the understanding of limits too. Niebuhr, for example, argued against the utopian idea of creating a world government by emphasizing that one should not “flee to the illusory security of the impossible from the insecurities and ambiguities of the possible”.⁸⁰

This realist understanding of ethics can be seen as the continuation of the Augustinian tradition that “provide[s] a framework in which a transcendental morality could be combined with a realistic appraisal of life”.⁸¹ This tradition was especially important for Niebuhr’s Christian Realism, but the influences of a “cosmopolitan moral perspective” can be identified in the works of Morgenthau and Kennan as well.⁸² In an essay about Augustine’s political theories, Niebuhr named him “the first great ‘realist’ in western history” whose concept of the human selfhood, drawn from the Bible, identifies the “excessive love of self” as the main evil threatening human communities.⁸³ In the Augustinian world, the social effects of this egocentricity create the dichotomy between the “city of the world” – the *civitas terrena*, –

⁷⁸ Kennan, *Realities...*, p. 36.

⁷⁹ Niebuhr, *Christian Realism...*, p. 3.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 31.

⁸¹ Murray, p. 48.

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 58.

⁸³ Niebuhr, *Christian Realism...*, pp. 121-123.

and the *civitas dei* that is driven by the love of God.⁸⁴ Augustine's description of the *civitas terrena* emphasizes "tensions, frictions, competitions of interest, and overt conflicts to which every human community is exposed,"⁸⁵ while tensions between the two cities are also impossible to avoid.⁸⁶ This view is clearly reflected in realism's conflictual understanding of relations among nations. The Augustinian response to the described situation is also important in the context of realist thought. He "refuses to allow either withdrawal from the world or the mitigation of the moral requirements on the actor,"⁸⁷ and instead propagates an imperfectionist ethic in practice that emphasizes "an ethic of responsibility, on the prudential application of moral principles, and on the importance of self-limitation in action".⁸⁸ Therefore, the important realist recognition of limits in the conduct of policy has its roots in Augustinian philosophy.

The recognition of the Augustinian foundations can provide a deeper understanding of the peculiar moral theory of realism.⁸⁹ This understanding denies "the false antithesis between morality and power politics,"⁹⁰ and instead stresses the unique attributes of morality in the "autonomous sphere of action"⁹¹ of politics, from which three will be highlighted here. First, the distinction between individual and social ethics, and its consequences on social behavior. Second, the existence of the will of power in politics makes the purely moral solutions incapable of solving political problems. Third, the importance of the specific context of any situation that means morality is understood not in some general terms but with the considerations of the concrete circumstances.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 125., Murray, p. 50.

⁸⁵ Niebuhr, *Christian Realism...*, p. 125.

⁸⁶ Murray, p. 50.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 52.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 54.

⁸⁹ For a detailed discussion of the Augustinian roots, see Murray, pp. 47-59., and Niebuhr, *Christian Realism...*, pp. 119-146.

⁹⁰ Morgenthau, *In defense...*, p. 34.

⁹¹ Morgenthau, *Politics...*, p. 5.

Niebuhr devoted a whole book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, to analyze the first issue. In his introduction, he states his thesis that “a sharp distinction must be drawn between the moral and social behavior of individuals and of social groups; and that this distinction justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individual ethic must always find embarrassing.”⁹² Therefore, the ethics of the politician cannot be judged solely based on the criteria of the laws of individual morality, which explains his previously mentioned definition of politics as the field for finding uneasy compromise between ethical and coercive factors. In the Niebuhrian approach, however, the moral man should not escape from the ambiguities of immoral society, but should find “an adequate political morality” between the ones proposed by moralists and “too consistent political realists”. This political morality would recognize “that human society will probably never escape from social conflict,” and instead of trying to completely abolish coercion, would work for reducing it to a minimum, thus “try to save society from being involved in endless cycles of futile conflict.”⁹³ In his works, Morgenthau also emphasizes the distinction between “political moralizing” and “morality,”⁹⁴ and the peculiarities of morality related to social groups contrary to individuals. For example, while self-sacrifice can have a high moral value as an individual act, states have no moral right to endanger national survival in defense of a moral principle.⁹⁵

The second point can be seen as a consequence of the previous one. Because morality among social groups works differently than among individuals, politics, which is intrinsically concerned with problems at the level of the society, has its own moral rules. The realist understanding of human nature recognizes its weaknesses already at the individual level, and the “perennial weakness of the moral life in individuals is simply raised to the *n*th degree in

⁹² Niebuhr, *Moral Man*..., p. xi.

⁹³ Ibid, pp. 232-234.

⁹⁴ Morgenthau, *In defense*..., p. 33.

⁹⁵ Morgenthau, *Dilemmas*..., p. 84. See also on the morality of nations, Niebuhr, *Moral Man*..., pp. 83-112.

national life”.⁹⁶ The expensive desires, Niebuhr argues, are as inherent in social groups as in individuals, they stem from the instinct for survival, but expand beyond it, and this is how the “will-to-live becomes the will-to-power.”⁹⁷ This recognition reinforces the notion that purely moral solutions are not capable of solving social problems, and the factors of power need to be taken into consideration. On the other hand, it strengthens the realist idea that the achievement of moral values to a certain extent depends on the responsibilities of those who hold power, and it is “always necessary to rely partly upon the honesty and self-restraint of those who are socially not restrained.”⁹⁸

Third, the realist understanding of morality argues that it should not lead to abstract rules for politics without the examination of the specific context. Morgenthau argues that “they must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place.”⁹⁹ Moreover, in the realist view the moral decision does not come as a simple choice between moral and immoral solutions, but “implies always a choice among different moral principles, one of which is given precedence over others.”¹⁰⁰ Kennan concurs with him by stating that morality is an important channel to individual self-fulfillment, is a highly valued civic virtue, but cannot be a “general criterion for the determination of the behavior of states,”¹⁰¹ and most of all, “abstract and generally applicable rules of ethics” does not exist for him, only “culturally and sometimes religiously conditioned” ethically commendable values and virtues.¹⁰²

Based on this concept of morality, realism considers self-preservation and survival as a moral duty, this is how Morgenthau described it,¹⁰³ and this is why détente was a “profound moral imperative” for Kissinger.¹⁰⁴ The realist emphasis on survival also reflects the

⁹⁶ Niebuhr, *Moral Man...*, p. 107.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 18.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 21.

⁹⁹ Morgenthau, *Politics...*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁰ Morgenthau, *Dilemmas...*, p. 85.

¹⁰¹ Kennan, *Realities...*, p. 49.

¹⁰² George F. Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), pp. 51-52.

¹⁰³ Morgenthau, *In defense...*, p. 38.

¹⁰⁴ Dickson, p. 122.

circumstances of the nuclear age: all the authors were conscious about the dangers of nuclear wars. In the nuclear age, “every issue seems to involve a question of survival,”¹⁰⁵ Kissinger argues, and the morally conscious statesman needs to take this into account. Furthermore, Morgenthau believes that in the case of a choice between different moral values, the realist would have clear priorities, namely to “choose the national interest on both moral and pragmatic grounds, [while the utopian] will deceive himself into believing that he can achieve both goods at the same time.”¹⁰⁶ This leads to the question of the national interest that will be investigated in the next section.

2.3 The National Interest

As has been seen above, Morgenthau reached the idea of the ‘national interest’ from moral considerations, and he believed in “the moral dignity of the national interest.”¹⁰⁷ Consequently, this understanding cannot be a simple articulation of the security and the advantages of one nation, but should include broader concepts, such as “an obligation to self-limitation and respect for the others.”¹⁰⁸ However, first it needs to be clarified what the national interest is, or how evident it is that nations have their own interests.

In fact, it is not self-evident, and as Scott Burchill points out, even the concept of *interest* is a “contested and problematic idea”.¹⁰⁹ It can be understood in an objective and subjective sense as well, which leads to his definition of ‘having an interest’ as “holding an objective and/or subjective stake on something, [and] being affected either positively or negatively by that stake.”¹¹⁰ About nation’s interests, he claims that “[t]here is no such thing

¹⁰⁵ Kissinger, *American foreign policy*, p. 56.

¹⁰⁶ Morgenthau, *Dilemmas...*, p. 85.

¹⁰⁷ Morgenthau, *In defense...*, p. 33.

¹⁰⁸ Murray, p. 122.

¹⁰⁹ Burchill, p. 9.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 10.

as an objective reality called *the national interest*, [which makes its consideration] an ineluctably subjective assessment.”¹¹¹ In contrast, Morgenthau intends to provide an objective standard for the behaviors of the state by ascertaining a “rational core of the national interest.”¹¹² In his essay on the national interest, Morgenthau himself concedes the substance of the argument based on the “elusiveness of the concept and its susceptibility to interpretations,” but he argues that the concept’s usefulness is not invalidated by it.¹¹³ Nevertheless, it is interesting that Morgenthau who himself criticized the excessive rationalism of idealist theories in *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, later “tried to generalize his own views into an ‘objective’ concept, a rational national interest based on calculations of power.”¹¹⁴

The ‘concept of national interest’ can refer to two separate, though interrelated subjects; an analytical one, and another which leads to the issues of practice. The first means an ‘analytical tool’ for the examination of international relations, in this context, it does not bear normative content, it is simply used to describe and explain nations’ foreign policies. The second, which appeared in the understanding of Morgenthau and Kennan, uses national interest to shape political behavior and intends to make it the general criterion for political action.¹¹⁵ The former was accepted by Niebuhr too, but he debated the latter. In other words, he “accept[ed] national self-interest as a fact while rejecting it as a norm.”¹¹⁶ Niebuhr, therefore, denied the normative aspect of the national interest, while Morgenthau and Kennan claimed that it can be the basis of a morally conscious policy. Kennan, who was first a practitioner of diplomacy and started academic life later and still remained skeptical about general theories, did not unfold this idea into a doctrine, but several references certify his

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 11.

¹¹² Smith, p. 154.

¹¹³ Morgenthau, *Dilemmas...*, p. 65.

¹¹⁴ Smith, p. 164.

¹¹⁵ Burchill, p. 23.

¹¹⁶ Robert C. Good, ‘The National Interest and Political Realism: Niebuhr’s “Debate” with Morgenthau and Kennan’, *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 22. no. 4. (Nov. 1960), p. 598.

preference for national interest in the conduct of foreign policy. In *American Diplomacy*, he argues that – contrary to the universal solutions of the legalistic-moralistic approach based on a universal knowledge – it is necessary to “admit that our own national interest is all that we are really capable of knowing and understanding,” which leads to the recognition that “the pursuit of our national interest can never fail to be conducive to a better world.”¹¹⁷

However, it was Morgenthau who made the national interest the centerpiece of a doctrine in foreign policy. In his description, the national interest contains two elements: a “residual meaning which is inherent in the concept itself”, and one that depends on the specific circumstances.¹¹⁸ The first element refers to the fact that nations “protect their physical, political, and cultural identity against encroachments by other nations,” and their survival is the “irreducible minimum”, the minimum requirement of their interest.¹¹⁹ The other component is “historically and circumstantially contingent, that varies from nation to nation and time to time.”¹²⁰ Regarding this component, Morgenthau does not deny that interests can arise at different levels too: he describes the existence of subnational and supranational interests, and claims that American foreign policy is “normally a compromise between divergent sectional interests.” However, the emerging national interest is “more than any particular sectional interest or their sum total.”¹²¹ It is an “uneasy compromise” between the different sectional interests, which creates an “absolute standard for political action.”¹²²

Moreover, Morgenthau argues that nations should follow policies based on the national interest, because it is conducive to the “attainment of a modicum of order and the realization of a minimum of moral values” whereas the pursuit of universal moral values can

¹¹⁷ Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, p. 103.

¹¹⁸ Morgenthau, *Dilemmas...*, pp. 65-66.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 66, 69.

¹²⁰ Burchill, p. 37.

¹²¹ Morgenthau, *Dilemmas...*, p. 70.

¹²² Ibid, pp. 66-68.

only lead to “political failure or the fanaticism of crusaders.”¹²³ However, Niebuhr rejects the concept that self-interest can be the sole basis of a morally acceptable order. For him, both giving too little and too much attention to the national self-interest pose dangers.¹²⁴ On the one hand, idealists fall into hypocrisy by insisting on the nation’s articulation of wider universal values. On the other hand, Niebuhr believes that “egotism is not the proper cure for an abstract and pretentious idealism”, but a “concern for both the self and the other” is also necessary.¹²⁵ Furthermore, “a consistent self-interest on the part of a nation will work against its interests,” because a “narrow national loyalty” does not take into consideration long range interests which are intertwined with the interests of other nations too.¹²⁶ For Niebuhr, a “myopic realist” approach does not understand the blindness of self-interest,¹²⁷ and there is a need for a higher loyalty, a strive for justice – which he considered the highest moral ideal from the perspective of society¹²⁸ – in international relations too. Therefore, he asserts the possibility for a limited “moral transcendence” by nations, which does not refer to unconditional generosity, but to a “wise self-interest” that finds an uneasy equilibrium between “the interest of self and the general welfare.”¹²⁹ In fact, it is not that far from Morgenthau’s opinion, who also emphasizes that nations must consciously define their national interests in terms compatible with those of other nations.¹³⁰ However, an important distinction remains: Niebuhr suggests the consideration of other nations’ interests in order to achieve a higher morality, while Morgenthau discusses it in connection with the conditions of survival.

Burchill’s evaluation of Morgenthau’s concept raises another important concern with the idea of the national interest. According to him, the assertion that states pursue their

¹²³ Morgenthau, *In defense...*, p. 38.

¹²⁴ Good, p. 600.

¹²⁵ Niebuhr, *The Irony...*, p. 148.

¹²⁶ Niebuhr, *Christian Realism...*, p. 136.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 146.

¹²⁸ Niebuhr, *Moral Man...*, p. 257.

¹²⁹ Good, p. 601.

¹³⁰ Morgenthau, *Dilemmas...*, p. 74.

national interests does not really describe their specific behavior. He cites Jack Donnelly who argued that Morgenthau's definition is little more than a "typology for categorising a wide array of divergent, even contradictory behaviours", which does not provide useful guidelines for policymakers.¹³¹ In this sense, the concept of the 'national interest' is rather empty, which gets its meaning with regards to the concrete circumstances of a situation and the concrete traditions of a nation. At this point, it is important to note that while realists were certainly against any kind of 'messianistic' idea of American exceptionalism, based on their thoughts on the limited validity of universal values, they attributed a unique character to American national interest. It was evident for Kennan, because for him foreign policy itself derives from the internal structures of a society, thus foreign policy is a means to the end of realizing the objectives or the overall purpose of the American nation.¹³² He rejected that this purpose is simply the preservation of order among the population, and ascertained that for Americans, government is a "means of protecting the individual in the exercise of certain rights – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, as the Declaration of Independence put it – but also, most importantly, the right to hold property and to dispose over it."¹³³ Therefore, American national interests receive a peculiarly American content by certain American values, and Kennan's approach is not realist in the sense that it rejects the importance of these ideas, but in the sense that it conceives the possibility of different nations determining their distinct interests based on a different purpose. In other words, no nation is exceptional precisely because every nation is unique.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Burchill, p. 41.

¹³² Kennan argued that "a political society does not live to conduct foreign policy; it would be more correct to say that it conducts foreign policy in order to live." (Kennan, *Realities...*, p. 4.) This contradicts Kissinger's views who distrusted the constraints imposed by domestic politics, and emphasized the roles of the statesmen. It was clearly reflected in his interest in 19th century diplomacy, especially in the Bismarckian approach where "domestic policy was manipulated for the purposes of foreign policy". (Henry Kissinger, 'The White Revolutionary: Reflections on Bismarck', *Daedalus: Journal of American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 97, 3, p. 909.)

¹³³ Kennan, *Realities...*, p. 7.

¹³⁴ This is exactly the thinking reflected in Obama's statements. In Strasbourg, April 2009, he answered this to a question on American exceptionalism: "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits

To be fair to Morgenthau, his thoughts on the two elements of the national interest show that he was aware of these challenges to the concept. He did not deny that the United States was “founded as a nation with a particular purpose in mind,” and he thoroughly investigated this purpose of American politics.¹³⁵ Moreover, for him, the articulation of American interests is also influenced by certain American peculiarities like the unique character of the “country which had been settled by consecutive waves of ‘foreigners’.”¹³⁶ Furthermore, he acknowledges another limitation of the concept of national interest. He emphasizes that the different approaches do not necessarily lead to different behavior: the same conclusion can be reached from an idealist and from a realist point of view too, which does not deny the significant differences between the two schools of thoughts.¹³⁷ Similarly, as we will see in the discussions on realist practice, the very same basic assumptions can lead different policy suggestions, therefore theoretical approach and behavior do not define each other necessarily.

This brings us to two important conclusions on the main problem about realist behavior. First, it might be better to see classical realism as a collection of similar thoughts based on some fundamental common assumptions than a clear-cut theory on international affairs. As was seen, the main realist authors have significantly different understanding of concepts such as the national interest, or its place in foreign policy decisions. In this sense, we cannot speak of ‘one’ classical realism – and we did not even consider neorealist approaches, – but each author and policymaker has their own understanding of realism, of course in the framework of some shared fundamental beliefs. As the ideal type of utopian thinking was itself an

believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” (Michael Scherer, ‘Obama Too Is An American Exceptionalist’, *TIME.com*, <http://swampland.blogs.time.com/2009/04/04/obama-too-is-an-american-exceptionalist/>, April 4, 2009)

¹³⁵ Hans J. Morgenthau, *The purpose of American politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), p. 11.

¹³⁶ Morgenthau, *Dilemmas...*, p. 71.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 54.

intellectual construction of realists,¹³⁸ so the classical realist thinking does not exist in its pure form either. This does not invalidate the theoretical observations of these approaches, but makes it more difficult to characterize any actual foreign policy along the lines of this distinction.

Secondly, it was argued that different assumptions can lead to the same behavior, and on the basis of similar assumptions, different conclusions can be reached. Therefore, it is not obvious to infer a certain political thinking from one's political behavior. Of course, a wider context of speeches, utterances, and the examination of consistent acts can reveal more, but it can still lead to limited results. Furthermore, one very basic assumption of classical realism – skepticism towards general laws and rationalist assumptions – makes it inherently impossible to exactly know what an expected realist behavior can be without knowing the context of the issue. For classical realists, practice often takes precedence over theory, thus behavior cannot be discerned purely based on theory. Therefore it is necessary to consider what can be seen as realist practice in American foreign policy, and this will be the aim of the next chapter.

¹³⁸ Romsics, p. 62.

3. Realism as Practice

Having identified relevant points of classical realist theories in the previous chapter, this chapter aims to examine how the described theories appeared in practice, and whether a consistent realist practice can be observed. Since classical realism first arose as a response to the contradiction between idealist theories of the interwar period, and realities of two World Wars and an unraveling Cold War, the first section analyzes the suggested practices in the early Cold War period: how Kennan, Morgenthau and Niebuhr viewed international relations. The second section deals with the period of détente, when a realist theorist, namely Henry Kissinger, had a unique opportunity to shape American foreign policy.

3.1 Containment and the Early Cold War: Kennan, Morgenthau and Niebuhr

When George Kennan suggested a “long-term, patient but firm containment of Russian expansive tendencies”¹³⁹ only one year after the conclusion of the war in which the United States and the Soviet Union fought alongside, many people were surprised by the idea. After all, based on idealist thinking, many people thought that it was still possible to create an international order on the basis of harmony and cooperation. Kennan, a diplomat with closer experiences of Soviet behavior, had no such illusions, and because of their theoretical assumptions, neither did Morgenthau and Niebuhr. A few years after, they found themselves in opposition to those who advocated a stronger policy against the Soviet Union, and suggested to “roll back” communism in Europe instead of simply containing it. The realists did not think that their position changed significantly, but they believed that it was a characteristic of American foreign policy to swing between two extreme points. In fact,

¹³⁹ Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, p. 119.

Niebuhr, Morgenthau and Kennan all criticized previous American foreign policies on the basis of their failure to reach some kind of balance between different standpoints.

In a 1953 essay, Niebuhr identified two kinds of failures in foreign policy previously made by American conservatives. The first was isolationism which “failed to measure the extent of ... [American] responsibilities in the larger world,” and he called the other one a “policy of adventurism which failed to judge the limits and hazards to success which even a powerful nation must observe.”¹⁴⁰ Niebuhr and the other realists believed that in foreign policy, one has to find a middle way between too much confidence in the possibilities for a nation’s achievement and a too cautious retreat from international engagements. As Niebuhr described in another work, nations have to fight against both the temptation “to flee the responsibilities of their power” and their refusal “to recognize the limits of their possibilities.”¹⁴¹ Therefore, finding a balance between responsibilities and limits is an important priority for realist practice.

Morgenthau had similar concerns when he assessed previous periods of American foreign policy, and listed the potential intellectual errors of the post-War era. He distinguished four types of fallacies typical of American thinking, which he did not attribute to either party, but claimed that “all men and all parties share to a greater or lesser extent.”¹⁴² Although he argued that they are intertwined in practice, he discussed separately the following errors: utopianism, legalism, sentimentalism, and neo-isolationism.¹⁴³ The first three can be viewed as different faces of the legalistic-moralistic approach that realists so vehemently opposed, as we have seen previously. The fourth stems from the belief that America “can take care of its national interests without regard from other nations,”¹⁴⁴ however, Morgenthau argued, this was no longer possible. In the “neo-isolationist” thinking he found a modified understanding

¹⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *Christian Realism*..., p. 54.

¹⁴¹ Niebuhr, *The Irony*..., p. 130.

¹⁴² Morgenthau, *In defense*..., p. 92.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 128.

of this approach, which did not mean a complete isolation from the world, but instead a “belief in American omnipotence ... and the disparagement of traditional methods of diplomacy.”¹⁴⁵ On this latter issue, he criticized those who do not make distinctions between appeasement and negotiated settlement which is a “recognition of the limits of the mutual interest of power.”¹⁴⁶ Thus, his conclusion is similar to that of Niebuhr – or Kennan, – who proposed diplomacy as a tool for recognizing limits. But what were the concrete foreign policy objectives realists considered achievable under the circumstances of the early Cold War period?

Later Kennan complained that his proposal of *containment* was mostly misunderstood by decisionmakers, and he criticized the evolving American behavior in the Cold War. Nevertheless, his *Long Telegram* and *X article*¹⁴⁷ fundamentally influenced U.S. foreign policy thinking of the next decades. His main objective, “to pursue a policy of coexistence that did not result in a ‘spineless pacifism’”¹⁴⁸ remained the basis of American foreign policy, even if he did not agree with some concrete steps. He insisted on opposing universalist ideas, and proposed policies with regard to local realities and by setting priorities. When Truman proclaimed his doctrine on aid to Greece and Turkey for their fight against Communism expansion, Kennan was not against the decision, but objected to the “ideological thrust and universalist commitment of the speech.”¹⁴⁹ This is another example for Morgenthau’s claim that the same policy proposals can be reached from different assumptions: while realist arguments could have been cited for containing Soviet influence at this particular place, Truman’s reasoning of a situation in which “every nation must choose between alternative

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 129.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 136.

¹⁴⁷ ‘The Sources of Soviet Conduct’, Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, pp. 107-128.

¹⁴⁸ Smith, p. 184.

¹⁴⁹ Lynn Boyd Hinds and Theodore Otto Windt, Jr., *The Cold War as Rhetoric: The beginnings, 1945-1950* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991), p. 143.

ways of life” and the declaration of the existence of two non-compatible worlds was well beyond what Kennan could accept.¹⁵⁰

Moreover, for Kennan, containment was not necessarily, in fact, primarily, a military issue. He rather viewed the problem of the Soviet threat as a political one, thus he opposed decisions that escalated military tensions, like the creation of NATO or the division of Germany.¹⁵¹ He believed that it was not necessary to accept the permanent division of Europe, and instead, he propagated demilitarization and neutralization, and the restoration of the balance of power in Europe by economic and political means.¹⁵² His observation on Soviet ideology made him skeptical about any immediate military threat, he claimed that a distinction needed to be made between existing hostilities and non-existing intentions, and that he had “never seen any evidence that the Soviet leaders ... desired a general war between the Soviet Union and the major capitalist powers.”¹⁵³ However, Morgenthau disputed his assessment of the situation. He argued that “[t]he threat in Europe is military,”¹⁵⁴ therefore he supported the militarization of containment, and believed that a massive Western rearmament was necessary to “bring about the conditions of a negotiated settlement.”¹⁵⁵ Morgenthau claimed that mostly the threat of atomic warfare and the American nuclear superiority prevented Russian aggression,¹⁵⁶ but argued that the Soviet Union’s acquisition of a nuclear weapon would make nuclear superiority irrelevant, thus suggesting a buildup of conventional forces.¹⁵⁷ In contrast to Kennan, he claimed that the Western world consistently underestimated the strength of the Soviet Union, “especially in its technological and military

¹⁵⁰ Harry S. Truman, *Address Before a Joint Session of Congress*, March 12, 1947. (The Truman Doctrine) http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp

¹⁵¹ Gaddis, pp. 72-75.

¹⁵² Ibid, pp. 40-41; Smith, p. 177.

¹⁵³ Kennan, *Realities...*, pp. 69-70.

¹⁵⁴ Morgenthau, *In defense...*, p. 161.

¹⁵⁵ Smith, p. 159.

¹⁵⁶ Morgenthau, *In defense...*, p. 161.

¹⁵⁷ Smith, p. 159.

aspects,”¹⁵⁸ which led him to different policy suggestions. Consequently, a similar theoretical background and basic assumptions do not prevent realists from coming to alternative conclusion on a concrete situation, based on their different assessment.

Nevertheless, on broader issues, Morgenthau and Kennan had similar positions. Both of them rejected ‘adventurist’ proposals about the necessity to liberate people under Communist rule. Of course, as Kennan explained, this was not because they “would not like to see the area of Soviet power and influence reduced.”¹⁵⁹ But they recognized the dangers of a policy that intended to overthrow Soviet power, namely, that this policy “would by every law of probability lead ultimately to war.”¹⁶⁰ In an age of nuclear weapons, this could bring unimaginable destruction to the territories of the United States as well, which serious leadership could not risk. Furthermore, Kennan argued,

any war fought in the name of liberation could not and would not be fully successful, either militarily or politically, precisely for the reason that aims would be too sweeping, too ambitious, and too total. People have become accustomed to saying that the day of limited wars is over. I would submit that the truth is exactly the opposite: that the days of total wars have passed, and that from now on limited military operations are the only ones that could conceivably serve any coherent purpose.¹⁶¹

This remark proved to be very far-sighted, and fits well into the realist thinking about the limitations of potential achievements. It reinforces the notion that war can only be a means to an end “which at least did not negate the principle of life itself,”¹⁶² which excludes the use of weapons of mass destruction. In a pessimistic way, Arendt articulated the same idea by stating that “we live in a peace in which nothing may be left undone to make a future war still possible.”¹⁶³ Morgenthau argued similarly by stating that “[t]he realist, too, seeks the liberation of all captive nations” but first he needs to prioritize interests, assess what resources the United States or the Soviet Union has to realize their objectives, and decide whether

¹⁵⁸ Morgenthau, *In defense...*, p. 165.

¹⁵⁹ Kennan, *Realities...*, p. 76.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 77.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, pp. 79-80.

¹⁶² Gaddis, p. 79.

¹⁶³ Arendt, p. 200.

“embarking upon a policy of indiscriminate liberation with the concomitant certainty of war or by continuing the present policy of containment” is the more expedient policy.¹⁶⁴

As is clear from our previous observations, realists were highly conscious about the dangers of the nuclear age. Niebuhr described it as the “ironic climax” of American history when a nation “finds itself the custodian of the ultimate weapon which perfectly embodies and symbolizes the moral ambiguity of physical warfare.” He contemplated the irony that the United States could not renounce the weapon because the freedom or survival of its allies depended on the deterrence of the threat of its use, but at the same time its potential use “might ensure our survival in a world in which it might be better not to be alive.”¹⁶⁵ Niebuhr does not offer any easy solution to this dilemma, but he argues that “[c]onsciousness of an ironic situation tends to dissolve it,”¹⁶⁶ thus facing the seriousness of the issue, recognizing the limits of potential achievements, rejecting idealist pretensions, and exercising prudence can lead to success in the “purpose and duty of preserving our civilization.”¹⁶⁷

As a consequence of the realist worldview, and the above-mentioned emphasis on the necessity for restraint and prudence, realists suggested limited foreign policy objectives too. We have seen Kennan’s argumentation that war cannot be an objective of foreign policy, therefore objectives that presuppose war – like total defeat of adversaries, and changing their internal structure – should not be the aim. In the end, for Kennan, the aim of containment was to change Soviet behavior, “to effect a shift in the thinking of Kremlin leaders away from their own version of universalism ... to particularism – the toleration and even the encouragement of diversity.”¹⁶⁸ In order to execute such a policy, one should rather use tools of indirect actions, from which Kennan considered “the most important influence that the United States can bring to bear upon internal developments in Russia [was] the influence of

¹⁶⁴ Morgenthau, *Dilemmas...*, p. 79.

¹⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *The Irony...*, p. 39.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 168.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 174.

¹⁶⁸ Gaddis, p. 48.

example.”¹⁶⁹ A precondition for this approach was the decontamination of ideology in foreign policy: realists all emphasized that the United States should not conduct its foreign affairs driven by ideology. With this precondition, one can conduct a flexible foreign policy, that effectively uses diplomacy. Of course, realists had no illusions about potential diplomatic achievements, and were skeptical of the usefulness of multilateral institutions, but an effective diplomacy that creates a climate in which states can have meaningful relations was an important priority for them. This understanding also underlied Kissinger’s policies who reached power in a turbulent period, which made a unique opportunity for him to reformulate American foreign policy on the basis of realist thinking. Therefore, it is useful to examine his practice separately.

3.2 Détente: Kissinger in Power

Richard Nixon entered office at a time when the United States faced many challenges, both domestic and international. The domestic turmoil of the 1960s, the disaster of the Vietnam War, and the unfolding economic difficulties made the reorientation of American foreign policy necessary. As his National Security Advisor, and later Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger had an important role in the reformulation of policies. Although it is impossible to detach Kissinger’s practice from its context – under the changed circumstances, some kind of reformulation was necessary anyway, – this practice clearly reflected his realist thinking. However, the fact that realists like Morgenthau and Kennan claimed that Kissinger “misapplied realist ideas,”¹⁷⁰ suggests that it is not easy to define what can be a genuine application of these ideas, and realists often themselves cannot agree on what are the characteristics of a truly realist practice.

¹⁶⁹ Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, p. 153.

¹⁷⁰ Smith, p. 193.

Before entering the Nixon administration, Kissinger articulated his criticism of American foreign policy of the previous decades. He was, just like Morgenthau and Kennan, against the idea of “rolling back” communism, but the reasoning behind was slightly different. For him, American foreign policy should not “be constricted by alliances or the need to defend freedom and contain communism around the world,”¹⁷¹ and in his view, the international system should be based on a sense of legitimacy. Like Morgenthau, he argued that a morally right policy from the United States is to openly acknowledge that it is defending its interests, and criticized previous statements of a ‘disinterested’ or ‘altruistic’ American policy. Kissinger believed that “[s]uch an attitude makes it difficult to develop a conception of our role in the world [because] a ‘disinterested’ policy is likely to be considered ‘unreliable’.”¹⁷² His policies, in a sense, did not constitute a “radical departure from the practice of his predecessors” but rather meant a recognition of the already existing pragmatist practice, which brought closer rhetoric and reality in American policy.¹⁷³ After all, for example, the United States did not follow a policy of ‘liberation’ even under the crusading rhetoric of John Foster Dulles, therefore the acceptance of the status quo at the Helsinki Conference “was merely final confirmation of what had been recognized in practice by all of Kissinger’s predecessors.”¹⁷⁴

According to Morgenthau, Kissinger, as a decision-maker, surprised many in the academic sphere by his “extraordinary ability ... to translate theoretical insights into the practice of diplomacy by adapting them to the political necessities of the hour.”¹⁷⁵ However, Morgenthau’s praise of Kissinger contained some form of criticism as well: he cited, for example, Kissinger’s later abandoned position on the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons, or his public defense of the Vietnam War. For Morgenthau, this latter case was an

¹⁷¹ Dickson, p. 21.

¹⁷² Kissinger, *American foreign policy*, p. 92.

¹⁷³ Dickson, p. 150.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 152.

¹⁷⁵ Morgenthau, ‘Henry Kissinger...’, p. 57.

example when Kissinger “adjust[ed] intellectual conviction to political exigencies.”¹⁷⁶ These words highlight the problem of identifying realist practice: although intellectual conviction and theories matter, realists are primarily preoccupied with actual issues, therefore in their approach, theory is adjusted to practice, and not the other way. Furthermore, the real convictions of a good diplomat are often inscrutable, and Kissinger himself once told an interviewer that he would “never tell anyone” who he really was.¹⁷⁷ This was the ability which Morgenthau described as Kissinger’s *polytropos* character, that he “is like a good actor who does not *play* the role of Hamlet today, of Caesar tomorrow, but who is Hamlet today and Caesar tomorrow,”¹⁷⁸ which proved to be useful in his practice of foreign policy.

As was described earlier, Kissinger was particularly conscious about the flow of the historical process, and he paid special attention to the 19th-century frameworks of European balance of power. This worldview influenced his conduct of foreign policy too: his emphasis on the goal of a “global equilibrium [that] could assure stability among the major powers, and even eventual cooperation”¹⁷⁹ clearly stems from this historical understanding of the balance of power. Kissinger did not explain explicitly how he imagined the achievement of this equilibrium, but it was clear that he intended to reach the “stable structure of peace”¹⁸⁰ by active American participation – the United States was “assuming the historical responsibility for preserving the balance of power,”¹⁸¹ as he described. However, Kissinger also stated in a 1973 report that the balance of power “is not the overriding concept of [American] foreign policy,” since it is both unrealistic and dangerous in the realities of the nuclear age.¹⁸² Faced with the dangers of nuclear weapons, classical 19th-century maneuvering for marginal advantages is not possible, though he insisted that some form of flexibility was still possible

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Dickson, p. 17.

¹⁷⁸ Morgenthau, ‘Henry Kissinger...’, p. 58.

¹⁷⁹ Kissinger is quoted by Smith, p. 206.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 205.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p. 206.

¹⁸² Dickson, p. 127.

and necessary. He argued that the “[m]ilitary bipolarity [of the previous two decades was] a source of rigidity in foreign policy,”¹⁸³ and instead suggested a new “diplomacy of movement.”¹⁸⁴ This was possible after liberating American foreign policy from its ideological orientation, which paved the way for policies such as the opening toward China, and conducting arm control talks with the Soviet Union. This gave Kissinger space for maneuvering, and provided an opportunity to have more flexibility in foreign policy.

This flexibility was the basis of his policies of *détente*, which can be seen as a means for creating meaningful relations between great powers. Peter Dickson claimed that Kissinger’s objective “went far beyond mere *détente*,” and it might be better to characterize as an aim to create *entente*, a formal cooperation between the superpowers.¹⁸⁵ Kissinger proposed the use of ‘positive inducements’ in order to secure negotiations and cooperation, which was more similar to Kennan’s ideas about containment than actual implementation of containment during the previous two decades. Moreover, Kissinger’s conduct of *détente* was based on his assumption that events are interconnected, and the ignorance of this fact would “undermine the coherence of *all* policies.”¹⁸⁶ This belief led to the principle of *linkage*, which sometimes meant direct connections between events, in other cases it referred to the view that events have consequences “beyond the issue or region immediately concerned.”¹⁸⁷ Of course, the main objective of linkage was to influence the behavior of the Soviet Union, and the conduct of arm control talks was a main scene for it. SALT is a good representation of Kissinger’s policies, where the negotiation of a treaty on arms reduction had some significance beyond its actual content – the emphasis was more on the fact that the superpowers were able to cooperate than on the actual results that cooperation achieved.

¹⁸³ Kissinger, *American foreign policy*, p. 56.

¹⁸⁴ Hans J. Morgenthau, ‘The New Diplomacy of Movement’, *Encounter*, 1974, August, p. 53.

¹⁸⁵ Dickson, p. 128.

¹⁸⁶ Kissinger is quoted by Smith, p. 207.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

However, in practice, the realization of linkage was hindered by many obstacles.¹⁸⁸ Most of all, a policy based on the assumption that all issues are interrelated can only be successful if the other side acknowledges this notion too. However, as Kissinger described about the negotiating style of Andrei Gromyko, the Soviets intended to begin each negotiation “*tabula rasa*; it started as if it had no history, and it established no claim or obligation for the future.”¹⁸⁹ Furthermore, the Soviet Union was unwilling to facilitate the conclusion to the Vietnam War for the United States.¹⁹⁰ In the absence of some shared basic beliefs about the legitimacy of the international order, cooperation with the Soviet Union could not follow the example that Kissinger appreciated in the statesmen of the Congress of Vienna.¹⁹¹ As Michael Joseph Smith concludes, the circumstances in the world might have not been suitable for the great power policy built on diplomatic maneuvering that Kissinger envisioned. It may have “proved too simple for a complex world yet too complicated and elitist for the domestic polity.”¹⁹²

This last remark leads us to another serious problem of Kissinger’s conduct of foreign policy: his distrust in the issues of domestic politics fits well into the Bismarckian concept of statesmanship, but was difficult to accept from the standpoint of the American traditions of democracy. Contrary to Kennan, who viewed foreign policy as a means toward the internal self-realization of the purpose of America, for Kissinger, domestic policy should have been subordinated to foreign policy. He viewed governmental structure as “an element of rigidity which operates more or less independently of the convictions of the statesman,” therefore he saw it as an impediment to the flexible conduct of international affairs.¹⁹³ He conceived popular democracy and bureaucracy as domestic constraints on foreign policy, and about

¹⁸⁸ Dickson, p. 130.

¹⁸⁹ Smith, p. 209.

¹⁹⁰ Dickson, p. 130.

¹⁹¹ Smith, p. 209.

¹⁹² Ibid, p. 216.

¹⁹³ Kissinger, *American foreign policy*, p. 17.

domestic scandals like Watergate, his main concerns were their effect on international affairs.¹⁹⁴ He envied Bismarck's age when foreign policy received primacy, and statesmen "seek[ed] to mold reality in the light of [their] purposes."¹⁹⁵ The Bismarckian statesman, who exercises a "doctrine of self-limitation"¹⁹⁶ but at the same time conducts "a policy that await events"¹⁹⁷ was an important ideal for Kissinger. In his distinction between the prophet and the statesman, the former intends to "create reality" and believes in total solutions, while the latter "manipulates reality [and] feels responsible not only for the best but also for the worst possible outcome."¹⁹⁸ Kissinger undoubtedly preferred this behavior, however, his distrust of others' – bureaucrats, politicians, critics – evaluations, and the excessive confidence in his own actions proved to be similar to those he criticized.¹⁹⁹

But how can we relate the practice proposed by realists to the theories they described? After all, it cannot be denied that a certain worldview is consistently manifested in their approach to international politics. However, this worldview is reflected in thoughts often too general to show a clear direction for foreign policy: concrete situations can be evaluated differently, and ultimately, some form of 'realist' thinking can be discovered in every practical decision that intends to deal with 'reality'. Furthermore, realists often emphasized their distrust of general theories, therefore practice becomes as important as theory, if not more important. On the experiences of American foreign policy, Niebuhr maintained that "fortunately we have already been somewhat better in our practice than in our quasi-official dogma,"²⁰⁰ and he pointed out the advantages of a "common-sense wisdom [of] the man in the street" over the

¹⁹⁴ This is clearly shown in his remarks at Nixon's final cabinet meeting in 1974: "For the sake of foreign policy we must act with assurance and dignity. If we can do that, we can vindicate the structure of peace." (Smith, p. 212.)

¹⁹⁵ Kissinger, *The White Revolutionary*, p. 910.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 914.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 910.

¹⁹⁸ Kissinger, *American foreign policy*, pp. 46-47.

¹⁹⁹ Smith, pp. 215-216.

²⁰⁰ Niebuhr, *The Irony...*, p. 10.

“scientific” wisdom coming from the theories of the “men of affairs”.²⁰¹ For Kennan, it was accompanied by a belief that “what is important ... is not so much *what* is done as *how* it is done,”²⁰² which might provide a better understanding of the significance of Barack Obama’s presidency in foreign affairs. In the final chapter, I will return to the questions of Obama’s foreign policy, and examine how the previous findings can alter our view on his practice.

²⁰¹ Niebuhr, *Christian Realism...*, pp. 69-70.

²⁰² Kennan is quoted by Gaddis, p. 50.

4. Is Obama A Realist?

In the first chapter, we have seen how the question about the relation between foreign policy practice and realist theories has arisen in connection with the presidency of Barack Obama. After discussing some elements of realist theory and their relations to the policies of the different eras, it is time to go back to Obama, and examine how these particular issues appear in his conduct of foreign policy. This will help us to have a better understanding of the current debate whether his policies can be characterized as realist, and it will also provide an opportunity for a reflection on theoretical issues.

Our starting point for the discussion on classical realism is its relation to ethics and morality, since normative concerns are inherently part of the approach chosen by classical realists. As has been seen previously in chapter 2, an uneasy reconciliation of moral values and factors derived from power and force constitute a main challenge for them, and one possible answer was an emphasis on limits: limited progress, limited achievements, and limited validity of universal values. Obama's rhetoric often reflected similar thoughts, though moral relativism is certainly not his answer to these challenges.²⁰³ His remarks about humility and prudence sounded much more realist than an idealist crusader, and these were the elements in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech which led to him being called a Niebuhrian realist by some analysts in the first place. For example, declarations like "[t]o say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism. It is a recognition of history, the imperfections of man, and the limits of reason"²⁰⁴ reminded Fred Kaplan of the ideas of Niebuhr's *The Irony*

²⁰³ Although Liam Julian argued that Obama's subjective interpretation of sin as "[b]eing out of alignment with my values" was a concession of his "swim in relativism" that, for example, "Niebuhr could have never accepted." (Julian, p. 29.)

²⁰⁴ Obama, Oslo speech.

of *American History*.²⁰⁵ This was no accident, since Obama told David Brooks in 2007 that from Niebuhr, he took away

the compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction.²⁰⁶

As Brooks recalled at a 2009 public discussion about Niebuhr's influences on the newly inaugurated President, this came up in the middle of an interview which was "getting nowhere" when he asked then-candidate Obama if he had ever read Niebuhr, and, as a response, Obama gave "a 20-minute summation of *The Irony of American History* in perfect paragraph form."²⁰⁷ However, others criticized Obama on the basis that he only finds compelling Niebuhr's "*conclusions* and not the theoretical reasoning that created them."²⁰⁸ Liam Julian claims that accepting Niebuhr's idea about America's irony "without accepting his theological bases" suggests that Obama only took "the pieces that reinforced his extant viewpoints," and argues that by calling Niebuhr a philosopher and not a theologian, Obama reveals his distance from the true understanding of Christian realism.²⁰⁹ Nevertheless, as we have seen certain aspects of Niebuhr's political philosophy, he can certainly be regarded as a philosopher, and although the existence of a religious point of view cannot be denied in his writings, his thoughts can be read from a secular perspective, as Julian himself also admitted.²¹⁰

The main question, of course, is whether Obama's practice of foreign policy shows some of the discussed characteristics of realism beyond some general references to realist

²⁰⁵ Kaplan.

²⁰⁶ Obama is quoted by Brooks.

²⁰⁷ 'Obama's Theologian', *Speaking of Faith with Krista Tippett*, from American Public Media, February 19, 2009. Transcript of the radio program: <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2009/obamas-theologian/transcript.shtml>

²⁰⁸ Julian, p. 30.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 29, 32, 27. Similar concerns were raised by Joseph Loconte in *The American*, the magazine of the conservative think tank American Enterprise Institute. He claimed that those who celebrate Obama's Niebuhrian roots disregard the religious aspects of Niebuhr's works, and his views on "the stubborn fact of human life". (Loconte)

²¹⁰ Julian, p. 29.

authors. In his discourse, he rarely speaks about questions of power, however, he often explains his actions by referring to the national interests of the United States. For example, Obama proclaimed that “it is in [America’s] vital national interest” to deploy an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan. He also added that he was convinced that America’s “security [was] at stake in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” which shows that American security clearly takes priority over other considerations, at least in statements directed toward a domestic audience.²¹¹ Nevertheless, his understanding of American interests can be viewed in a broader context. When he speaks about the “enlightened self-interest” of American actions around the world, he also implies that certain common goals belong to American interests as well, and America should represent some values, moreover “neither America’s interests – nor the world’s – are served by the denial of human aspirations.”²¹² While Obama does not proclaim American exceptionalism, neither does he deny that America has some special purpose – although his emphasis on the importance of “living [these values] at home”²¹³ shows that his approach is much closer to Kennan’s notion about the duty of self-realization than ideas about a special role of global leadership. Altogether, Obama is not afraid to declare that “[t]he United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades,” or that “America will always be a voice for those aspirations that are universal.”²¹⁴ His rhetoric combines a sense of limits with assuming responsibilities if necessary.

This understanding can also be found in the Administration’s new National Security Strategy, published in May 2010. It declares that “[t]he United States rejects the false choice between the narrow pursuit of interests and an endless campaign to impose our values. Instead, we see it as fundamental to our own interests to support a just peace around the

²¹¹ Obama, West Point speech.

²¹² Obama, Oslo speech.

²¹³ Obama, West Point speech.

²¹⁴ Obama, Oslo speech.

world.”²¹⁵ The 52-page document²¹⁶ suggests advancing American interests through the pursuit of four main objectives: security, prosperity, the promotion of values, and a just and sustainable international order. However, it also proclaims that the United States is “promoting universal values abroad by living them at home, and will not seek to impose these values through force.”²¹⁷ This underlines our observation that the precise understanding of ‘interest’ depends on the meaning assigned to the concept, and in the case of American interests, a certain group of values can also be implied. Obama’s views on this are similar to those of Kennan, and can be contrasted with Kissinger’s notion who downplayed the importance of this particular American context of ‘interest’ derived from domestic traditions.

As was already emphasized in the first chapter, on the question of the war in Afghanistan, Obama pointed out that American goals should be more narrowly defined, and he downplayed the importance of other objectives, like the creation of democracy. This leads to the broader question of what the objectives of foreign policy should be. We have seen that for Kennan, it was interconnected with some internal development of the United States, while for Morgenthau, foreign policy primarily should be conducted with regard to the national interest. The place of highly rated American ideals, such as freedom or democracy, is particularly interesting in this context. Niebuhr, who also traced back these questions to the creation of some form of justice in the international environment, argued that while “[f]reedom is a high value, ... absolute intellectual freedom is achieved by only a few minds,” thus he did not agree with the goals of “democratic educators,” and did not regard these values as end-points.²¹⁸ However, “promoting democracy” became a political slogan in our time. In a 2006 article, David Chandler criticized this approach, and argued that “the

²¹⁵ *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, p. 5.

http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf

²¹⁶ The document was published during the final week before the submission of this thesis, therefore a more detailed analysis was not possible here.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ Niebuhr, *Moral Man...*, p. 246.

downplaying of the centrality of broad social engagement in the political process” was the most worrying aspect of state-building projects.²¹⁹ Imposing a type of order based on some concept of “good governance,” but disregarding local factors or the need for organic processes in the development of a democratic societies is often deemed to fail precisely because “[d]emocracy is ... presented as a solution to the problems of the political sphere rather than as a process of determining and giving content to ‘good life’.”²²⁰ Under Obama, this kind of rhetoric has certainly been curbed compared with the time of the previous Administration.

Of course, certain differences can also be observed in Obama’s view to those which realists argue. They possibly partly stem from the different circumstances of today’s world compared to the era when Morgenthau and the others wrote their seminal works. Classical realists were primarily concerned with relations between great powers, and foreign policy actors were principally states. However, Morgenthau already described in the 1950s that there is nothing perennial or inevitable in the political organization of states, and “the connection between interest and the national state is a product of history.”²²¹ In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama argued that nowadays the main source of danger is not a potential conflict between great powers, but instability comes from areas where government is weak, or from even non-state actors like terrorists.²²² For some critics, his thoughts are even characterized as de-emphasizing “sovereign interests” of nations, and highlighting “‘shared’ interests defined by interconnected material problems.”²²³ Regarding Obama’s reiterated emphasis on national interests too, this might be an exaggeration, but he certainly realizes the existing interdependencies in our world. It appears in his non-proliferation agenda: in his 2009 Prague

²¹⁹ David Chandler, ‘Back to the Future? The limits of neo-Wilsonian ideals of exporting democracy’, *Review of International Studies* (2006), 32, p. 477.

²²⁰ Ibid, p. 483.

²²¹ Morgenthau, *Dilemmas...*, p. 68.

²²² Obama, *Vakmerő remények*, pp. 307-308.

²²³ Henry R. Nau, ‘Obama’s Foreign Policy’, *Policy Review*, April&May 2010, p. 29.

speech, he argued that “[i]n a strange turn of history, the threat of global nuclear war has gone down, but the risk of a nuclear attack has gone up,” particularly because the danger of terrorists acquiring such weapons.²²⁴

Obama’s priorities for the commitment to reduce, and ultimately totally abandon nuclear weapons reflect both the classical realists’ anxieties on the nuclear age, and his understanding of today’s dangers. According to Charles Kupchan, his nuclear policies demonstrate that pragmatism and problem-solving approach are the main characteristics of Obama’s conduct of foreign policy. His modest solutions – while not giving up the achievement of a higher goal – show his awareness of “the limits imposed by domestic constraints at home and abroad.”²²⁵ The way Obama dealt with this issue – and some others like the summit on climate change – reinforces the notion that the circumstances of the practice can be at least as important as the actual content of a policy. Even the fact that direct talks matter among great powers can be a sign of cooperation after the unilateralist policies of the Bush administration. Of course, it is also true that under current circumstances, Obama has less options, and as Stephen M. Walt remarked, amid “an economy in freefall, two ruinous wars, and an America whose international image had been tarnished, ... [i]t was no time for starry-eyed idealism.”²²⁶ But he also added that “Americans ought to be grateful that Obama grasped this essential fact from the very beginning,” and he predicted that the real test of Obama’s convictions would be the time when “America’s fortunes improve”.²²⁷

In his Oslo speech, Obama also outlined how he thinks those states should be dealt with that “break rules and laws” of international behavior. He suggested a policy that “balance[s] isolation and engagement, pressure and incentives,”²²⁸ which can be understood in the context of Kennan’s containment and Kissinger’s ‘positive inducements’ too. His

²²⁴ Obama, Prague speech.

²²⁵ Kupchan in: ‘George H. W. Obama’, *Foreign Policy*

²²⁶ Walt in: *Ibid.*

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ Obama, Oslo speech.

emphasis that it is necessary to “develop alternatives to violence that are tough enough to actually change behavior”²²⁹ shows a consciousness of the limitation of achievements that force or America alone can achieve, but at the same a commitment to hold accountable those regimes that break rules. Although it is far from the much criticized concept of world government, it is still impossible to carry out without some kind of cooperation between leading international powers. Obama saw this when he declared that “pressure exists only when the world stands together as one,”²³⁰ thus his diplomatic efforts reflect this understanding. Furthermore, the objective of “changing behavior” is reminiscent of Kennan’s suggestions for containment at the dawn of the Cold War.

So finally, can Obama’s foreign policy be called realist? We have seen that he himself was conscious of some parts of this tradition, and we have also discerned some characteristics that make it similar to those policies that were suggested by realists. However, some agreements with realist scholars do not make a foreign policy realist, and it might be worth considering whether this distinction – that a foreign policy is either idealist or realist – is meaningful in the first place. Philip Zelikow claims that it is not necessarily. When he was asked by *Foreign Policy* about the quote from Rahm Emanuel that “[e]verybody always breaks down between idealist and realist,” he replied that “[w]ell, no. At least not me.”²³¹ He then asked whether Emanuel would characterize the health-care policy or the nuclear non-proliferation agenda of his boss as either realist or idealist, or both. “Maybe these labels aren’t so helpful after all,” and actually preferred by those who want to style themselves as ‘realists’ while “making an argumentative contrast.”²³² He is definitely right that these kinds of characterizations are often used to reinforce one’s position in a debate. Moreover, the concepts of ‘realism’ and ‘idealism’ refer to ideal types that of course do not exist in their

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Zelikow in: ‘George H. W. Obama’, *Foreign Policy*

²³² Ibid.

pure form, rather in every political decision both ‘realist’ and ‘idealist’ elements can be found in some proportion. However, one can still ascertain some basic assumptions of realism, and some common characteristics of realist thinking. But categorizing practice is still much more difficult than categorizing theories, which leads to the question of relations between theory and practice.

In some sense, as was argued, classical realism was peculiar in its distrust of general theories, and preference for practice. In Obama’s case as well, one can say that without any ‘big’ idea on the conduct of international affairs, his practice – *how* he did things, with his words and gestures²³³ – created an atmosphere which represented the idea of ‘change’ even without serious changes at the level of concrete policies. If we ask if it is realist foreign policy or idealist foreign policy, we simply cannot really answer – this is foreign policy, without the aim to set up a clear doctrine for future behavior, but with the goal of maintaining a particular international standing. Furthermore, as was discussed in connection with the concept of *national interest*, *realism* can also be understood in two different, though interrelated ways. First, it can be an analytical framework: a descriptive tool of the behavior of states. In this understanding, the question whether someone’s foreign policy is realist is meaningless – the question to be asked is if certain acts of foreign policy are well explained by realist theories. For this, it is possible – though it was not the aim of this thesis to do this – to identify the underlying assumptions, and to set up a theoretical framework. This was the direction to which realism later evolved in the form of neorealism. However, the analysis of classical realist authors clearly showed their normative concerns too, and their aim to create policy prescriptions. This is the second aspect of realism, one that intends to influence practice by claiming what is a realist behavior. Nevertheless, in this sense, the clear content of realism is less clear, and it might be better to speak about separate ‘realisms’ in each case of a concrete

²³³ Like reaching out to the Muslim world, while not seriously changing the direction of Bush’s policies on Iraq and Afghanistan.

policy proposal. In this understanding, it is even difficult to distinguish theory from practice: a view on a concrete situation can establish a ‘theory’, and ‘theoretical discussions’ can prescribe actual behavior. Of course, some common philosophical assumptions can be identified, but they are often too general to give concrete guidance, and as we have seen, they often lead to different policy suggestions. In the concluding remarks, based on the previous findings, the question on realist theory and practice will be discussed.

Conclusion

After having examined some aspects of classical realist theories and practices, we can still find difficult to decide on a certain foreign policy conduct if it belongs to realist thinking or not. While a great part of Barack Obama's speeches or the way he deals with international affairs definitely reminds us of the thoughts of realist authors, it is not evident to label his policies as realist. The reason behind this partly comes from our last remark about the distinction between realism as an analytical framework, and realism as a philosophical background which can be the basis of policy prescriptions. When analyzing Obama's policies from a realist point of view, one can more or less explain his actions, but cannot conclude that 'Obama is a realist'. However, it was not superfluous to analyze his convictions and utterances. On the one hand, while this analysis might not be suitable for categorization or labeling, it has still revealed some important characteristics of his thinking that helps us in the understanding of his conduct of foreign affairs. On the other hand, it also revealed something about realism as a theory, and it is worth summarizing these findings in five points.

First, something which can be said about the relation of *any* theory and practice. Foreign policy decisions are not made within the isolation of the academic environment, but as a response to actual circumstances and events, often under serious constraints of space and time. Whereas the scholar has as much time as he chooses for analyzing concrete actions, the decisionmaker has to find solutions quickly, and at the same time has to take into consideration several factors like his convictions, or potential consequences on his career as a politician. It is not completely meaningless to examine how a certain theory can manifest itself in the practice of policymakers, but it is useful to be aware of the limits of these approaches.

Second, more specifically about realism. We have seen that classical realism arose as a response to the idealist approach, which embraced rationalist ideas about how decisions in the social sphere can be calculated by means of scientific methods. Realists were skeptical about these kinds of ‘engineering’ solutions, and argued that issues related to social life are so complicated that it would never be possible to detach only one or two relevant factors. Therefore, they distrusted abstractions and generalizations, which makes it inherently impossible to delineate a unique ‘realist theory’ how states should behave in the international arena. Classical realist authors objected to this timeless understanding of international relations, and emphasized the role of historical contingency. Moreover, they did not view history as a process toward an ultimate end, which would also provide a measure of statesmen’s practice. Their understanding about the historical process meant that practice always depends on the concrete circumstances of the time, thus an overarching theory cannot prescribe it. Ultimately, realists often emphasize that foreign policy should be primarily pragmatist, thus it cannot follow directly any general theory.

Third, as have been seen, classical realists themselves often debated the assumptions, or more frequently each other’s conclusions. Thus, especially at the prescriptive level, it might be better to see classical realism as a collection of similar thoughts based on some common fundamental assumptions, and not to speak of ‘one’ classical realist theory. In a sense, we can see as many ‘realisms’ as many authors who identify themselves with this approach, and even within the work of one author, one proposal can refer to a slightly different form of realism than another.

Fourth, as Morgenthau and others argued, different assumptions do not necessarily manifest themselves in different behavior. The same decision can be supported by different kinds of reasoning, and it is often difficult to discern convictions from particular actions. Furthermore, the use of realist expressions like ‘national interest’ can be understood

differently, and the different understandings can also lead to alternative proposals. These notions are often too general to prescribe action, and their concrete relevance depends on the content assigned to them, which might only get its meaning within the context of some specific issue.

Fifth, the relation of theory and practice is not a self-evident issue for realists either. Some of them explicitly argued that practice and behavior takes priority, and theories should be adjusted according to that. Even the distinction between theory and practice might not be clear. For example, we have seen that realists were highly concerned about the consequences of the nuclear age. Suggestions about nuclear weapons can represent a certain theoretical thinking, while it is clear that they are intended to influence practice. In a sense, practice and theory are mutually constituted – at least, in this understanding of theory. Of course, it is only true under the above-mentioned limitations about the validity of theoretical references to practice, and behavior can be so complicated that even this kind of ‘theory’ cannot be discerned from it. But this ‘practice-related’ interpretation of theory can still provide a better understanding of actions and behavior.

Finally, this leads to a broader question about theories: what do we expect from them, what is the aim of studying, for example, the works of classical realists? Of course, it would be too ambitious to say that Obama conducts his policies based on the guidances of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, Kennan or Kissinger; and we might not be able to conclude that he is a realist in this sense either. But still, the writings of these authors can influence how we understand certain decisions, can help us to better understand particular events. Just like classical realists suggested for policymakers, we might achieve more by aiming for less. Instead of a complete categorization or explanation of policies, the recognition that certain thoughts are still relevant today can widen our understanding of contemporary international relations.

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